

BOOKS

edited by Margie Thomson



DARK SUN: TE RAPUNGA AND THE QUEST OF GEORGE DIBBERN

By Erika Grundman

David Ling, \$49.99

Reviewed by Margie Thomson

GEORGE DIBBERN, vagabond, adventurer. Never a member of any herd, he was the original "citizen of the world", who sailed the seven seas with his own flag, his own passport, and an extraordinary, free-thinking philosophy that made him friends and admirers (and surprisingly few detractors) in every port.

Born in Germany in 1889, Dibbern first went to sea at 18 as a cabin boy aboard a merchant sailing ship, but soon realised that, with engines about to supersede sail, it would no longer be a desirable career. Sail was always the thing for Dibbern.

He jumped ship in Australia and eventually made his way to New Zealand, which he loved, but where he was interned on Somes Island during World War I. Sent back, against his will, to Germany in 1919, he stayed 10 years, marrying, fathering three daughters, struggling hopelessly against Germany's crippling economic problems and huge unemployment.

Finally, in 1930, he took off in a 9.75m ketch for freedom and a life unbound by convention.

For the next 30 years he sailed the world, apart from another period of internment on Somes Island during World War II, despite his visible and vocal rejection of Nazism. Had he returned to Germany, he would, his wife believed, have been sent to a concentration camp for his anti-nationalistic views. His refusal to fly a Swastika flag on his German-registered boat was what led him to develop his own flag in the first place.

In 1934 he won the trans-tasman race and the Melbourne to Hobart race; in 1950 he won an astonishing £10,000 in a Tasmanian lottery and bought two islands. He hated the idea of holding



CAREFREE: George Dibbern lived his life according to his conscience

A vagabond's wayward charm

down a job and lived frugally, making ends meet by writing, lecturing and the generosity of others.

"[We] are the happy, carefree adventurers who just made up their minds to do what 90 per cent of white-collar workers want to do," he said.

Dibbern believed that life was to be lived in accordance with one's own conscience, not rules and conventions established by society. "If I am faced with a decision the only factor to consider is 'Do I like it or not?'"

His 1941 book *The Quest*, about the first four years of his voyage, won him the strong friendship of American author Henry Miller, who instinctively understood the wanderer and championed him from then on.

It's a great story, and Grundman tells it well and with passion, although she does get rather bogged down in the years of wrangling-by-letter between Dibbern and the

wife and family he left in Germany.

Certainly, this issue hangs like a black cloud over Dibbern's story: his family had to fend for themselves through depression and war, but the astonishing thing is that his wife, Elisabeth, an artist and unconventional thinker, always defended him — until he had another baby with his longtime sailing companion Eileen, at which point all the years of subterranean hurt surfaced bitterly.

Dibbern's life and philosophy remains deeply challenging today, despite all the changes that have swept the world since his death in 1962. Self-serving it undoubtedly was, yet we can't deny the magnetic, wayward charm of the man, even at a distance of nearly half a century.

The world loves a vagabond, and arm-chair vagabond-adventurers, especially those with a penchant for the sea, will feel their lives spiced up with this extraordinary story. **[H]**

