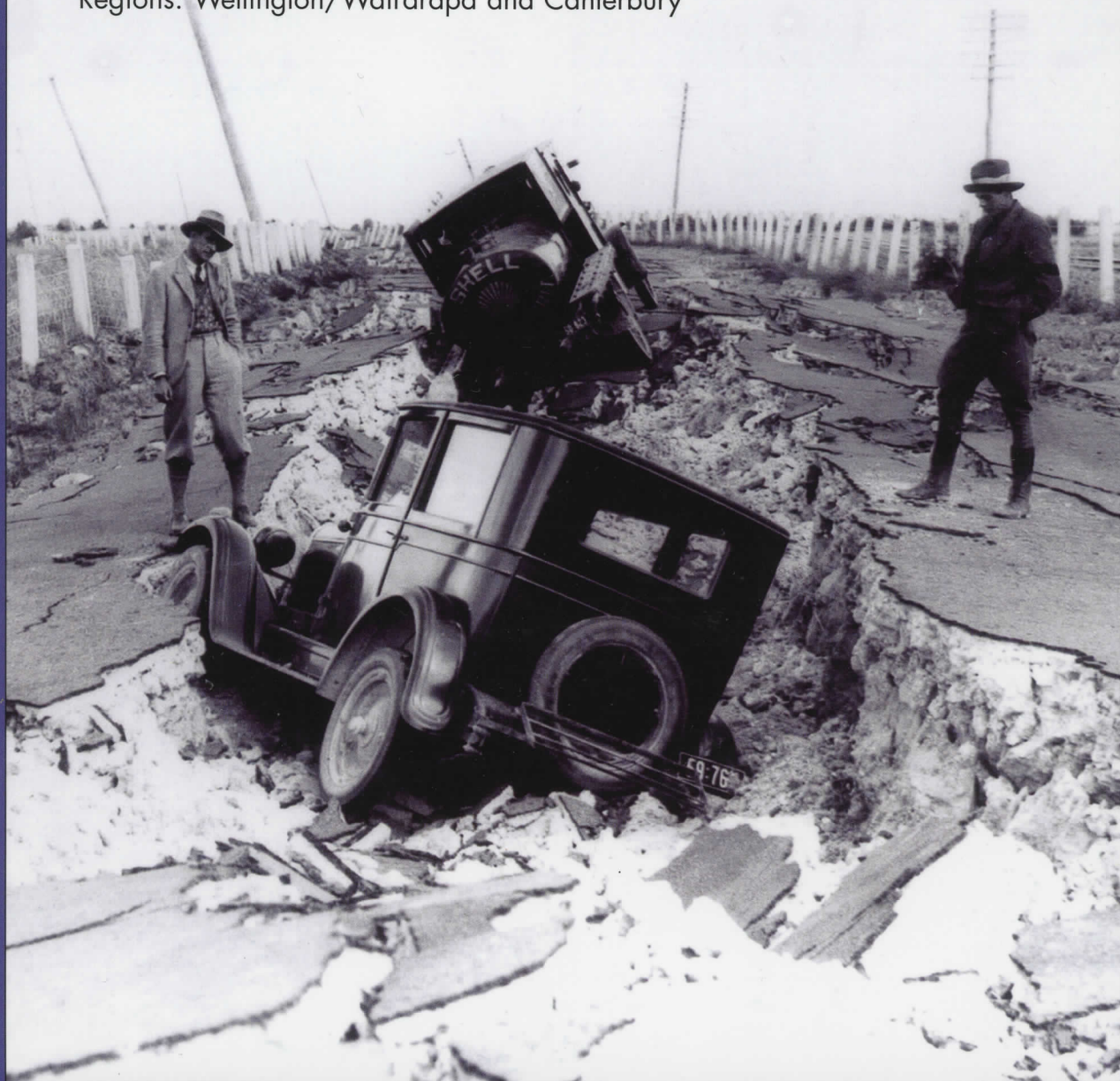


NEW ZEALAND Memories

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Robert Laidlaw and the Farmers Trading Company
Northland Coalmining Community
Flying Over Oamaru
Teaching in a Tent
Major Bunbury: Soldier, Artist and Farmer
Regions: Wellington/Wairarapa and Canterbury



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Many readers will remember Erika Grundmann's articles on George Dibbern and his exploits on the ketch *Te Rapunga* published in earlier issues of *New Zealand Memories*. George spent some thirty years sailing the Pacific, punctuated only by his confinement at Wellington's Somes Island during World War I and II.

After the Book: *More Tales and Treasures*

For close to ten years I had researched George Dibbern's life. I'd visited New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii, Cook Islands and Germany, where I'd spent ten days with Dibbern's family sorting through a treasure trove of photos and letters which had survived the bombing of Berlin. I'd written to, and spent countless hours in, archives, libraries and museums. I'd met or corresponded with numerous people who had themselves known George, or who knew someone who had been acquainted with him, with people who had photos, articles by and about him. I'd had a Dibbern web site for a year and a half. In other words, I'd been *very* thorough in my research! Though there still remained a few gaps, and though I was convinced there was more out there, somewhere, I finally conceded I'd exhausted every avenue open to me – and spent a year compiling the material and writing what became *Dark Sun: Te Rapunga and the Quest of George Dibbern*.

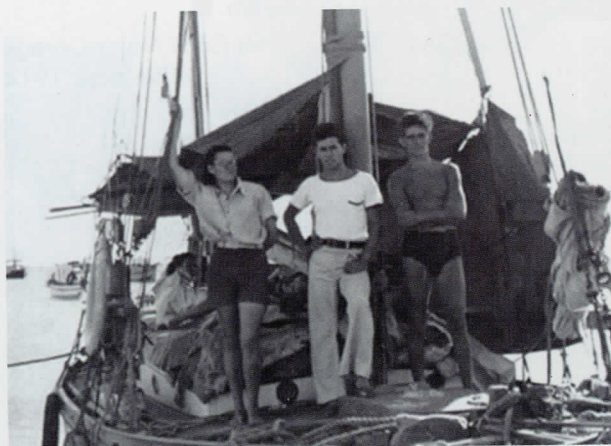
The 544-page book had hardly arrived at the printers in mid April 2004, when the first "George ghost" moment occurred in the form of e-mail from Robin Elliott (who writes books on yachting history and coincidentally shares the same publisher, David Ling). He forwarded a message – which had been forwarded to

him – from Brian Watson:

As a former family member / owner of the ketch *Te Rapunga* for many years I wondered if someone could bring me up to date with her whereabouts, and the current owner. Or any other person interested in this lovely ketch-rigged boat. Some items have come to hand...

My first reaction was, "Damn, it's like buying a computer. Not even off the shelf and already out of date!" Nonetheless I could not help but be delighted when Brian offered to bring the items to my presentation at the Akarana Yacht Club for the release of *Dark Sun*. Why Brian was frustratingly tight-lipped about the items was revealed on 25 June when, at the end of my talk, he granted me the honour of opening two packages revealing the fully restored ships bell (what a magnificent tone it has!) and a copper flare-tube containing fragile, crumbling plans of *Te Rapunga*. We were awestruck. Additional treasures were brought to that event by other former owners: a porthole ring (Ken Moss) and a padeye (Barry Cawson).

This was just the beginning. Throughout the following months I would experience the same sentiments of surprise, delight – and frustration – when I opened my e-mail and found yet another 'George ghost' had made



Eileen Morris, Douglas Denton and George Dibbern in the chaos of sails airing aboard *Te Rapunga*, back in port after drifting for 72 days off the coast of Hawaii while final revisions were made to *Quest*. Honolulu, October 1940.



"'Man without a Country' Back Here After 72 Days at Sea off Hawaii" read the headline. George Dibbern, Eileen Morris and Douglas Denton on the return of *Te Rapunga* to Honolulu after revisions to *Quest* were completed. *Honolulu Advertiser*, 8 October 1940. Neal Denton

an appearance.

Two of the women who had sailed with Dibbern's all-female crew in the 1954 Trans-Tasman Race came to my attention. Elizabeth Keanan Whitten (currently living in Papua New Guinea), on an International Congress tour in Tasmania mentioned to guide Kathy Duncombe of the Bruny Island Historical Society, that she had crewed on *Te Rapunga* for the race! Kathy shared my excitement at having located one of these courageous women. Not long after, through Mark Panther's reading of *Dark Sun* and through his mother's memoirs in which she devoted a chapter to her *Te Rapunga* experience I was able to connect "posthumously" with Joan Foster-King Panther.

Stephen Dunlop, son of Cyril James Dunlop, filled one of the remaining gaps when he wrote from Auckland to say that his parents had owned *Te Rapunga* from 1968 to the early seventies. He acknowledged the Dunlop family's responsibility for "that terrible light green colour" the boat was painted.

The very next day a cryptic e-mail message arrived from Bob Peden of Spiderorchid Bookshop in Highton, Australia: "I bring to your attention the UK First Edition of 1941 by Bodley Head." The scan of the dust jacket he included – so different from the one that covered the US edition of *Quest* – compensated for his paucity of words. When an internet search revealed his asking price of US\$600, I replied to him that I, if anyone, deserved to own that copy – but I'd have to sell an awful lot of *Dark Suns* to justify such an indulgence. Bob, in turn, responded: "The book is yours. It would be a pleasure to swap it for a signed copy of your book."

A shiver, literally, travelled up my spine when Brendon Tarrant from Auckland, having googled the name George Dibbern, contacted me with the news that he had in his possession a ship's log written by Eileen Morris. In the 1970s the police station in Napier had undergone renovations. *Te Rapunga's* log, considered of no interest, was destined for the rubbish bin. Instead, Brendon's policeman uncle took it home for his children to draw on the blank pages. For years it stayed untouched in a cabinet till fifteen years ago Brendon's aunt, aware of his interest "in old boat stuff," passed it on to him. He has since generously returned the log to a surprised and appreciative Eileen Morris.

Gillian Bailey e-mailed from Lower Hutt that Roy Murdock, the young journalist who had sailed from Napier aboard *Te Rapunga* in 1935 was her uncle – and that her sister had his diary! This would explain the empty pages in Eileen's log, as Roy took over for a while. The diary has since been located and is being reproduced. Another coincidence, however, has come to light in that Elizabeth and Trevor King with whom my husband and I stayed as Servas guests during our visit to NZ in 1998 are good friends with Gill Bailey. It frustrates me to think that I met Elizabeth again during the book tour in 2004 – and missed an opportunity to meet Gill.

The ease of communication provided by e-mail has certainly contributed to these contacts. The role of the internet, too, has been instrumental in leading "George people" to me. The guest book on my web site provided the next 'George moment' in the form of an

entry by Neal Denton whose father, Douglas Denton, a Canadian-born, amateur photographer, had sailed on *Te Rapunga* from San Francisco to Hawaii in 1940. Neal sent me precious photos.

Just when I had begun to think there couldn't be anything more, e-mail arrived from Robert Messenger, a journalist for the Canberra Times. Inspired by an article about the rescue of Australian and NZ yachtsmen in December 2005, he got the idea of devoting his weekly column to George Dibbern, whom he had met as a boy after the stranding of *Te Rapunga* near Greymouth in 1957. He consulted the autograph book in which George had left an entry, did an internet search, and, yes, e-mailed me. He also mentioned that his father, the award-winning amateur filmmaker Wallace Messenger, had filmed the event. The New Zealand Film Archive in Wellington to which the 8 mm movie had been donated (Film ref : F24062 – New Zealand Film Archive, <http://www.nzfa.org.nz/> or email info@nzfa.org.nz), doesn't usually send out collection items, but "recognizing the obvious geographical difficulty ... along with the strong New Zealand connection in this particular instance" they did. I'm so grateful to them for their understanding. Imagine how exciting it was to see *Te Rapunga* dismasted, being tossed by the waves, then lying on the beach with people climbing all over her and looking inside, being towed off the beach around to Greymouth, then, almost half a year later, sailing away to Wellington. Alone to see George run his fingers through his thick (really thick even at age 69) white hair was worth the cost and the wait!

As I was celebrating the existence of the Greymouth film footage, a photograph of a single frame from a movie film (another film!) arrived in the mail. It was from J. "Pony" More, the son-in-law of Fred Norris who had crewed for the Trans-Tasman Race in 1934. I am aware of the difficulty involved in deriving a photo from a movie film, and am doubly appreciative.

During one of the newspaper interviews I had with a NZ journalist in June 2004 I was asked whether I thought, with the publication of *Dark Sun*, more information about George Dibbern might be forthcoming. My response was that nothing would surprise me. Now, I must confess, I was indeed astounded at the tales and treasures that found their way to me – and relieved they substantiate what I had learned from other sources, and support the claims I made in the book.

Is there more to come? It wouldn't surprise me at all! ■

Dark Sun

Te Rapunga and the Quest
of George Dibbern

Erika Grundmann

477 pages / \$49.95

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Or orders to:

David Ling Publishing,
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\$50 (plus \$5 p/p)

