

**PIRATES OF BOAT HARBOUR • DESTINATION: WEST COAST**

July 1999 • \$4.50

# ***Pacific Yachting***

***Power & Sail In British Columbia***





# George Dibbern: Sailor-Philosopher

*A free-spirited wanderer who declared himself beyond nationality, George Dibbern spent two years on the B.C. coast, writing, cruising, and inspiring all he met with his idealism and charisma.*

PHOTO COURTESY ROBIN ELLIOTT



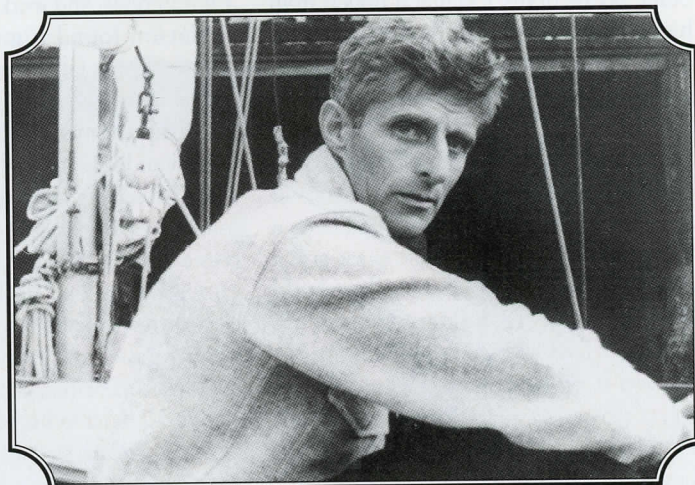
Left: George Dibbern sailed the 32' ketch *Te Rapunga* from his native Germany to New Zealand, then to B.C. and back to New Zealand. She is pictured at the start of the 1934 Trans Tasman Race, which she won.

Below: Dibbern aboard *Te Rapunga* at Immigration Wharf, Vancouver, in 1937.

**T**HEY hove to in the early morning mist. After 31 days en route from Honolulu, a clean-up was in order for boat and crew. *Te Rapunga* had once again made landfall, this time in Victoria, Canada at last! Skipper George Dibbern, along with Roy Murdock and Eileen Morris, had started their adventure in Auckland, New Zealand almost two years earlier.

The brass polished and the crew, like the deck, scrubbed, the 32' ketch sailed (no motor for this lot!) confidently into Victoria Harbour. Puzzled by the fact that no harbour boat came to meet them, they circled, then tied up at Enterprise Wharf, only to learn that they would have to return to William Head for pratique. It was July 1, 1937.

By late afternoon, with proper clearance, *Te Rapunga* lay silent alongside Enterprise Wharf. Her crew had been whisked off to the hospitality of the Royal Victoria YC. It wasn't long



ILSE SCHREIBER PHOTO



Dibbern created his own passport declaring himself "a citizen of the world and a friend of all peoples." Eventually it was recognized by New Zealand and Australian authorities. He also designed his own flag to represent his philosophy—it flew for the first time on *Te Rapunga's* arrival in Victoria in 1937.

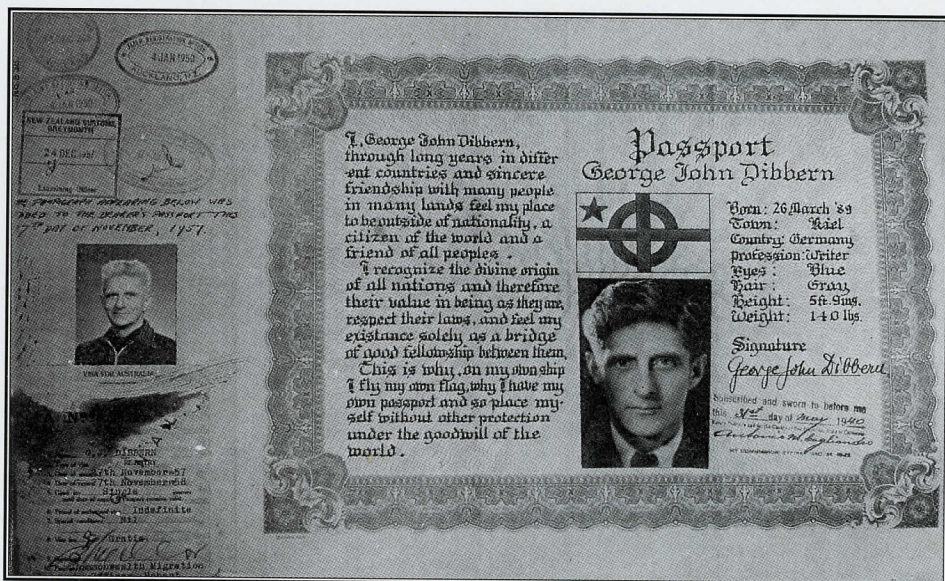


PHOTO COURTESY RALPH BRADSHAW



before Dibbern was recognized as a "sailor-philosopher" and invited to give talks to the RVC, the Gyro Club and the Women's Canadian Club. Both Victoria newspapers of the day covered the arrival of the plucky double-ender, as well as Dibbern's speaking engagements, but neither mentioned *Te Rapunga's* unusual flag which had puzzled the officials at William Head.

**WANDERER** Born in Kiel in 1889, Dibbern ventured to sea in 1907, sailed on square-riggers to the nitrate ports of Chile, and jumped ship in Sydney in 1909. He spent the next eight years tramping and working at odd jobs in Australia, then in New Zealand where he was interned in 1918-19 and subsequently deported back to Germany.

He followed the "normal" path of marriage and children, but it didn't take him long to realize that his outlook on life, shaped by his experiences, was far from the norm. He had outgrown Germany. Frustrated by failed business ventures, unemployment and debt—while refusing to buy into the politics of that turbulent period—he decided to seek a better future for his family in New Zealand. Financially strapped as he was, his only hope was *Te Rapunga*. With a few changes in crew and a few detours along the way, he arrived in New Zealand in March 1934 after a passage that lasted nearly four years.

For Dibbern, the voyage had been one of self-examination, self-recrimination (at leaving his family behind) and self-discovery. He began to have misgivings by the time he arrived at his destination and sought out his Maori friends. Conditions had changed and the vision he'd started out with was now clouded. His wife and children had made a life for themselves and were not prepared to give up what little they had for the uncertainties that Dibbern could promise. On the opposite side of the globe, broke, unable to face the constraints of Germany, Dibbern had to find a new purpose in life.

His ruminations at the tiller on quiet, starlit nights had led him to favour freedom rather than security, love rather than force, the brotherhood of all people rather than the division of nationhood. The sea opened his eyes. He would, in his small way, with his small boat, give others the opportunity of a sailing experience; he would be a bridge of friendship between people. With this aim Dibbern brought together his crew from New Zealand and sailed from Auckland to Rarotonga, Tahiti, the Marquesas, Hawaii and now Canada.

In Hawaii, Dibbern had been forced into a decision. By law he could no longer fly the flag of the Germany of his birth. He felt, however, that the obligatory swastika did not represent what he stood for. The concept that had been in his thoughts crystallized when a friend who "understood" presented him with the flag she had sewn to his design. It consisted of a white background with a red St. George's Cross cutting through a dark blue circle, and in the upper left-hand corner a blue star. The design represented the fundamental and equal rights of people to evolve, each according to his or her individuality; the brotherhood of all people and the presence of God within all people. The new flag flew for the first time on *Te Rapunga's* arrival in Victoria.

**FRIENDSHIP** After a couple of weeks in Victoria, the urge to press on to Vancouver took hold. Murdock had relatives there, waiting for his visit. *Te Rapunga*, as the vessel of friendship, took on four new-found friends as passengers. Three days later the crowded little boat arrived in Vancouver, met by reporters and an accommodating harbour master who ought to have fined the skipper for entering Burrard Inlet without a motor. Instead, he granted a

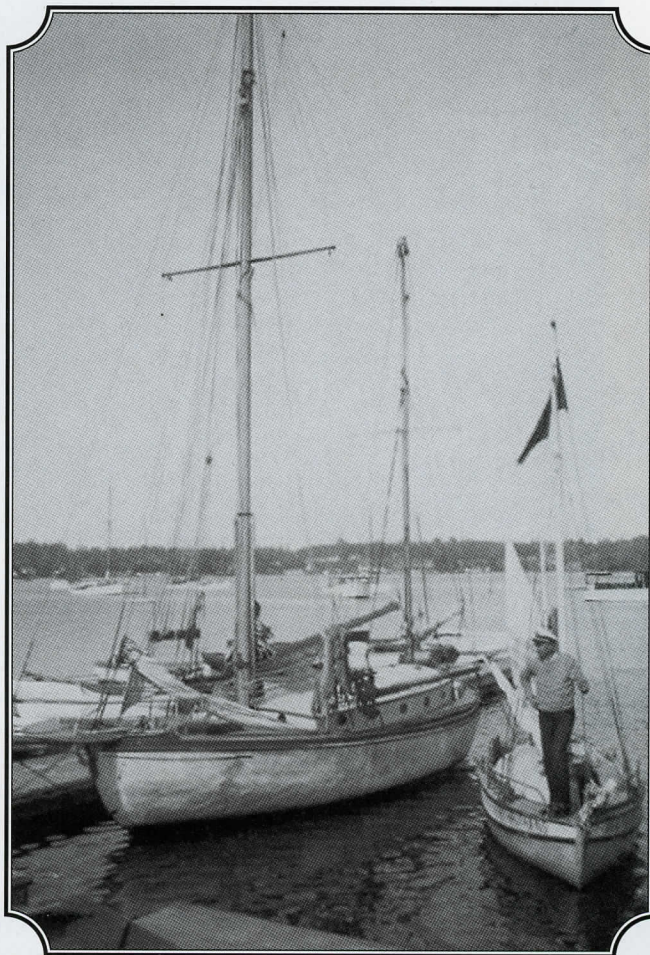


permit for a year's cruising in B.C. waters.

That summer and fall, *Te Rapunga* explored the Gulf Islands. True to Dibbern's vision, new friends regularly visited or joined the boat as job constraints allowed. Among them were Daphne, Jo, the two Dorothys, Noel, Maynard and Frances. Kay Day, Mavis Wilcox, William Nicholson, Margaret Willis...and Gladys Nightingale. Gladys (who later became known as "Sharie" of the legendary coastal couple, Allen and Sharie Farrell) worked in the same office as Murdock's cousin, Muriel Murdock, and had followed the progress of *Te Rapunga* from New Zealand to Vancouver. She had become intrigued, and after her first visit was hooked.

In the fall of 1937, Roy Murdock left the crew and settled in Victoria, later to become associate editor of *The Daily Colonist*. That his love of sailing was cemented through his *Te Rapunga* experience is evident in the preface to her log, as cited in his obituary (*The Daily Colonist*, February 21, 1961): "My main ambition had always been to sail small boats, not in the shelter of bays and harbors, but across oceans and through foreign waters..." The obituary continues: "It took him a long time, but he realized this dream. And from the August day in 1935 that the little 32-foot *Te Rapunga* which can be roughly translated from the Polynesian as 'longing' or 'searching' sailed from New Zealand, he knew his greatest pleasure, his greatest satisfaction on the sea."

**VISION** Although Dibbern was a skipper with vision and an enchanting speaker, he wanted to write a book to share the excitement and the powerful influence of the sea with those who weren't able to sail with him. He found, however, that he could not express himself on paper in a language not his mother tongue. He tried dictating to Gladys, who had become part of the crew, and found that worked. He decided it would be better to moor *Te Rapunga* at Enterprise Wharf in Victoria for the winter



***Te Rapunga* berthed at Royal Victoria YC in 1937, with the 23' ketch *Queen Mary* from Halifax alongside.**

in Eileen's care. He returned to Vancouver where he rented a room with a view across the harbour to Hollyburn Mountain and where he could spend more time with Gladys. Mornings he gave talks at schools and clubs to earn much-needed cash; afternoons he made notes, and following supper with Gladys, he dictated. Occasionally they went out dancing. So passed the fall, punctuated by a surprise visit from Eileen and Jack Shark (an adventurer they had first met in Tahiti, who ultimately settled in Courtenay), and periodic trips to Victoria.

By spring the first draft of what would be *Quest* was completed. Her permit extended, *Te Rapunga* was towed to Vancouver in anticipation of another season of cruising. Eileen set to editing the

manuscript; Gladys retyped. They formed a happy, loving threesome. The book finished, *Te Rapunga* was once again free to sail: Pender Harbour, Half-moon Bay, Blind Bay and any other little bay that suited their fancy. As they explored, a common dream took shape: they would buy some land; build a truly Canadian log house and some cabins for friends and family to visit for as long as they wished; provide hot baths and laundry facilities for sailors; garden and fish; and from time to time sail to Vancouver to give talks for what little money they'd require...or to San Francisco or even Hawaii.

**GALLEY BAY** A 200-acre property at Galley Bay in Desolation Sound, available for \$528 in back taxes, became the object of their dreams. They pooled their limited resources and purchased the land. Inspired and buoyed by the plan, they cruised from summer into fall until, back in Vancouver, the realization hit that George and Eileen's visitor permits were soon to expire and this time would not be renewed.

Their only recourse was to apply for landed-immigrant status. Given the times (early 1939), Dibbern's German birth, his refusal to take up arms for Canada (or for any country, for that matter), and official concern that he was planning to start some sort of cult or commune in Galley Bay (not to mention the fact that he and Eileen were unmarried and living in the same restricted quarters), their application and subsequent appeal were unsuccessful.

In the cold rain of a late February afternoon in 1939, *Te Rapunga* dragged herself from the embrace of Immigration Wharf. A few days of farewell in Victoria, then on to Port Angeles where the "man without a country" flying what was lightly referred to as a "pirates' flag" was welcomed...for a while. The U.S. allowed *Te Rapunga* and her crew, George Dibbern and Eileen Morris, to stay until June 1940. During that time, Dibbern's German passport expired and he created a new one displaying his

PHOTO COURTESY TOM DENNY

Please turn to page 42



## SPINNAKER YACHTS

Features "The Trailerables"

★ MacGregor 26X ★ Hunter 26 ★ Compac ★ MacGregor 26  
★ Hunter 23.5 ★ Precision ★ Santana 2023

Visit our Chandlery for great gift ideas • open all year  
website: [www.spinnakeryachts.com](http://www.spinnakeryachts.com)

Boat Yard: Ghost Lake Marine Park 18 km west of Cochrane on Highway 1A  
Box 1468, Cochrane, Alberta T0L 0W0

Tel: (403) 932-6051, • Fax: (403) 932-6257 • Toll Free: 1-888-YACHT45  
e-mail: [spinaker@spinnakeryachts.com](mailto:spinaker@spinnakeryachts.com)

See our full line of quality used sailboats  
Chandlery ★ Service Dept

**Blackline**  
MARINE INC.

**AWLGRIP® Spray Painting**  
**Osmosis Repair**  
**Fiberglass Repairs**

Blackline Marine Inc. is a part of the full service facility at Canoe Cove Marina and we are experts in fiberglass repairs & refinishing – whether the problem is cosmetic or structural – we can fix it.

Technical Problems? Give us a Call we are happy to advise.

Located at Canoe Cove Marina, Sidney (250) 656-6616 Fax: (250) 656-1971

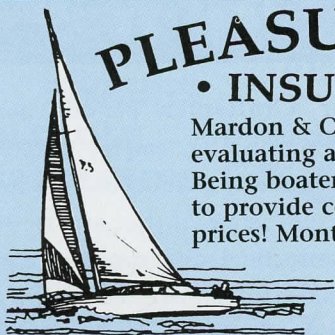


If you own a Boat,  
and a Computer...

**BINNACLE.COM**

"Canada's Online Marine Store"

[www.binnacle.com](http://www.binnacle.com)



**PLEASUREBOAT**  
• INSURANCE •

Mardon & Campbell Brokers are experts at evaluating and satisfying your insurance needs. Being boaters ourselves, we have the experience to provide comprehensive coverage at low prices! Monthly payments are available too.

**Call Richard today!**  
**274-9971**

Website: [www.mardoncampbell.com](http://www.mardoncampbell.com)

Vancouver  
876-3366

**Mardon & Campbell**  
**Insurance Brokers**

Richmond  
274-9971

flag and declaring himself "outside of nationality, a citizen of the world, a friend of all peoples."

TO N.Z. After 72 days of sailing and drifting beyond the limits of Hawaii, while Eileen sat on deck fine-tuning *Quest*, a typewriter perched on her knees, the adventuresome idealists headed back to New Zealand. Their survival of a hurricane en route is described in a letter Eileen wrote to friends in Canada. (A copy of that account is taped to the edition of *Quest* donated by Tom Denny to the Maritime Museum of B.C. in Victoria.) Shortly after their arrival in Eileen's hometown of Napier on January 24, 1941, Dibbern was again interned because the New Zealand authorities refused to recognize the declaration of his flag and passport.

*Quest* was published by W.W. Norton in March 1941. Dibbern was released from internment in October 1945. He and Eileen resumed sailing, pursuing their goal of a bridge of friendship among peoples. Dibbern won a lottery in 1950 and bought an island in Tasmania where he was joined for a time by Eileen and their daughter. The Galley Bay property was sold in the sad acknowledgment of a dream beyond realization. In 1954 Dibbern caused a stir by participating in the Trans-Tasman Race—shockingly, with an all-female crew! He made news again in 1957 when *Te Rapunga* was driven ashore in a storm near Greymouth, New Zealand and yet again in 1959 when, battered by a hurricane, she was towed into Auckland.

On June 11, 1962, Dibbern died of a heart attack in Auckland. He was making preparations to "complete the circle" by returning to Germany to visit his family whom he had not seen, but with whom he had remained in contact, since his departure in 1930. To the end he remained true to his principles, never took out citizenship in any country and thereby forfeited old-age security income. To the end, he proudly flew his own flag and carried the passport that expressed his philosophy. ▀

Erika Grundmann is writing a book about George Dibbern's peripatetic life and would like to hear from anyone who has memories of him, photos, clippings and other memorabilia. Write her at PO Box 227, Mansons Landing VOP 1K0, E-mail [grundman@island.net](mailto:grundman@island.net) or phone 250-935-6724.