

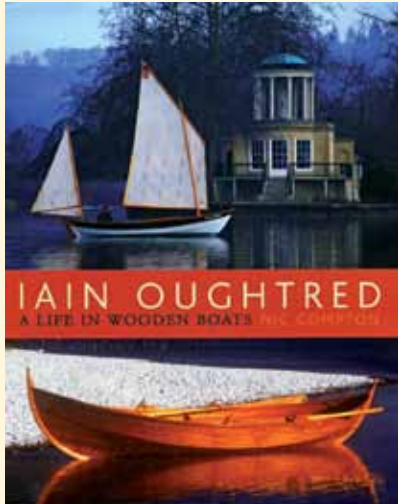
By Nick Watt:

Iain Oughtred: A Life in Wooden Boats, by Nic Compton.

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Hardcover, £16.95-£25.00, Adlard Coles Nautical, 2009

160 pages, illustrated with photographs.



Britain has a rich and regionally diverse history of boatbuilding in wood. With the advent of glass fibre in the 1950s, the demand for wooden boats began to reduce and, by the early 1970s, very few of the skilled workforce capable of building such craft remained. A similar trend was experienced across the Atlantic. However, starting in the United States in the mid-1970s, there was a resurgence of interest in wooden boats and their construction as people became aware that a rich part of their cultural heritage was about to disappear as the craftsmen who built these vessels retired and died. The revival movement lagged behind on this side of the Atlantic and did not appear in Britain until the early 1980s.

This book examines an unusual individual. Oughtred was one of a small group of designers and boatbuilders who pioneered the clinker approach to plywood boatbuilding during the 1970s and 80s. His designs borrow heavily from traditional craft, which he studied closely. Compton makes clear, however, that Oughtred's expertise has not been attained without significant personal sacrifice. He is portrayed as an uncomfortable loner who has often felt at odds with many elements of his upbringing and his native Australia. He has a wonderful designer's eye and a clear sense of purpose, coupled with an almost inhuman amount of determination and focus. He has lived most of his life in close to abject poverty, still eschews computer-assisted design and is perhaps more of an artist than a naval architect in his outlook.

If you are interested in wooden boats and do not

already know Oughtred's work, you probably should: he draws beautiful boats and his highly detailed plans have earned huge respect from those who have built them. Yet there are some paradoxes here. Unlike other designers whose work draws from the tradition, almost all of his boats have a certain something that makes them instantly identifiable as being from his board. Another contradiction is that although Oughtred has over time drawn and re-drawn his boats with the aim of making them easier to build, few amateur builders building a boat for the first time feel confident enough to tackle one of his designs.

Compton (a yachting journalist specialising in traditional boats), has explained much of this. He has written a strikingly personal biography that shows clearly how Oughtred's difficult childhood and dislike of a brash commercial culture led the boat designer to escape as far as possible from his Australian roots, becoming first very English and later very Scottish. The somewhat journalistic style makes for a very easy read. The first (and major) part of the book is an excellent biography of an enigmatic artist. The second part, where he examines Oughtred's key designs, is less successful; there is little sense of how the man and his beliefs are connected to what you see.

The production quality is excellent, with numerous well-reproduced photographs. The boat plans reproduced in the second part are, however, rather less clear than the reader might prefer. Overall, an excellent introduction to Oughtred the man and a reasonable introduction to his designs – but more of a coffee table work than a technical tome. NW

(This review appears courtesy of the editor of The British Army Review, where it first appeared.)

Photographs/design on this page ©Nic Compton & Kathy Mansfield.



Iain at home in Skye. He makes and plays a number of instruments and is fascinated by Scottish traditional music.