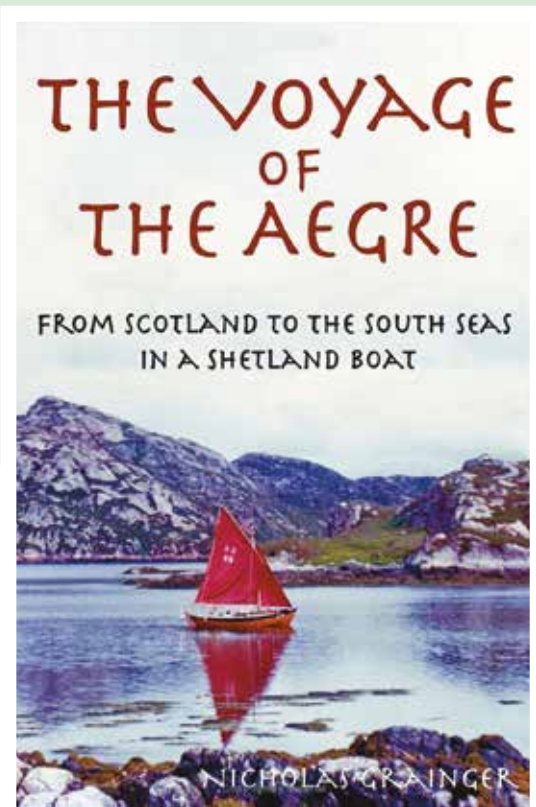


THE VOYAGE OF THE AEGRE:

FROM SCOTLAND TO THE SOUTH SEAS IN A SHETLAND BOAT

BY NICHOLAS GRAINGER



Reviewed by Matthew Sullivan

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princely sum of £300. Of course, that was in 1972, he was only 22, Julie only 18, and he was skint.

What he liked about the boat was its spartan simplicity: no toilet, no shower, no electrics, no creature comforts. Young Nick's ambitions were uncontainable, and he saved up for the boat: with this small boat he planned to cross from Scotland to Madeira and thereafter to the Canary Islands. Most inexperienced sailors would blanch at such a challenge. Ridgway encouraged him to go yet further, across the Atlantic to the West Indies, another 2400 miles.

Like all successful long-distance sailors, Nick was an expert in planning, coordination, and execution. His girlfriend Julie, who abandoned her mathematics degree to marry him and follow their dreams, was a tremendous support. One can hardly imagine today contemplating such a passage with only a Hitachi transistor radio and a rotating RDF aerial, but of course in the 1970s technology was basic, and their philosophy was to be as self-reliant on their own wits as possible. Nick, who hailed from landlocked Cambridge, worked through a coastal navigation correspondence course

The *Voyage of the Aegre* is an account of an adventure in a 21 ft Shetland boat, sailing all the way from Scotland to the South Seas. Nicholas Grainger distinguishes himself from other writers in this genre by writing 50 years after the voyage to reflect on what happened, how it happened, and the psychological impact of the experience on him and his young wife, Julie. It is far too common in nautical literature for authors to feel that their readers will be satisfied with reading what is effectively a logbook rather than an autobiographical experience. Grainger does not make this mistake, providing us instead with an exciting series of sailing yarns whilst also giving us insights into the psyche of a young couple trying to forge their way in the world together while living alone with the sea.

Nick's mother's mantra, 'wear out, don't rust out' informed Grainger's every move as a young man. At the age of 21 he wrote to John Ridgway, the famed international oarsman who had crossed the Atlantic, asking him for a summer job at his adventure centre in Ardmore, northwest Scotland. Ridgway was an influence and an inspiration, as was his boat *English Rose III*, which Grainger admired for its simplicity, seaworthiness, and reliability.

After learning the ropes working with Ridgway, Grainger came across the boat that would change his life. The *Aegre*, named after a Norse god of the sea, a traditional Shetland fishing boat, was for sale for the





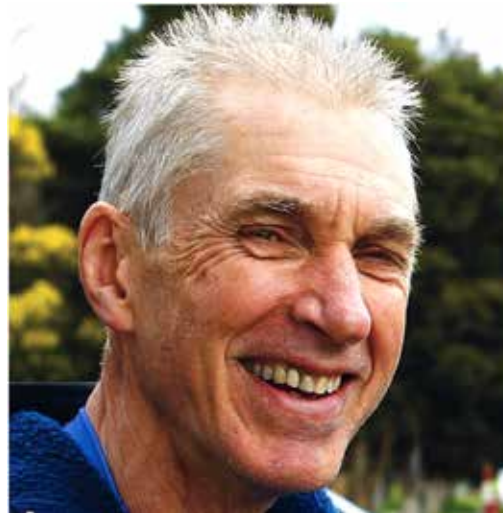
and mastered celestial navigation. However, *The Aegre* would have no engine, no transmitter, no chronometer and no running water, making meticulous planning absolutely essential.

Their 31-day passage from Scotland to Madeira was hair-raising and eye-opening. When they reached Madeira, they realised that they had never actually sailed into a harbour before, but they managed it perfectly and turned out to be a curiosity for onlookers. During this period, they made friendships that lasted a lifetime.

After seven weeks in Madeira, they headed to the Canary Islands, and set their sights on a transatlantic crossing to Barbados, taking with them food and water for 100 days, but no life raft, no means of communication beyond letter-writing, and no plans to shower or bathe for six weeks. After a break in the Caribbean, they sailed 1200 nautical miles to the Panama Canal in only 11 days, with just their transistor radio as company. Thereafter they had a 9-week passage to the Marquesas, still living cheek-by-jowl in a 3m X 2m cabin, amidst tremendous heat, with no privacy. They never slept together during a passage as they only had a single bunk in the cabin and were always on watch and fearful of disaster. Understandably, life got tense from time to time! Nick's understated reserve when discussing such matters marks him as a true Brit of the old school—stoical to the core.

Even when relaxing in the Marquesas, 'eternal vigilance is the price the cruising yachtsman must pay for freedom.' Nick became increasingly disillusioned about life ashore; Julie felt the same about life at sea. Tellingly, Nick reflects that they never made the most of their experiences by simply enjoying them: 'I'm disappointed we didn't make more of being there. Now I've come to understand that visits to out-of-the-way places like this are never repeated, that I'll never be back and should use the opportunity, but at 23, that idea was not in my mind. How could it be?' What he loved was the sense of freedom he had since leaving Britain, and he had no intention of going back.

The climax of this book centres around the passage from Tahiti ostensibly to Rarotonga, during which *The Aegre* suffered a massive capsize in atrocious weather, leading to a near-fatal flooding of the cabin and the loss of most rigging. Nick threw out 65 days' worth of drinking water to use the jerrycans for buoyancy, and in this way he saved their lives and their boat, thinking on his feet very clearly in a life-or-death crisis.



Nicholas Grainger

Their logbook, passports, money, sextant and virtually everything else on board was missing or destroyed.

After jury-rigging the boat, Nick used star bearings and sunrise and sunset times to determine their position and then set a course to sail for Samoa, which they reached 31 days later, having abandoned the idea of searching for Rarotonga, feeling that it would be easier (if much longer) to find Samoa, thereby avoiding treacherous reefs along the way. Whilst hove-to off Samoa once more in bad weather, a Japanese ship came over the horizon and towed them into the nearby harbour of Pago Pago in the Samoa group. That was just about the end of the brave but very tired and weather-beaten little *Aegre*, but not the end of the story of Nick and Julie, who went on to land jobs in Pago Pago, and later to migrate to New Zealand.

The Voyage of the Aegre deserves to become a classic in seafaring literature as it has all the key ingredients—adventurous excitement, serious danger, exemplary planning and self-reliance, but most importantly a completely authentic, honest and heart-warmingly humble voice of a man who has seen and overcome much in his life but who takes nothing for granted. Nick acknowledges his mistakes and limitations with clear-eyed frankness and also understands the huge debt he owes to Julie for her incredible strength of character, patience, and devotion in adversity. Nick's frequent use of extracts from Julie's diary makes for powerful reading. *The Voyage of the Aegre* is not only an account of a journey but also a moving tale of two young people growing up together, forging a relationship in extraordinary circumstances, and facing down unimaginably difficult challenges with inspirational courage. *MS*