(By John Rousmaniere) The winner of a record three straight Bermuda Races in *Finisterre*, a cruising sailor and powerboater of great accomplishment, and one of boating’s best and most influential writers and photographers, Carleton Mitchell died of heart failure on July 16, 2007, at his home in Key Biscayne, Florida. He was 96.

Mitch (as he was always called) first sailed as a boy in an uncle’s racing sloop off New Orleans. He kept a scrapbook in which he pasted pictures of boats, and when he was 12 he answered an inquiry about his plans for a career by announcing, “I want to sail and write about it.” That dream survived college in Ohio and mundane jobs in the Depression (for a while he sold women’s underwear at Macy’s). It even survived a wretched experience in a leaky old ketch that almost sank in the Gulf Stream. When the ketch staggering into Nassau, he began his lifelong love affair with the Bahamas, where he later worked as a writer and photographer. *(Photo Credit: John T. Hopf, 1958, copyright Mystic Seaport Carleton Mitchell Collection.)*

After wartime service in the U. S. Navy’s photography department, he bought one of John Alden’s old *Malabars* and, renaming her *Carib*, sailed to the West Indies, which then were barely known by American sailors. Out of this cruise came the first of his seven books, *Islands to Windward* (1948), which introduced the charms of Caribbean sailing to Americans and fueled the enthusiasm that produced the first charter fleets. Moving on to a 58-foot Rhodes yawl he named *Caribbee*, he won a transatlantic race to England and wrote a book about it, *Passage East* (1953), that was illustrated with some of his best photographs and infused by his affection for the sea. “To desire nothing beyond what you have is surely happiness,” he mused. “Aboard a boat, it is frequently possible to achieve just that. That is why sailing is a way of life, one of the finest of lives.”

All the while Mitch was thinking about the ideal boat. She had to be small enough for a couple to handle easily, beamy enough to be comfortable, shallow enough to cruise in the Bahamas, strong enough to cross an ocean, and fast enough to have a chance at winning some silver. With the concept of a beamy little centerboard yawl in his head, he went to Olin Stephens for the design. The vessel that came out of this collaboration he named *Finisterre* because he intended to survive happily in her, far beyond the end
of land.

Though designed without attention to the rating rules, *Finisterre* ended up winning three straight Bermuda Races, a record nobody has come close to matching. In the vast firmament of sailing records, the polestar is the one set by this tubby yawl. It is hard enough to win one Bermuda Race. A favorable rating can help, and, *Finisterre* had one in the first race, but not the other two. Quoting John Nicholas Brown, *Bolero*’s owner, to the effect that the Bermuda Race is “the great Atlantic lottery,” Mitch sometimes credited blind luck for his successes. But it was not luck that made *Finisterre* one of the few boats in 1958 to avoid chaos on the starting line and press on to victory through 50-knot squalls. He credited his crew: “On *Finisterre* we have a basic tenet to keep moving at maximum speed in the wind of the moment. There must be either a trim or a shift in sails every time there is a variation. . . . In no other race in my memory have so many strings been pulled or so many bits of cloth gone up and down the mast. Crew work and helmsmanship have never been more important.” (Photo Credit: Mystic Seaport Rosenfeld Collection)

His crew, meanwhile, credited their skipper. Bunny Rigg put it all down to Mitchell’s “good admiralty” – meaning his powers of forehandedness, organization, and leadership. Two-time Bermuda Race winner Dick Nye explained *Finisterre*’s success this way: “For one thing, she’s got everything. And he sails the hell out of her.” Mitchell said as much. “My theory was that the time to get everything right is before you leave the dock. And then, once you leave the dock, to be able to drive the hell out of the boat and never have to worry about something carrying away. And if anything did let go on you, the spares were on board with the know-how to put it back together.”

Consider his approach to navigation in that era before long-range electronic position finders. He himself was a bold and skilled celestial navigator. He told me that *Finisterre* once got lost near Bermuda. “We didn’t know where the hell we were. Then with Bunny Rigg holding me, I took a moon sight and we came out right at Northeast Breaker. It was an easy sight.” It may have been easy for him, but sighting the fast-moving moon from a pitching little boat can be like grabbing a firefly. Still, Mitch was careful to sign on at least one more sailor of equal navigational ability so each watch was prepared for an opportunity to take a sight when the overcast momentarily cleared.

If *Finisterre* had everything, it was the best of everything, as demanded by her owner. Examples of Mitch’s obsessive, painstaking approach fill his correspondence, which is collected at Mystic Seaport. On the day after Christmas, 1953, he wrote a four-page letter to the sailmakers at Ratsey & Lapthorn laying out his high expectations. “I realize all these wants of mine add up to a lot of trouble for you and your people,” he wrote, no doubt correctly, “but I want *Finisterre* to be a very special little craft, and to me – as I know to you – perfect sails are necessary for performance and pleasure.” Good admirals can be demanding clients.

With her 22,000-pound displacement and 11’3” beam on a waterline of just 27’6” – “the fat little monster,”
Mitchell cheerfully called her — *Finisterre* had the inertia and initial stability that add up to sail-carrying ability. In her first race, as she was beating fast into a hard blow in the company of 50-footers, one of Mitchell’s crew, an amiable Bahamian Star sailor named Bobby Symonette, mused, “I wonder how the little boats are doing tonight.” Something about *Finisterre*’s performance in this rough stuff had made him forget that she was, in fact, the littlest boat in the fleet. *Finisterre* did have a problem in light going, but as Olin Stephens has admiringly commented, “her skipper and her crew maintained an almost magical degree of concentration to keep her moving in light airs.” In the long, calm run that made up the early going in the 1960 Bermuda Race, *Finisterre* tacked downwind and kept up with the lighter boats.

As anybody who ever ate a meal or shared a bottle with Carleton Mitchell knows, the man thoroughly enjoyed his creature comforts. *Finisterre* may have been only 38 feet long, but her sailing crew of six were looked after by a full-time professional cook, and the off-watch was not merely advised but ordered to get their sleep. This paid off nicely in the final 100 miles of the 1958 race, when line squalls appeared. “*Finisterre* passed many of her competitors right there,” recalled Rigg, “rolling reefs in and out and changing headsails no less than 20 times with the fluctuations of the breeze simply because she had a well-rested crew.” Two reasons why they were well-rested were the eye shades and ear plugs provided by their skipper.

Few vessels have enjoyed the influence of *Finisterre*. From the mid-1950s until well into the 1970s, one of the most popular and successful boat models was universally called “the *Finisterre*-type yawl.” Many beamy, shoal-draft centerboarders in the 32- to 45-foot range were inspired by *Finisterre*’s racing prowess and by the loving tributes that Mitch paid to his pride and joy in his articles in *Yachting* and *Sports Illustrated*. When fiberglass construction came along, these boats cost much less than *Finisterre*, and sailing enjoyed one of the biggest booms in the sport’s history. Where the 1954 Bermuda Race had just 77 starters, all but a few over 40 feet, in 1966 there were 167 starters, and a whole division was dedicated to boats smaller than that length.

Part of the appeal was that there was much more to the *Finisterre* breed than racing. Mitchell made her an extremely comfortable floating home, even carrying a phonograph when cruising. He told me that for every mile she raced, she cruised at least ten. After winning the 1956 Bermuda Race, she sailed to the Mediterranean. “It has been a phenomenal trip,” Mitchell wrote home from Gibraltar. “I came, basically, because each time I had gone sailing in *Finisterre* we had run out of water too soon. So I figured if I pointed the bow east from Bermuda, there would be plenty of water and plenty of sailing. Now I am not sure there was enough of either.” Appropriately, a trophy that Mitch donated for the Bermuda Race has been rededicated as the first-place prize for the Cruising Division. With it goes a half model of *Finisterre*.

Back on the race course, even as her rating was increased substantially, the boat never finished below third in a major ocean race. In 1958, with only one new sail she won the Bermuda Race again. When she next raced seriously, it was to Bermuda in 1960, and she amazed even her skipper by winning a third time in some of the wildest weather in the race’s history. When the pioneer class for the new Bermuda Race Roll of Honour was selected in 2006, it included Carleton Mitchell. The inscription on his plaque reads as follows: “When he won the 1956, 1958, and 1960 Bermuda Races in his 38-foot yawl *Finisterre*, Carleton Mitchell tied John Alden’s record for most Bermuda Race overall victories while setting two new
The 1960 race was his last serious sailboat race as skipper. He went on to cruise in *Finisterre* and several powerboats, many of them heavy-displacement trawlers – a type that became popular thanks in part to his reports of his cruises to the Galapagos and elsewhere.

All along, whether racing or cruising, Mitch was writing gracefully and incisively about his and others’ boats and activities for *Yachting*, *MotorBoating*, *Sports Illustrated*, *National Geographic*, and other magazines, and in his books. *Islands to Windward* was followed by *Yachtsman’s Camera* (1951), a beautifully illustrated guide not only to sailing but to the methods of photography at sea. Fascinated by maritime history, he edited and annotated a collection of accounts of great voyages titled *Beyond Horizons* (1953). (When Leah and I visited him and Ruth, his wife, last Christmas, he and I spent a part of an afternoon marveling at the seamanship of Captain William Bligh in his longboat voyage after the *Bounty* mutiny.) Later came one of the best accounts of America’s Cup racing, *Summer of the Twelves* (1959), based in part on his experience as navigator of the Cup contender *Weatherly*. Mitch also wrote another book about the West Indies, *Isles of the Caribbees* (1966) published by the National Geographic Society, and a collection of his best articles, *The Winds Call* (1971).

These books have meant a lot to me and others. When I was a teenage sailor-reader, I so identified the name “Carleton Mitchell” with writing and photography that, on hearing that someone of that name had won the Bermuda Race, I asked my father if they were related. When he explained that they were one and the same man, I thought to myself, “This fellow can sail pretty well, too.” I first met this fellow several years later in Acapulco. He had raced down from San Diego in a *Kialoa*, and I, just 19 and speechless with awe, was helping his friend Hod Fuller deliver a 77-foot motorsailer to Greece. In the 1970s he would stop by the office of the old *Yachting*, where I was a young editor. We became acquaintances, he taking an avuncular interest in my career, and I becoming a little less speechless.

When I attempted to recruit him to give a talk at a symposium on yachting history, I was astonished when this seemingly confident man confessed outright that nothing frightened him more than the prospect of having to make a speech. Even prize ceremonies terrified him, he said, demonstrating that every success comes at a price, and every good man can admit vulnerability.

A hurricane made us friends. After Andrew blew the roof off his office, he solved the clean-up problem by donating his accumulated photographs and correspondence to Mystic Seaport. It was my pleasure to spend three days elbow to elbow with Carleton Mitchell – by day sorting and filing the photographs and papers to be shipped up to Mystic, by night sipping Champagne and enjoying Ruth’s magnificent cooking, and all the time talking of boats and sailors and their lot at sea. He knew and was not afraid to admit the mixed pleasure, awe, and fear that arise in a sailor’s heart, sometimes all at once. The photograph he chose for the jacket of the first edition of *Passage East* shows a sunrise on an ominously glassy sea over which a tense sailor keeps a close watch. The mood of wary challenge is expanded on in the text, where Mitch writes this about “the somewhat fantastic nature of ocean racing”:

“Here we are, nine men, driving a fragile complex of wood, metal, and cloth through driving rain and building sea, a thousand miles from the nearest harbor; no one to see or admire or applaud; no one to help if our temerity ends in disaster. . . . Our attitude is not even wholly based on the competitive aspect of racing. It is that we all feel there is just one way to do things, one standard, one code, and we live up
to it for our own satisfaction. We are driven by our own compulsions, each personal and secret, so nebulous we probably could not express them to our mates if we tried. But in our own way, we are about as dedicated as it is possible for men to be.

Carleton Mitchell was 42 when he wrote that paean to adventure. He was still pursuing his watery compulsions half a century later as he and Ruth cruised on the Mediterranean, and from his South Florida home to his beloved Islands. He celebrated his eighty-ninth birthday sailing on the Adriatic in Finisterre, now with a good owner in Venice. An accident and Parkinson’s called a halt to such pleasures, but when I telephoned in 2005 to wish him a happy ninety-fifth birthday, he told me he was looking for another new boat – a houseboat on which he could get around in his wheelchair. It was just like Mitch to want to get back on the water in something beamy and comfortable. He found that boat, and after he took delivery, his always strong voice, which had been a little weary, was sounding spry again.

Zephyr (sail)

Sailing culture for voyagers, zealots

M O N D A Y ,  J U L Y 2 3 , 2 0 0 7

Carleton Mitchell Dies at 96

Labels: Poets, Zealots

Carleton Mitchell died last Monday at the ripe old age of 96 - below is the NYT obit in its entirety. Those of you who are offshore sailors and have not read Mitchell order a copy of "Passage East" and give it a read...

In “Passage East,” Mr. Mitchell wrote about the mind-set of ocean racers:

“Here we are, nine men, driving a fragile complex of wood, metal and cloth through driving rain and building sea, a thousand miles from the nearest harbor; no one to see or admire or applaud; no one to help if our temerity ends in disaster. We are driven by our own compulsions, each personal and secret, so nebulous we probably could not express them to our mates if we tried. But in our own way, we are about as dedicated as it is possible for men to be.”

Carleton Mitchell, 96, Sailor Who Wrote About Yachting, Is Dead

By RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

Carleton Mitchell, who won the prestigious Newport Bermuda Race a record three consecutive times, and chronicled the joys and challenges of sailing in his books, magazine articles and photographs, died Monday at his home in Key Biscayne, Fla. He was 96.

His death was announced by John Rousmaniere, a family friend and a writer on sailing.
In the early Depression years, Mr. Mitchell was working at Macy’s in Manhattan, a dropout from Miami University of Ohio who was collecting rejection slips for Western novels. He had sailed as a youngster on Lake Pontchartrain, and he vowed to pursue his dream to be a sailor.

With a $500 stake from his mother, he got a job as a stevedore in Miami. He later worked as a photographer in the Bahamas, taught combat photography in the Navy during World War II, then turned to sailing and writing.

Mr. Mitchell sailed through the Caribbean in 1946, and, at a time when it was only lightly visited, wrote of his experiences in “Islands to Windward” (1948). After competing in a trans-Atlantic race, he wrote on ocean racing in “Passage East” (1953). C. B. Palmer wrote in The New York Times Book Review that Mr. Mitchell’s photographs in that book were “among the most moving ever made of that beautiful object, a vessel under sail.”

Mr. Mitchell reveled in the approach to life that sailing provided.

“No 20th-century man can really escape, but a boat gives a man the opportunity to get away from the turmoil and into direct contact with nature,” he told Gay Talese of The New York Times in 1958, after he won the Miami-to-Nassau yacht race. “Somehow the detached life on the sea gives me the ability to think. It’s a life of action, yet contemplation.”

Mr. Mitchell was best known as a competitor for his victories in 1956, ’58 and ’60 in the 635-mile race from Newport to Bermuda, winning in his 38-foot yawl Finisterre.

“His innovation, with the assistance of yacht designers, was to be able to make a wide boat competitive in racing as well as roomy for cruising; that was the real insight,” said Mr. Rousmaniere, the author of “A Berth to Bermuda” (2006), a history of the Newport Bermuda Race.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, one of the most popular and successful boat models was known as the Finisterre-type yawl, Mr. Rousmaniere said. Mr. Mitchell’s 1960 victory in the Newport Bermuda Race was his last major competition.

He is survived by his second wife, Ruth. His first wife, Elizabeth, predeceased him.

In “Passage East,” Mr. Mitchell wrote about the mind-set of ocean racers:

“Here we are, nine men, driving a fragile complex of wood, metal and cloth through driving rain and building sea, a thousand miles from the nearest harbor; no one to see or admire or applaud; no one to help if our temerity ends in disaster. We are driven by our own
compulsions, each personal and secret, so nebulous we probably could not express them to our mates if we tried. But in our own way, we are about as dedicated as it is possible for men to be.”

FROM CRUISING WORLD

End of an Era

Visionaries and contemporaries, Carleton Mitchell and Charlie Cary shared an innate understanding of what made sailing, and cruising, such a singular and rewarding pursuit. "Herb’s Watch" from our July 27, 2007, CW Reckonings

27-Jul-2007

By Herb McCormick (More articles by this author)

Sailing the 38-foot Finisterre, Carleton Mitchell won the Lighthouse Trophy, the overall prize for the Newport-Bermuda Race, on three consecutive occasions.

They were a pair of American sailors, Navy veterans of World War II, pioneers in voyaging the Caribbean, sons of New Orleans. Their rich, complete lives were so layered and eventful—so full of adventure and joy, challenges and accomplishments—that they almost read like fiction, straining the bounds of plausibility. They loved their wives and the sea, in that order. And when all was said and done, their earthly days concluded within a month of one another, and their passing signaled the true end of a singular era in cruising under sail.

Charlie Cary, the founder of The Moorings who basically invented the rewarding pastime of bareboat chartering, passed away in Florida on June 14, 2007 at 89. Carleton Mitchell, the three-time winner of the Newport-Bermuda Race and one of the most prolific and talented marine photjoournalists of all time, followed Cary to Fiddler’s Green on July 16; he was 96. To say that Mitchell and Cary—the former an artist, the latter an entrepreneur—enjoyed stupendous runs would be a more than a minor slip, it would be an understatement of criminal proportion. Each, in their own way, was a giant, and it’s unlikely we’ll ever see the likes of either of them again in our lifetimes, if ever.

Related Resources

Carleton Mitchell, Bermuda Race Legend, Dies at 96

Travels with Charlie

Past the End of the Land

Mitchell grew up sailing in the waters of Louisiana’s Lake Pontchartrain, and at the ripe old age of 12 reportedly uttered these prophetic words: “I want to sail and write about it.”

As it turned out, the lad was clairvoyant. As a sailing photographer and journalist, Mitchell had nor has a single peer. Sure, one can make the argument that there have been better pure writers, and you could certainly mount a case that there were cameramen who were at least as talented as he was, but there was no one, and I mean no one, who combined both crafts with such skill and dexterity.

Then, throw in the fact that he was one of the best offshore racing sailors and most intrepid cruisers of his time, and you begin to see what I’m getting at. Carleton Mitchell was an original, the best of the best, a nautical icon for the ages.

I won’t completely rehash the excellent tribute John Rousmaniere—a friend of “Mitch’s” and a damn fine sailing journalist and historian in his own right—has penned about Mitchell on the website for the Newport-Bermuda Race, but here are some highlights: His first cruise to the West Indies in the late 1940s was the subject of a terrific book Past the End of the Land. He competed for the America’s Cup and won the prestigious biennial jaunt to the Onion Patch a record setting, mind-boggling three times (1956, ’58 and ’60). And his famous 38-foot centerboard yawl, Finisterre—wide of beam (11’3”), short of waterline (27’6”)—proved to be the template for all sorts of voyaging boats that followed, including the Bermuda 40 and the Bristol 40.

The New York Times loved Mitchell. Of the photographs in his 1953 book, Passage East, reviewer C.B. Palmer said, “(they’re) among the most moving ever made of that beautiful object, a vessel under sail.” And in a 1958 story about his victory in the Miami-Nassau Race, a young journalist named Gay Talese (’) quoted Mitchell thusly: “No 20th-century man can really escape, but a boat gives a man the opportunity to get away from the turmoil and into direct contact with nature. Somehow the detached life on the sea gives me the ability to think. It’s a life of action, yet contemplation.”

That was a certainly a sentiment to which Charlie Cary could relate. Cary grew up on the East Coast but adopted New Orleans as his hometown during a long career there in the mining business. At 50, spurning a promotion (and move to New York City) he had no use for or interest in, Cary flew to the British Virgin Islands, and with wife Ginny and six Pearson 35s, founded The Moorings.

Today, of course, one can charter a boat and take a sailing trip in literally every corner of the world. That wasn’t the case in 1969, when Cary hung out his shingle. He struck a chord for a lot of reasons, but the simplest one proved to be the most effective. For Cary was a racing and cruising sailor himself, and he shared two things with Mitchell: an innate understanding of what made sailing, and cruising, such a singular and rewarding pursuit, and a deep passion for the islands of the Caribbean. It was a thread that bound "Herb’s Watch" from our July 27, 2007.

In his own, parallel universe, Cary also had as profound an effect on boat design as Mitchell with his Finisterre. And we won’t be so silly as to compare the two vessels on any real subjective terms. But Cary was the impetus behind the Morgan Out Island 41, a bulbous cruiser that certainly never won a Bermuda Race, but which became a well-loved vehicle to many cruising sailors, and which has taken many would-be voyagers—old salts and neophytes alike—to all corners of the watery world.

I never knew Mitchell, unfortunately, though in some small way I’ve tried to follow in his footsteps. However, I spent a week canoodling around the BVI’s with Charlie Cary a...
few years ago, and was left in awe of his zest for living and his kind, gentlemanly ways. On the last day we were together, he told me one of the main reasons he'd first come to the islands. It was a photograph in Yachting magazine, which in the 1960s was a true bible for sailors of all stripes. The image was of a trim cruising boat in a still anchorage, with palm fronds waving in the breeze.

The picture, of course, was by Carleton Mitchell, of Finisterre. It linked them then and it links them now, two sailors who left unwavering wakes, two great guys who won't, and can't, be forgotten.