

# ALAN VILLIERS

VOYAGER OF THE WINDS

Kate Lance

*with a foreword by*

Sir Robin Knox-Johnston

# INTRODUCTION

Alan Villiers was only in his mid-forties when he wrote his autobiography *The Set of the Sails*, but by then he had already lived a life that made it well worth reading. In 1920 he went to sea on square-riggers, but an accident forced him into life ashore as a journalist. At twenty-five he sailed again on a four-masted barque around Cape Horn: a thrilling race and a female stowaway made his book of the passage a bestseller.

A shocking death blighted his next voyage in 1929 but gave Villiers another memorable book. By the mid-1930s his writings, films and lectures had made him famous, but after the agonising failure of a love affair he set off for two years to sail around the globe in the exquisite full-rigged ship *Joseph Conrad*.

His public rationale was always the urgency of recording the fast-disappearing ways of sail; Villiers never mentioned the private depressions, loneliness and self-doubt that also drove him. He rarely questioned the racial and sexual stereotypes of his era, yet he lived amicably among people from all over the world in sometimes extreme privation.

Villiers at last found happiness in marriage at thirty-seven, then spent six arduous wartime years in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve. Afterwards he became a media star of the '50s and '60s, captained the *Mayflower II*, sailed movie ships for Hollywood and lectured internationally. He inspired ship-lovers worldwide to preserve their remaining historic vessels, and today his unique images enhance a renowned museum collection.

Oddly, despite further significant work and extensive travel, he never published an updated autobiography. This book is the first study of his life as a whole – the myth-making, the achievements and the consequences.

Alan Villiers was not simply a voyager. At a pivotal moment in maritime history he worked aloft as a seaman and abaft as a master, observing and recording an age-old body of wisdom. The result was an extraordinary memorial: to the greatest sailing ships ever launched and to the talented man who loved them.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Villiers' diaries contain outdated nomenclature, random British or American spelling and occasional errors. For authenticity and readability I have left quotations as they appear in the diaries, without indicating his variations by '[sic]' except in potentially confusing cases. However, an ellipsis '...', which means omitted text or a significant pause, is shown as '... [sic]' where Villiers himself has used it for significance. The other instances occurring in this book indicate text I have omitted for brevity, and appear simply as '...'.

# I

## HELL AND MELBOURNE

One moment I was working away, full of pleasurable thoughts. Next moment the rigging was flying past me, and a tar-covered wire hit me a grazing clout. I felt myself striking other rigging. Then the deck. It seemed to me, in a last instant of consciousness, that the deck was surprisingly soft.

It was not the deck that was soft. It was I.<sup>1</sup>

In a life of accidents and injuries and sudden shocks, none was to bring such a change of fortune to Alan Villiers, able seaman on the four-masted barque *Lawhill*, as the moment the vessel ran aground near Port Lincoln in 1921 and threw him from aloft. He was eighteen and feared he might never walk again.

He had always yearned to sail on the square-riggers, never accepting their days of glory were lost forever beyond the void of the First World War. In an era intoxicated with the new there were few enough sailing ships left working in the world – there were none for a half-crippled seaman.

Alan Villiers was a stoic, stubborn boy. He went home to Melbourne, forced himself back to his feet, and took a job on a grim little Bass Strait ketch. Then he tried the easier labour of steamships: he made one tedious voyage to Europe and loathed every moment.

He knew finally he would never become a master in deep-sea sail, and he could not bear to work in steam. His dream was over and he must leave the sea behind. He started again in Hobart, Tasmania, and talked his way into a newspaper job at the age of nineteen. It was 1923 and the world of the wind ships was finished, he believed.



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Villiers was correct. By 1923 one of the greatest periods of human ingenuity was coming to a close. From the days the world was flat and order spread at the point of a sword, sailing vessels had been the engines of civilisation. Only ships could fly (by grace of God), with parchments and news, perfumes and silk, weapons and gold, from port to far-flung port. Entire economies were driven by the species of trees a country could harvest for its fleets, and entire cultures knew themselves in terms of those fleets.

Shaped by the physics of air and water, sculpted through centuries of cruel experience, wooden vessels reached their perfection in the clipper ships of the mid-nineteenth century. With their long slim hulls, dashing raked masts and cloudstorms of canvas, they were (to most minds) the finest creations of the age of sail. They set speed records as they raced the year's first crop of fragrant China tea to England, or immigrants to Australia and wool bales home again. On one trip the terrified crew begged the master to reduce sail in a great storm; he famously replied, 'To Hell or Melbourne!'

Wood was part earth, part liquid, part breathing green life; perfectly at home within the flux of great waters. But the Chinese tell us whenever an element has reached its peak another is growing stronger quietly beneath; and even as wood mastered the seas, metal was being forged to take its place.

It was a good joke at first – floating metal! – but by the mid-nineteenth century iron ships with ingenious propellers and puny engines had appeared, and every year those engines became more powerful. Yet the sailing world adapted. Iron hulls were large and strong, and iron masts could carry canvas. God's wind needed no bunkers, and even the best steamships were no faster than the square-riggers.

But in 1869 the balance shifted forever when the Suez Canal was sliced between Africa and Arabia, and made voyages around the Cape of Good Hope a thing of the past: a thing of the past for steamers at any rate. The big wind ships could not negotiate the canal without costly towage and were forced to keep to their old highways of the Roaring Forties. The postal lifelines between distant colonies shifted to steamships, and passengers began to prefer their reliable passages. Understandably, a trip through the tropics – no matter how fever-stricken – was a more attractive prospect than the gales and icebergs of southern seas.

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Only one market remained open to the square-riggers – carriage of bulk goods from remote ports, where slow loading and lack of facilities made the tight schedules of steamers too expensive. They began to specialise in coal, saltpetre, ore, timber, grain and guano: filthy, labour-intensive cargoes.

In the late 1880s ship-building steel became available in quantity. It led to major advances in steam but also made possible the creation of a kind of wind-driven vessel that had never before been imagined: one of vast rigging and even vaster capacity, a massive four-masted warehouse that could be driven through even the roughest of waters.

To many these vessels were simply industrialised horrors, lacking the grace and glamour of ‘real’ sailing ships; to others they were romantic anachronisms – surely any fool could see that the future belonged to steam? But the new square-riggers were surprisingly useful – crews were cheap and the market for bulk commodities booming – and shipowners were anything but fools. They commissioned over four hundred of those extraordinary vessels and worked them hard, until the First World War brought their epoch to an end.

By the Second World War just twenty or so of the giant four-masters were still afloat, taking grain to Europe from isolated ports in South Australia, the far Antipodes. The great wind ships had been an expression of the highest in human art and skill and intelligence, but like the dinosaurs, their day was done.



Alan John Villiers was born in Melbourne on 23 September 1903. He was the second of Annie (Anastasia) and Leon Villiers' six children. His elder brother Noel was born in 1902, young Frank in 1906, Edith in 1907, Lionel in 1909 and Enid in 1912. Six babies in ten years – poor Annie! – but his mother is only an anxious shadow in Villiers' memoirs; he never mentions her by name.

Leon was a gripman on the cable trams, once the marvel of old Melbourne. They were propelled by metal cables running constantly in narrow tunnels beneath the road surface, between the tracks. The ‘grip’ was the device that reached through the slot in the side of the tunnel to grasp the moving cable, released by the gripman when the tram had to stop or coast, thrillingly, around corners.

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Cable trams were quiet, cheap and very frequent, did not smell of oil or petrol, and glided, it was said, 'with a swan-like motion', along seventeen routes and more than sixty miles of track. Every small boy in Melbourne wanted to grow up to be a gripman: every small boy but Alan Villiers. He saw what happened to his father.

Beyond his long working hours, Leon was a tramways union leader and unsuccessful Labour parliamentary candidate for the seat of Waranga. He was also a passionate poet and writer. 'His poetry was about the bush and the strivings of man: the articles were to point the way to a better world,' said Villiers, who felt that his father was overloaded with 'a great deal of the donkey-work for a movement which, great as were its early aspirations, sometimes came regrettably short of carrying out its ideals.'<sup>2</sup>

Leon was 'a tall square man with a high forehead and a black moustache'. Alan always remembered his 'doctrine of good citizenship – be resolute: give your ideas: go after peace of mind, gear down to simple things. Be not possessive or avaricious. Discard all shams. Love simple things.'<sup>3</sup> Leon believed that education for the workers would lead inevitably to progress, and that his children must aspire to a better life: he trusted in *The Future*. He was appalled to discover that his son longed instead for *The Past*, and the labours of a common sailor.

He should hardly have been surprised. Alan wrote that his earliest memories were not of his own home but of a house on Spencer Street belonging to his Ballarat Irish aunts and uncles (from his mother's family) which had an amazing balcony – one from which the little boy could watch the square-rigged sailing ships along the Yarra River at the end of the street, and in Hobsons Bay off Port Melbourne and distant Williamstown.

The uncles at Spencer Street were gold prospectors, 'tall, brown, bearded men', who would take Alan with them to visit the docks, 'a very small boy trudging along beside some very large uncles in the shadow of a full-rigged ship'. Alan's father was of more reserved English stock: he liked ships well enough, but visits to the docks were opportunities for lectures on geography and politics. He preferred camping in the bush to the sea, and tried to turn his son away from his growing passion.

When Alan was small, the family moved from Buncle Street, North Melbourne, to a tiny house near Flemington racecourse, in Collett

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Street, Kensington. Ships were still his greatest love, and he would walk to the docks and back – ‘only four or five miles’ – by himself or with his little brother Frank. He kept a secret book of his drawings of square-riggers.

Once Leon brought home a gripman, an elderly sailor whose job was to talk Alan out of his passion for ships: instead, to Leon’s dismay, they enthused together for hours. Villiers later imagined the old man dreaming of Cape Horn gales, where ‘silent ships under a press of trade wind sail followed each other through sunlit days’, while he was ‘jammed in the driver’s pew of a cable tram’. Such a prospect filled him with horror.



Alan Villiers’ family always called him by his second name, John, or more usually ‘Jack’. His sister Edith Hazel was ‘Hazel’, brother Lionel was ‘Leal’, and Enid Marjorie, for some reason, became known as ‘Bill’.

To help support his family, Alan had a paper-round from the age of nine, starting at 5.30 in the morning. A boy in one of the children’s novels he later wrote ‘was very quiet and paler than he should have been: a hard life had left its marks ... for eight years – six days a week, for two hours in the early morning, he had trudged four miles throwing people’s newspapers on their verandas and poking them beneath their doors.’<sup>4</sup>

He needed the money for schoolbooks, and the few pennies left over went towards second-hand books on ships, which he read obsessively. He loved to go to Royal Park near the Melbourne Zoo to climb a favourite tree from which he could see the square-riggers. When he was nine, he and his little brother Frank were chased away by a park ranger on horseback, who flogged them with a stockwhip he kept for impounding stray cows.

‘I can hear the creak of the saddle-leather now’, he wrote in an unpublished draft of his autobiography, ‘thirty years afterwards and 12,000 miles away, and see the suffused blood grow on the ranger’s saturnine face ... This incident befouled Royal Park for me. Never again did I climb the tree to look at ships.’ Villiers ran to his father to show him the welts and blood. Leon dashed to the park and

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confronted the ranger, who simply sat on his horse and, humiliatingly, ignored him. Leon was powerless. Alan wrote, 'That stinging stock-whip lashed deep & even today I find the sight of Melbourne depressing and dispiriting.'<sup>5</sup>

At the age of eleven Alan tried to join the barque *Hippen* as an apprentice, but was dissuaded by the mate, who had signed on at ten. He was 'bewitched' by the five-year-old daughter of the captain of the Norwegian ship *Asmund*, a white-blond angel 'as remote from humdrum everyday life as the lovely ship she sailed in, and the great man her father who sailed the ship'. But now, in the years of the First World War, *Hippen* and *Asmund* sailed without him, and both went missing. Villiers does not clarify whether storms or German submarines were the reason, but U-boats certainly had as little mercy for graceful square-riggers as for warships.

When Alan was twelve he started work with his older brother Noel in the long summer holidays at the glass-bottle factory in Spotswood, on the Yarra River leading to the docks. It was hot and hellish, with much night work; but square-riggers towed past and that was compensation enough. (Sailing ships were rarely spoken of as 'being towed' – too passive a term, perhaps.)

He was a clever, adaptable boy, awarded a scholarship to continue at high school, and hopefully to go on to university. He flirted with the idea of joining the Royal Australian Navy but lost interest when he found out that they no longer sailed their last full-rigged ship; and in any case, they did not want him.

Then, when Alan was only fourteen-and-a-half his childhood ended, and even the loss of the blonde angel from the *Asmund* could not have prepared him. His father went suddenly to hospital, was operated on for cancer, sewn up and sent home to die. He did so within a week, on 10 April 1918, aged only forty-five.

Leon Villiers was laid out in an open coffin in the front room, and Alan recalled 'his manuscripts, his *Songs of Labour and Love*, his poems of the Australian bush, now never to be revised. All his great hopes for his country and for us, his sons, were in that coffin too ...' But at the burial all he could think was, 'Oh God, now let me out of Melbourne! Let me go!'<sup>6</sup>

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Leon Villiers' own father had also died at an early age, and his mother had left Australia with her four younger children. The three eldest stayed with relatives at Warrnambool but, wrote Alan, they 'committed my father and two of his sisters to an institution miscalled a home ... his greatest dread was that he might die young and leave the six of us to suffer one.'<sup>7</sup> Leon's worst fears had come true, but the Labour movement was able to help establish widowed Annie in a small suburban grocery shop. Alan, respecting his father's wishes, stayed reluctantly at school for almost another year.

As in many Australian families of the time there may have been some inter-denominational tensions – Leon was Protestant and Annie Irish Catholic. Alan and Noel identified themselves as Protestant, but after Leon's death the four younger children were raised as Catholics. (Edith Hazel changed her name to Hazel Mary, Enid had numerous children, and Lionel bitterly resented what he saw as an imposition.)<sup>8</sup>

In late 1918 the deadly global pandemic of pneumonic influenza escaped quarantine in Australia and broke out in Sydney, Perth and Melbourne. Alan fell ill early in 1919, then the rest of his family also succumbed; Annie lost the shop. 'My mother went to work for a Jew in Flinders Lane, for she was handy with the needle. Brave soul! She worked hard there for years.'<sup>9</sup>

Villiers wrote a number of varying accounts of what happened next, which present some interesting anomalies. The first version of his final year in Melbourne appeared in the 1937 book *Cruise of the Conrad*. When he wrote it he was deeply depressed: he had lost a woman he loved and a ship he loved even more, and the book is suffused with anguish, self-doubt and financial desperation.

In a chapter bitterly entitled 'Local Boy Makes Good', memories of the life he had fled sixteen years before came back to haunt him. He recalled losing his school cap and being humiliated 'time and again'. His widowed mother was too poor to replace the cap, so he worked at the glass factory to get the money. He would watch ships on the river, yearning desperately to escape, and finally – as simple as that – he did so.

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A second version appeared in a 1938 piece Villiers wrote for a twenty-fifth anniversary magazine for his high school, Essendon, which by then regarded him as its most eminent old boy. From February to August 1919 the school was used as an influenza hospital, but classes continued at another school in Wilson Street, Moonee Ponds.<sup>10</sup> He recalled, 'the school was taken over as a hospital, when the influenza epidemic was so bad, and we were all bundled off to a new school at Wilson Street, or somewhere ... it was about that time that the chance of a cadetship came in the barque *Rothsay Bay*, and I was off.'

The third telling is in his 1949 autobiography, *The Set of the Sails*. Here there was no mention of lost caps or Wilson Street, but instead a strange tale of sexual humiliation. He wrote that his school had been closed and he was working in the glass factory until the official notification came that it was open again. After months had passed Villiers suddenly realised his school had re-opened but he had not been informed, when he saw a pretty blonde classmate, with a look of the *Asmund* angel, in uniform one morning on the train. He was filthy, just off the night shift and embarrassed to be recognised, and he simply never returned to the school.

This published version of events puzzled a classmate, who wrote to him saying, 'I could have sworn you actually began your leaving certificate year and stuck it for one term at the school in which we were temporarily housed when ours was appropriated as an emergency hospital. I thought you started on Chemistry and Latin, as you thought you might take up Medicine, but also did History, as you were keen on it.'<sup>11</sup>

The complete story seems to be that he attended Wilson Street school for at least the first third of 1919, then dropped out and worked at the glass factory until the end of 1919. During the year he had an embarrassing meeting with a classmate he was attracted to. He started learning sailing skills halfway through 1919 with the Melbourne Ancient Mariners Club at Albert Park Lake, and actually joined his first ship on 11 January 1920, according to his discharge certificate.

Minor discrepancies, certainly. Still, what is the significance of his tale that other students were informed that school had resumed, while he was not? There is an air of grievance about it – his close friend Fritz

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Egerton would chide him gently about his ‘inferiority complex’ – but it might have been just a story he told his mother to account for dropping out of school, one that expressed his sense of exclusion and became entangled in his memories.

What is undeniable is that in this frustrating period he yearned to ‘sail away’ from his bereavement, poverty and emotional pain. His various tales express compulsion – just get away from the hell of Melbourne! – and anything and everything around him seemed to offer a justification.



Villiers needed a Board of Trade certificate to learn sailing with the Ancient Mariners. Dated June 1919, it states that he is fifteen, 5 feet, 10½ inches in height (he would grow a little taller), with fair complexion, fair hair and grey eyes. He had passed his vision tests and had an ‘eagle and flower’ on his left forearm: tellingly, at the tender age of fifteen, he had already committed himself to the stigma of a sailor’s tattoo.

The Ancient Mariners found a sailing ship willing to take him on as a cadet – *Rothsay Bay*, sailing between New Zealand and Australia. (Villiers pronounced the ship’s name crisply as ‘Roth’sy Bay’, as he did his own, ‘Vill’yers’ – two syllables, not three.)<sup>12</sup>

In early 1920 sixteen-year-old Alan took the train to Adelaide, South Australia, and a steamer to the small port of Edithburgh. He felt guilt at leaving his struggling mother – it was true that one less child around would make it easier on her, but she wanted him to study as his father had wished, and he knew that his leaving for a sailor’s life would hurt her.

All mariners’ memoirs at this stage seem to retell the same scenes: the sad farewells, the looming ship, the awkward baggage, the unfriendly mate, the grim berth in the apprentices’ half-deck, the awful food, the inevitable seasickness: and Villiers’ story retells them too, except that from the moment he first saw the ‘very ordinary’ three-masted barque *Rothsay Bay* – all bluff bows and ugly grey paint – he discovered a great happiness. As if in a dream he recalled the vessel setting sail, all of the hands cheerfully drunk, a few of them having fled from a much harder ship:

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They ran along the yards, scorning the footropes, and they danced and sang, laughing to think themselves free of their great Cape Horner and in this handy, small Australian barque ... They went at everything with such a will that they never finished a chanty, and the chanties they sang were such as I had never read in any books ... What a going to sea!<sup>13</sup>

Later, when a week or two of wretched seasickness had passed, standing at a masthead he thought, 'Spiritually I felt nearer the Creator of things on the high yards and astride the bowsprit-end than I had ever felt ashore. This was the life! Drive on good barque, I am where I want to be! This is contentment.'

Happiness from the first few ships he knew was to colour his view of the sea for life. He would bring all of his father Leon's passionate trust in the innate goodness of the working man to a vision of the ship as a near-perfect world, content in its firm, wise hierarchy, safe from the deceits and illusions of the shore.



*Rothesay Bay*, 'this handy, small Australian barque', was one of a greatly diminished fleet sailing southern coastal waters with timber, coal, fuel and provisions. She was a classic three-masted iron barque, built in 1877 in Glasgow; 187 feet long and 772 gross registered tons.<sup>14</sup> We may know a little of *Rothesay Bay* from another of her kind, *Polly Woodside*, the 'prettiest barque ever built in Belfast', which is marooned today on the Yarra River in Melbourne beside the unlovely bluster of an exhibition centre.

*Polly Woodside* is an iron barque from 1885 of 678 gross tons. She was in the same Tasman Sea trade as *Rothesay Bay*, but the year after Villiers first went to sea she was turned into a coal hulk. In 1968 she was rescued by the National Trust of Australia and restored by a group of passionate volunteers. The World Ship Trust awarded *Polly Woodside* the International Maritime Heritage medal in 1988, placing her in the company of vessels such as *Cutty Sark* and *HMS Victory*. Sadly, her museum site was closed in 2006 so that another convention centre could be built on it.

Melbourne seems to have forgotten it was once – and still is – one of the great port cities of the world, but few residents ever think of the docks now except in terms of real estate. What used to be the heart

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of the city – alive with odd vessels and mysterious people – is now a high-rise wasteland. The freighters (so ugly), the trawlers (so smelly), the tugs (so noisy) have been banished to less desirable environs, and today barely a soul in trendy Docklands would know a brig from a barquentine, although once any child in Melbourne could have told them.

In the days of merchant sail every kind of ship had its own terminology. Even the word ‘ship’ itself meant precisely a vessel with three masts and a bowsprit, carrying rectangular (‘square’) sails on *all* of the masts – a ‘full-rigged ship’. A major innovation of the nineteenth century was a move from square sails on the rearmost mast to ‘fore-and-aft’ sails, set along the length of the vessel, which were more easily worked. Hence a two-masted full-rigged vessel was a ‘brig’, but with fore-and-aft on the rear it was a ‘brigantine’. A three-masted full-rigger was a ‘ship’; with a single fore-and-aft mast it was a ‘barque’, with two it was a ‘barquentine’.

Those carrying four masts were simply termed four-masted barques or ships. They were usually constructed of iron or steel to cope with the structural stresses. Four-masters could load far more cargo than three-masters but they were comparatively rare – out of a 1901 list of sailing vessels only 3 per cent had four masts.<sup>15</sup> In total, amongst the thousands of square-riggers of that era, only 414 metal four-masters were ever built: they were the elite of the wind ships.<sup>16</sup>

Today, *Polly Woodside* floats unvisited beside a construction site in Melbourne, her hard grey bulk and outstretched yards looming tall above the mud. She is vast in a puzzling way that simply has no scale of comparison to modern eyes. Yet when likened to a four-masted barque, pretty *Polly Woodside* is as a dolphin might be to a whale.



Alan Villiers grew lean and sinewy, utterly content in his new life on the barque *Rothsay Bay*. He learned of the true seaman’s passion for neatness and cleanliness and well-organised gear, and the importance to ship stability – and survival – of precise cargo stowage. He liked both his young fellow cadets and the weathered ancients who ran the ship.

They sailed 1,000 tons of gypsum to Whangarei in New Zealand, unloaded it and filled up with timber for Sydney. The passage was

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expected to take two weeks but poor weather turned it into two months. When they arrived their desperately ill captain went to hospital and the first mate, who had sailed the ship safely through atrocious conditions, was fired. So was Villiers, after only half a year at sea, but the first mate found him a berth in the barque *James Craig* – ‘a lovely little vessel, as much a clipper as the *Rothsay Bay* was a warehouse’.

*James Craig* had been launched as *Clan McLeod* from the Glasgow slips in 1874 and was still crewed by a number of Scots. An iron barque like *Polly Woodside*, 180 feet long and 671 gross tons, she was ‘a lively, lovely, and highly responsive thoroughbred of a ship ... She tacked like a yacht and ran like a greyhound.’ *James Craig* had already done time as a coal hulk in New Guinea but had returned to service for a firm of Tasmanian jam merchants. Her first port of call was Hobart in Tasmania, and Villiers ‘took a great liking to the clean southern city at the foot of Mt Wellington ... an attractive and cheerful spot, full of small ketches and schooners’.

In Hobart Alan also met a girl, Daphne Kaye Harris. In the little notebook he kept at this time, in a different, childlike handwriting, are the words ‘D. Harris, 193 Davey St Hobart’.<sup>17</sup> He liked Daphne enough to send her the following Christmas a copy of a posthumously published booklet of his father’s poetry, *The Changing Year and Other Verses*.

*James Craig* loaded timber for South Australia and battled the Southern Ocean for a month to get it there. In Port Adelaide Villiers saw a four-masted steel barque, the first he had ever seen, registered to an unknown port named Mariehamn – ‘a massive ship, manned by young fellows with white hair and pale yellow eyebrows’. The barque flew a flag with a blue cross on a white background, that of newly independent Finland.

‘The little *Craig* tramped pleasantly around the Tasman Sea for several voyages’, wrote Villiers in *Set of the Sails*. ‘It seemed to me that the fo’c’sle of a happy sailing-ship at sea was one of the more pleasant abodes of labouring man, where the sailors of all nations had learned through the centuries to work and live amicably together. Here there was true democracy, true international co-operation.’

Then in December 1920, less than a year after Villiers had first gone to sea on *Rothsay Bay*, they sailed into Port Phillip with a cargo of

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New Zealand timber, and towed up the Yarra to find out that *James Craig* would sail no more. She was laid up in Hobart for four years, became a coal hulk in Recherche Bay in southern Tasmania, and in 1932 was beached in a storm and abandoned.

In 1949 Villiers wrote about *James Craig* in his autobiography, and passed on his memories of the 'happy sailing-ship' to a new generation of maritime enthusiasts. In 1972 volunteers from the Australian Heritage Fleet refloated *James Craig* and towed her to Hobart for repairs. In 1981 they took her to Sydney for an extraordinary job of rebuilding, and today she is a working excursion vessel.

*James Craig* and *Polly Woodside* were the lucky ones. They could easily have gone the way of so many others: the way of *Rothesay Bay* perhaps. She was hulked in 1921 and dismantled in 1936, her remains dumped on an island near Auckland, unidentifiable among those of thirteen other vessels.



It was still just possible for a naive lad to dream of a career in sail when Alan Villiers first went to sea in 1920, although the path to ship's master was not easy. The first step was four years of apprenticeship at sea, followed by nautical academy to prepare for examinations for second mate. Next came more sea time, then another set of exams for first mate, followed by at least a further year as a watch-keeping officer, and finally the test for Master's Certificate. Command was still not assured, either – many ships' mates were qualified masters hoping for a position.

By the early 1920s the cruel truth was emerging. Since the war, the world had an abundance of new steamer tonnage; the merchant fleets no longer needed sailing vessels. Not only the handy little iron barques had been superseded by steamships, but even the great steel four-masters were living on borrowed time.

Still, Villiers and his friends searched for another sailing ship. They had no wish to go in a 'Yankee' schooner – American ships were notorious for their casual brutality – or a 'Squarehead' (Scandinavian) cadet ship, which would have no need of apprentices. They went to Williamstown, the old port town at the mouth of the Yarra, to look over two four-masted steel barques loading bags of grain at the railway pier, *Bellands* and *Hougomont*.

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