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Sailing with the sons of Sindbad

Alan Villiers the Australian Arabist

The exhibition *Sons of Sindbad – the photographs of Alan Villiers* in our South Gallery owes much to the research of Australian writer **Grace Pundyk**. She has helped to restore Villiers to his rightful place among the leading Western writers about the Arabian world, such as Gertrude Bell, T E Lawrence and Wilfred Thesiger.



It was the caption of the photograph that initially caught my eye. I'd been doing my usual lunchtime rummage in the archives of the Kuwait Oil Company, where I was editor of its English-language quarterly, and had come across the book *Kuwait by the First Photographers*. It wasn't that old, published two years previously in 1998, but the photos it contained captured a bygone era, a time before oil wealth brought rapid transformation to this tiny state. There were buildings made of coral, Bedouin families selling brushwood in the town square, old men fishing from tiny watercraft made of the spines of date palm fronds lashed together, waterskin-laden donkeys trudging through the shallows, rows of dhows towering behind them. Every image fascinated me and I took a longer than usual lunch that day to study the book further.

The photographers were mostly the usual suspects – the British 'travellers' (read political agents, diplomats or spies) exercising some Imperial muscle in the guise of desert redemption. But it was the eye behind the lens of this one particular photo, of British political agent Major A C Galloway lounging with Kuwait's Sheikh Ahmad bin Jabir Al-Sabah aboard the sheikh's steam yacht,

that really stood out. The caption identified the photographer as an Australian by the name of Alan Villiers. It was dated 1939. And while the handsome sheikh and relaxed diplomat were certainly a telling portrait of the political alliances of the time, all I kept wondering was, 'What was an Australian doing in Kuwait in the 1930s?'

Alan Villiers, born in Melbourne in 1903, made a name for himself as a maritime adventurer in the 1920s and 30s. His passion for sail and the sea led him to sail the world in the last of its fleet of tall ships. Shorebound after an accident on a Finnish barque, a job as a journalist on *The Hobart Mercury* allowed him to discover his great flair for writing and photography. He would publish a whole library of books and numerous articles on his travels and voyages, which would include a whaling voyage to the Antarctic and voyages as part-owner of a four-masted steel barque, *Parma*, carrying grain from Australia to Britain. Selling her for a profit he bought his own three-masted ship, renamed her *Joseph Conrad* and during 1934–36 made an epic voyage around the globe. The circumnavigation's route was inspired by the voyages of James Cook, but Villiers the writer drew as much inspiration from the ship's Polish-British namesake.

Villiers' decision to travel to Arabia in 1938 was borne of the certainty that he was living through the last days of sail. Having recorded the last of Europe's tall ships, he wanted to document the sailing traditions of pre-industrial cultures before they too disappeared. The Arabian dhow and its voyages on the monsoon winds was his first choice from a long list

left: Alan Villiers with friends in Kuwait, 1939. 'I'm the one with the cutlery,' he wrote.

above: A deep-sea boom under full sail off the southern Arabian coast, augmenting her lateen mizzen and settee mainsail with a jib flying from a demountable bowsprit.

All images lent by National Maritime Museum, Greenwich UK

of journeys he'd identified for such a project. 'There were still large fleets,' he wrote in *The Set of the Sails*, 'quietly going about their share of the world's sea-borne trade in the Indian Ocean and the waters of East Asia ... and I proposed to make an exhaustive survey of the types of ship and the trades I came across, and to photograph and make films as records.'

This wider survey, however, was not to be. With a world war on the horizon Villiers managed just this one trip. Nevertheless, his choice was an important one as Villiers himself said:

'It seemed to me that having looked far and wide over 20 years of a seafaring lifetime, that as pure sailing craft carrying on their unspoiled ways, only the Arab remained making his voyages as he always had, in a wind-driven vessel sailing without benefit of engines. Only the Arab still sailed his wind ships over the free sea, keeping steadfastly to the quieter ways of a kinder past.'

Of course, back in the year 2000, in that dusty archive in the middle of an oily desert, I knew none of this. In fact, when I came upon that first photograph, I'd never even heard of Alan Villiers. It seems shameful to admit this now, knowing what I do of this extraordinary man, and even more so that I, a fellow Australian, came only to learn of him through living in a distant country, one that has long remembered the man for the contribution he made to recording their own culture and history. But life is never linear. And all we can do is navigate its kaleidoscope of journeys, seemingly random but always interconnected, as they unfold in time.

Eventually I left Kuwait for Singapore to embark on a new life. Various other projects ensued but I just couldn't let go of this Alan Villiers fellow. I had to know more. A trip back to Australia to read through his Arabian journals, held at the National Library of Australia, revealed that Villiers had travelled aboard a Kuwaiti-owned and crewed boom, or large trading dhow, called the *Bayan*, which Villiers freely translates as the *Triumph of Righteousness*. This journey commenced in the Yemeni port of Aden following a route that Arabia's mariners had been making from time immemorial; around the Arabian peninsula and down the east coast of Africa, returning at the change of monsoon winds next season.

I also learned that he had written an account of his journey, *Sons of Sindbad*, published by Hodder & Stoughton, London, and Scribners, New York, in 1940. This turned out not only to

be a ripping sea-dog yarn but also a great classic of Arabian travel, a rich study of the ways of life, politics, governments, ancient and modern trade, people and cultures at the western edge of the old Indian Ocean world. It ranked, as far as I was concerned, with Wilfred Thesiger's famous *Arabian Sands*, which it predates by a decade and a half. And it's the only book of this genre – travelogue and ethnography – to have at its centre the seafaring Arabs. Yet amazingly the book had long been out of print and, it seemed to me, was in danger of falling into obscurity.

It was this realisation that propelled what became my campaign to restore Alan Villiers to the recognition he deserved in the field of Arabian studies. I packed up my belongings in Singapore and moved to the UK where I took up a scholarship to do a Masters in Arab Gulf Studies at Exeter University's Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. The focus for my thesis was, of course, Villiers and his Arab dhow voyages, but I also wanted to find a way of getting *Sons of Sindbad* republished.

The vogue for republishing Arabian travel narratives had so far been confined to the better-known travel writers. This celebrity cast of overland explorers who have dominated the story of the West's discovery of Arabia and its peoples included those writers, travellers, archaeologists, and influencers of British Imperial policy Gertrude Bell (*Arabian Diaries 1913–14*) and T E Lawrence (*Seven Pillars of Wisdom*). There was the naturalist, political officer and adviser of Saudi royalty Harry St John Philby (*The heart of Arabia*) and one of the few women to travel through the Arabian deserts, Freya Stark (*The Southern gates of Arabia*). Wilfred Thesiger crossed Arabia's Empty Quarter in the late 1940s, extolling his love for the desert's space, silence and cleanness in *Arabian Sands*. All were intimately linked with British political power in the Middle East.

Yet as far as I was concerned Villiers, too, deserved to be included in this A-list. Why, then, had he not been recognised?

It seemed to me that his focus on the sea was the main obstacle. For a start, it was not the purifying voyage of personal redemption across a barren desert, accompanied by noble *asil* ('pure') Bedouin escorts, that was commonly associated with Arabian travel narratives. Villiers' sea journey followed a well-travelled, centuries-old route, entirely unexotic and unromantic in its everyday humdrum routine and at odds with the

Having recorded the last of Europe's tall ships, Villiers wanted to document the sailing traditions of pre-industrial cultures before they too disappeared



top: Alan Villiers' genial host Captain Mansur (centre) and crew of zarook *Sheikh Mansur*, on which the Australian writer made his first Arabian voyage, from Aden to the Arabian port of Jizan on the Red Sea in 1938.

right: A two-masted trading dhow known as a *baggala* undergoing hull maintenance at Kwale Island off the coast of Tanganyika (Tanzania). It was one of the last of these deep-sea dhows, their lavish stern galleries believed to show the influence of early Portuguese explorers' ships.



‘Only the Arab still sailed his wind ships over the free sea, keeping steadfastly to the quieter ways of a kinder past’

Crew of *Triumph of Righteousness* climbing and working aloft on the massive main yard. This was the deep-sea trading boom that was home to Villiers for six months in 1938–39 during a voyage on the old Indian Ocean monsoon trading routes from Arabia to East Africa and back to Kuwait.

journeys taken by his desert counterparts. His description of Bedouin passengers undermines their fabled desert nobility. Aboard the *Triumph of Righteousness* they are simply poor and homeless refugees, fleeing famine and hardship and hopeful of starting afresh in distant lands.

Certainly, the sea has long played a vital role in the lifestyles, politics, economies, history and traditions of this diverse region. Yet for devotees of Arabian travel it has been regarded not so much as ‘other’, but as ‘nowhere’, that in-between, borderless space to be endured in order to get from A to B. Viewed this way, Villiers’ story is set literally off the map. By substituting the seas for the desert, it was as if he had automatically disqualified himself as an authentic Arabian traveller.

Not that he’d have cared. Villiers was as modest as they come, with an attitude so wholly lacking in superiority, with that Australian instinct for a ‘don’t imagine you are any better’ inclusiveness, that it is no wonder he was so respected by his fellow crew members and by passengers alike. Of course, his skill as a seaman was paramount in his ability to write this first-hand account of life aboard dhows, and to contribute to the workings of the ship. It also contributes to the way that Villiers, like Thesiger, travelled among his companions as an equal. At first critical of some of their methods, he soon came to appreciate their knowledge, which he conceded was often superior to his own. In fact, Villiers celebrates the dhow sailors’ extraordinary toughness and stamina and their ability to do without on unbelievably slender means.

But I also believe that in addition to his seamanship it was his Australianness that helped align him with the Arabs. His upbringing in a working class milieu, for example, is reflected in his native hostility to letter-of-the-law bureaucratic controls, which made him sympathetic to his Arab seafarers as they struggled with British officialdom in colonial ports. And his inclination to support the underdog, that particularly Australian tendency to make heroes of noble failures, shines through in his attitude to the sailors, one of whom he describes as ‘such a thorough scoundrel, so absolutely without pretence, so genuinely and wholly what we call bad that I rather admired him’.

In many ways Villiers mirrored Australia’s position at the time, an independent colony still tied to the Empire but not quite established in its own identity. Villiers, as an Australian, may have been loyal to Britain, but he also

hailed from a colonial frontier – just like the Arabs, who had seen Britain assert its power over them in the guise of ‘protection treaties’. Neither he nor the Arabs were colonisers; both were travellers. And, unlike his British writer counterparts, Villiers was an independent traveller with no political affiliation to empire. It is an interesting juxtaposition, therefore, that his journey was by sea.

The wide scope of Villiers’ interests, not only in sailing but also in the economics of the dhow and pearl trades, and the social conditions of those engaged in them, lifts the book out of the niche of sailing memoirs and certainly places it squarely within the larger genres of travel writing and ethnographic study. He was, in a real sense, the Wilfred Thesiger of the Arabian Sea, and such a claim is based not just on his writings but also, like Thesiger’s, on his photography – the subject of the Australian National Maritime Museum’s current exhibition.

Villiers, who died in 1982, bequeathed his entire photographic and film collection to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, UK. Photographs taken on voyages such as those on the majestic tall ships *Grace Harwar*, *Herzogin Cecile* and *Parma* had long attracted wide attention through his many successful books, not only for their subject matter but also for the spectacular beauty of their composition.

In the first edition of *Sons of Sindbad*, 50 photographs were published and as part of my research I decided to take a trip to Greenwich to view these images at first hand. What I found exceeded my expectations. For the small, dark room I was directed to contained not just 50 but hundreds of photographs, as well as negatives and contact sheets, from his Arabian journeys. Villiers himself had scrawled detailed captions on the back of many of them. Stored haphazardly in boxes and paper bags, the collection had clearly been forgotten, hiding in the shadow of Villiers’ more celebrated tall-ship photography.

I sifted through this treasure, of Kuwait’s dhow sailors, of the ports along the routes of his voyages, of Kuwait itself and its people, and of the pearl-divers of the Arabian Gulf. Here were images of a time now past, when the wealth that would ensue from the discovery of oil was still something unimaginable for this desert state. Kuwait had enjoyed no natural resources of its own, not even fresh water. Over the previous two centuries, however, its rulers and people had drawn on their strategic location and



Sons of Sindbad was a great classic of Arabian travel, a rich study of the ways of life, politics, trade, people and cultures at the western edge of the Indian Ocean

unearthed at Greenwich. We agreed to work on the project together. And so, with the assistance of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, Villier's wife Nancy and his son Kit, *Sons of Sindbad* was republished by Arabian Publishing and released in the UK in 2006. Villiers' insightful and unique Arabian travelogue was back in print.

At the same time the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, published *Sons of Sindbad – the photographs*, a spectacular, large-format pictorial account of his journey using some 150 of Villiers' previously unpublished photos. Captioned with extracts from Villier's original work and with an introductory essay by William Facey, myself and Kuwaiti maritime historian Dr Yacoub Al-Hijji, the book was voted in *The Times* Top 5 Photography Books for 2006. It is some of these photos that make up the current exhibition at the Australian National Maritime Museum.

I often think that it was Alan Villiers himself who was steering the course of this voyage I'd been on. With the publication of the books and my MA tucked under my arm, I left the UK. My first port of call was Yemen. It was to research a chapter for my book, *The Honey Spinner*, but I was also keen to make a pilgrimage to the places Villiers experienced. I wasn't disappointed. Sunsets at Mukalla with its tiny fishing boats rocking in the harbour, dhow repairs in Hudaidah ... even at Ma'alla Beach, Aden, now with concrete pylons and industrial shipyards, I could sense the vanished years of the 1930s.

Then, after an almost 10-year absence, I returned to Australia. I chose to live in Tasmania, or perhaps Tasmania chose me. It was yet another parallel for me and Mr Villiers. He began his writing career at *The Hobart Mercury*, set sail for Antarctica from the port of Hobart, and as a young man sailed the island's coastal waters in Tasmanian timber ketches.

Few others can claim to equal Villiers' contribution to recording and popularising maritime history. *Sons of Sindbad*, however, and the hundreds of photographs Villiers took during his year-long journey with seafaring Arabs, go well beyond purely maritime history and join the classics of Arabian travelogues and ethnography. It seems fitting for these images to be on their own journey now. More importantly, it is fitting that they have finally reached Australian shores and will travel on to Hobart when this exhibition closes at the Australian National Maritime Museum. ■



Grace Pundyk is an Australian-born writer whose work has taken her to the Middle East, Europe, South-East Asia, India and Africa. She has sailed in small dhows and dived for pearls in the Persian Gulf. Her MA in Arab Gulf Studies, published by the Gulf Research Center, Dubai, is called *Sea Change: Alan Villiers and the subversion of the Arabian travel narrative*.

Sons of Sindbad is at the Australian National Maritime Museum until 17 October 2010 and at the Maritime Museum of Tasmania 27 January–27 February 2011. This exhibition is supported by the National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program, an Australian Government program aiming to improve access to the national collections for all Australians.



The new edition of Alan Villiers' original *Sons of Sindbad* is on sale at the museum's retail outlet The Store. So too are *Sons of Sindbad – the photographs* by Grace Pundyk, William Facey and Yacoub Al-Hijji, published by the National Maritime Museum Greenwich 2006, and Kate Lance's biography *Alan Villiers Voyager of the Winds* (UNSW Press, 2009).



above: An official of the British colonial government of Tanganyika (Tanzania) checks the mangrove-pole cargo bound for treeless Kuwait.

right from top: Recaulking the hull planking with oakum made of shredded coconut fibre soaked in oil.

Women come to buy dates and other goods from the waterfront.

Boatswain and sailors on *Triumph of Righteousness* sing and drum their ship into Mutrah harbour, Oman, at the voyage's end in May 1939.



traditional skills to turn their barren state into the foremost Arab dhow port in the Gulf. In 1939, when Villiers was there, dhow trade and pearl diving were still crucial to the economy, but the country was at a crossroads. Tradition was slowly giving way to modernisation. Villiers identifies as much in one of his captions:

'To the Bedu, the camera may still be a strange and fearsome thing, and he stares at the Basra bus with amazement. But the townsman may be on leave from the University of Cairo... Camels provide some meat as well as transport.'

In both his photography and his writing, Villiers captured a moment in Kuwait's maritime history not long before it was lost forever. The photographic collection was gold, and more than worthy of being released from its storeroom captivity.

I continued my research and studies at Exeter. Part of this included putting together an exhibition of some of these photos, at the urging of the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies' director Professor Tim Niblock, and through the generous sponsorship of the Kuwait Embassy in London. However I was still no nearer to getting *Sons of Sindbad* republished. Then one night, some months later, I attended a screening of a 1920s film of the first crossing of the Empty Quarter, that vast desert made infamous in Thesiger's *Arabian Sands*. It was here that I met William Facey, owner of Arabian Publishing – the man who had compiled and published *Kuwait by the First Photographers*, the book in which I'd spied that very first Villiers photograph.

Facey told me he'd been considering republishing *Sons of Sindbad* for some time. I told him of my research on Villiers and the archive of photographs I'd



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