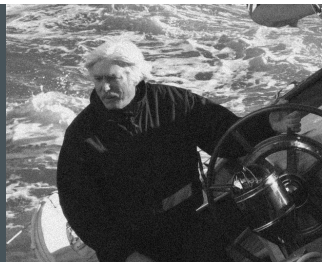
Tom Cunliffe



There I was and the waves were 40ft high.....

Joshua *under storm canvas with Bernard Moitessier*

Tom realises we can all learn a lot from sailing narratives

Experience is a fine thing. There's no substitute for it, you might be thinking. Every sensible sailor would agree, but when it comes to extreme weather or generally rare events, there aren't many who can put hand on heart and say that it's all 'old hat'. Luckily, sailing is rich in literature. Of all sports, it is probably the most blessed in this respect. This means that even if we haven't been there ourselves there's usually someone else who has and who took the trouble to write about it. The best prepared seamen and women are those who understand their options when the time comes. A bit of study up-front pays handsome dividends, but if we haven't read all we might, a well-stocked saloon bookshelf can still give us an extra chance when the stormy day dawns.

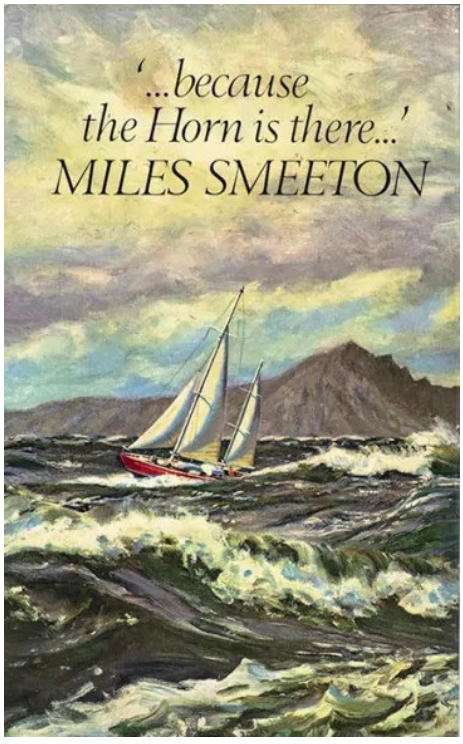
That's what this article is about. Rather than have the reader suffer accounts of my own jousts with significant gales, I've found a couple of classics from which we all can learn. Coincidentally, both happen to involve Frenchmen. So here we go, and note well that Bernard Moitessier himself makes recourse to his ship's library when he nears his wit's end.

Joshua in the Great South Sea

Bernard Moitessier is perhaps best remembered for 'going round again' in the Southern Ocean after passing Cape Horn in the original 1960s Golden Globe event. Driven by philosophical issues and having no interest in praise from those who had not been there, he sailed on to Tahiti instead of turning north into the Atlantic to beat Sir Robin Knox-Johnston for the glory of being first to circumnavigate non-stop. This unique story is recounted in his book, 'The Long Way', but it is an earlier work, 'Cape Horn the Logical Route', in which he spells out his conclusions about storm survival. On passage with his wife from France to Tahiti, he found himself under the hammer in the Great South Sea. By the end of the first storm day he was in survival mode. Steered from below, with Moitessier looking out from a Perspex 'astrodome' above the wheel position, the 40ft double-ended steel ketch *Joshua* was running under bare poles with five warps streamed. The drag was cranked up by weighting them with iron ballast pigs and rolled-up fishing nets.

Things went swimmingly to begin with, so long as he kept dead before the seas. The warps made steering sluggish but maintained speed at manageable levels although the yacht was regularly swept end-for-end. Shortly before dawn, the seas were running phenomenally high. Helming became progressively more difficult until finally *Joshua* broached and took a knockdown. The cabin was filled with flying objects, but she righted herself positively. It was clear the wind was not easing and the seas were getting steadily worse. A seemingly innocent wave picked up her stern which rose, as usual. The boat stayed dead upright and began to accelerate. Suddenly, without warning, the foredeck went under and was buried all the way back to the mast. She rose again, but the danger of pitchpoling was abundantly clear.

Moitessier now brought his wide reading on the subject of storms to bear, recalling the fate of *Sandefjord*, a Colin Archer sailing lifeboat – some would say the ultimate seaboat - and *Tzu Hang*, a well-crewed classic yacht. Both had been pitchpoled running dead before the weather, so whatever they were doing, it wasn't successful.



'...because the Horn is there...'
by Miles Smeeton.
Gray's Publishing Ltd I

As day two progressed, dry under his astrodome and powered by coffee, Moitessier began to think about the Argentinian Vito Dumas in *Legh II*. Dumas traversed the Southern Ocean single-handed in his wooden boat that was only half the size of *Joshua*. He claimed to have carried some sail in all weather which Moitessier believed to be impossible. He couldn't recall Dumas' survival technique, so his wife Françoise produced the Dumas book. The claim was confirmed. Dumas apparently left a lot of sail up. His little boat surfed at speeds of up to 15 knots and was saved by keeping up with the waves. Moitessier was cynical, remarking, 'If we had followed that method we would have done ten Catherine wheels by now!'

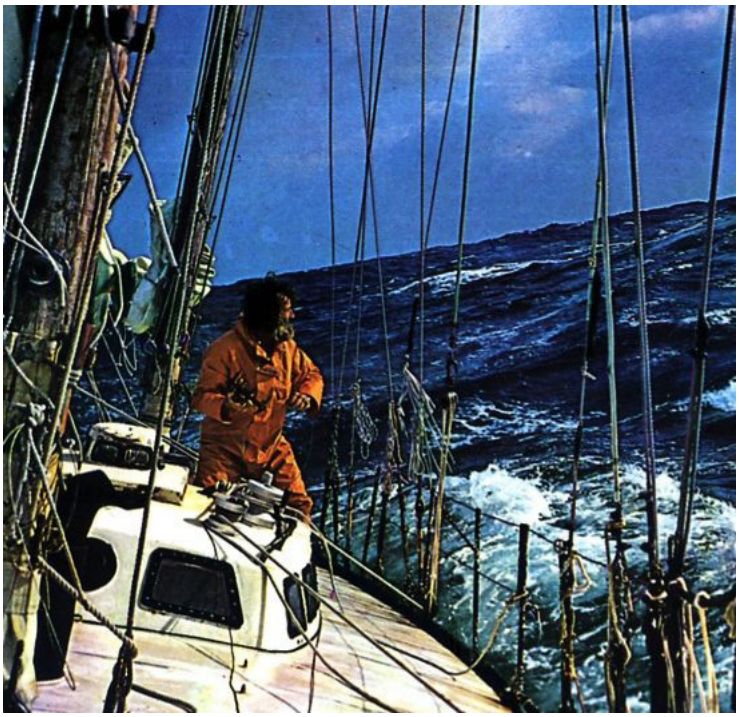
Further plundering of *Joshua*'s library brought out the opinion of Pilot Bohlin, schooner skipper from Gloucester Mass back in the glory days. He also recommended cracking on before a storm, but Moitessier wouldn't have any of it until he had a sort of out-of-body experience. Perhaps this was unsurprising after being on the helm for more than 24 hours. Against all logic, he swore he heard Dumas saying, 'Look, I'll show you...'

Yet another awkward wave now lifted *Joshua*'s stern. Even with her warps, she began to surf. She yawed and heeled heavily but this time she didn't bury her bow, because the heeled topsides forward acted like a ski and bore her up by virtue of her own speed. He had found Dumas' answer. He grabbed his sharpest knife, went out on deck and committed himself by cutting the warps adrift.

Joshua was immediately a different boat. No longer was she held back, parrying the blows of the seas. Instead, she was running free under bare poles. With the waves at 15 to 20 degrees off dead aft, she heeled and took off, resting her bow against the trough and virtually planing. She steered easily and the huge seas were suddenly harmless as they came up under her quarter.

Moitessier's last word on the matter was this. 'Everything had changed because a dead seaman had replied to my insistent question. Five blows with my knife had freed *Joshua* of the chains she had been dragging. A small gesture, but what a difference!'

The benefits of running off in a storm to minimise the force of the waves are spelled out in this account. An interesting side-implication is that, as long as the boat was steering freely, Moitessier believed her less likely to suffer the sort of potentially destructive knock-down that *Joshua* took while her stern was inhibited by warps. By no means all voyagers of comparable experience would agree with this, and perhaps the effects of *Joshua*'s warps were exacerbated by the policy of ballasting. So far as can be deduced, the warps were streamed from the extreme stern which cannot have helped the steering. Awkward though it might be in practice, if they could have been led to a point forward of the rudder post, it might have helped, but one thing is sure. Cutting them loose worked wonders.



One possibility not considered by Moitessier back in the 1960s was to run with a drogue or series drogue. Many authorities now speak well of these, but they were not on the agenda fifty years ago. Later in the same interminable gale, Moitessier finally succumbed to exhaustion after forty-eight hours at the wheel. His self-steering gear had long since thrown in the towel. As he handed the helm to his wife, he remarked, 'You are driving a 15-ton lorry without brakes down a winding road at 60mph. If you don't slow down before each bend by changing gear, we are bound for Chile like *Tzu Hang*.'

Tzu Hang had made it to Chile after pitchpoling ripped off her dog-house and left her dismasted. Françoise Moitessier passed her driving test and *Joshua* sailed free into the land of legend.

Griffin and *Lorelei* in the 1979 Fastnet race

The storm which hit the 1979 Fastnet Race cost the lives of fifteen sailors, sank five yachts and caused the abandonment of nineteen more. One of those lost was *Griffin*, the RORC crew training boat, ably skippered by Neil Graham and navigated by sometime Cowes Week CEO Stuart Quarrie. *Griffin* was an OOD 34 ('Offshore One-Design'). A number of these yachts were involved in the race and many of them fared badly. Whether this was due to a basic design fault or was a result of the group being at the wrong place in the storm at the worst possible time will never be answered, but the marque was not reintroduced. The story of the rescue of *Griffin*'s crew is drawn from accounts by Stu Quarrie on *Griffin* and Alain Catherineau, skipper of the French yacht *Lorelei*. It describes seamanship of the highest calibre and underlines the selfless sporting spirit found in the best of ocean racing. It also serves to remind any doubters of the extreme difficulty of manoeuvring in big waves and of lifting casualties from rough water.

Griffin*'s rescue painted by Alan Tabor*

In full open-water storm conditions, *Griffin* took a 180° knock-down 40 miles SE of the Fastnet Rock in the middle of the night. She remained fully inverted for a protracted period. When she finally rolled back upright she was waterlogged. After a brief experiment with the pumps it was decided to abandon her in good order rather than wait for the now inevitable sinking.

The crew of seven boarded the raft without incident but were unable to locate the vital drogue that is partly responsible for liferaft stability in extreme conditions. Perhaps as a result of this the raft capsized before long. When it was righted, the canopy had been ripped away and it was more or less full of water. All the crew survived the raft inversion, but were now dangerously exposed to wind and sea.

Around 0230 they had been crammed into the raft for an hour and, more in hope than expectation, they fired a red rocket flare. By good fortune this was seen by Alain Catherineau and his crew aboard an S&S designed She 36. *Lorelei* was still racing despite a mean wind speed of 50 knots, surfing under triple-reefed main and No. 4 jib at 90° to the apparent wind. Thierry, the mate, was at the helm, enjoying a thrilling ride through this wildest of nights with the boat standing well up and steering easily.

When they saw the flare, they reckoned it to be about half a mile downwind. Three men worked their way forward to drop the headsail, noting the gale gusting to 60 knots. After a brief conference they agreed to try and close with what they now took to be a red hand-held flare. They reported casually that this wasn't difficult with three reefs in the main, but they did have an issue trying to tack as they were obliged to do. Once through the wind, they were heading roughly south. The mate, who was still at the helm, saw the loom of another hand-held flare. The light itself was out of sight among the tumble of big seas, but its halo popped up from time to time.

Rather than head directly for the glow of the flare, they decided to assess the situation and came away 30° to see what sort of craft was in distress. *Lorelei* was being deluged by heavy seas and two of her crew had already been saved by their harnesses when two smaller lights became visible above a dark shape only about 50 meters downwind and in the trough of the same wave as they were. It turned out to be *Griffin*'s liferaft. They stood on a short distance then swung towards it, but their first pass was unsuccessful. Coming within 3 metres of the raft, they were unfortunately upwind and unable to spill properly. Surging by at three knots they hove a rope to the liferaft, but it didn't reach. Two men in the raft tried to leap across, but ended up in the water to be hauled back aboard by their shipmates.

Catherineau now took the helm himself, convinced that they could save *Griffin*'s crew. He knew his boat intimately and also understood her tiny engine with its surprisingly effective variable pitch propeller which could transfer maximum power very rapidly.

Once again, working the boat through the wind proved a real problem, but after seven or eight unsuccessful attempts the skipper finally succeeded. By now the distance had opened considerably and *Lorelei* was again heading south in pitch darkness with all hands looking out for the red light. Suddenly it popped into view about 25 metres away. Catherineau tacked again, this time without difficulty, and aimed *Lorelei* straight at it. At the last minute he slammed the engine into astern and, thanks to that remarkable propeller, the rescuing boat lost way miraculously within a metre of the liferaft.

Stu Quarrie, Alain Catherineau and Neil Graham after the event

Catherineau reported that at this point he felt totally drained, but there was still much to be done. After some initial confusion aboard the raft, the crew soon hauled themselves alongside *Lorelei* safely with lines tossed across to them. A couple climbed aboard easily; three fell in but hung onto the aluminum toerail at the stern.

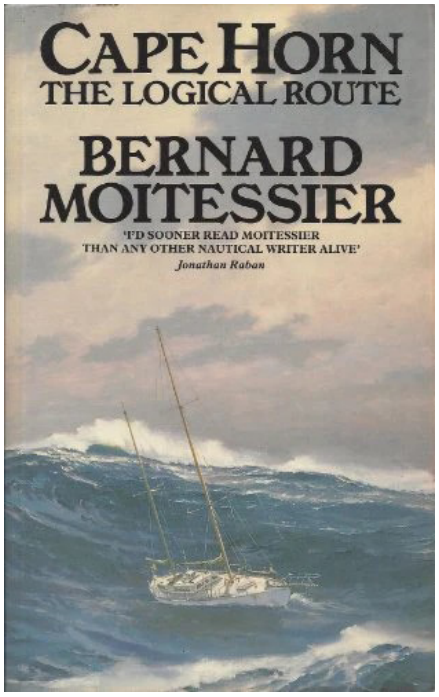
Meanwhile the raft began blowing away, but one of the pair still aboard managed to haul it back with a rope left over from the initial grab. They clambered across seconds before the raft drifted off again, now empty.

By the time the first few survivors were down below there were only two remaining in the water, but lifting them aboard in the hurricane-force wind and the heavy sea was proving difficult. Catherineau called the fittest 'Griffins' to supply extra muscle on deck as he hung onto a man stuck under the counter with only his head above water. A rope was passed through his harness ring to hoist him but the harness slithered over his head and he had to be released. One of the Frenchmen was now hanging onto him by his teeshirt. He was heavy and was only recovered to the deck with the combined help of several of his shipmates.

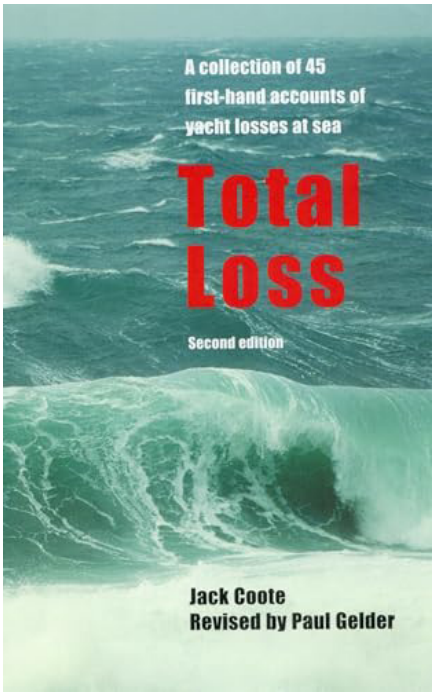
Nobody remembers how they brought the last man to the deck from the water further forward, but the suggestion is that as the yacht heeled hard in wind and wave, they were able to take advantage of the temporarily reduced freeboard to drag him under the guardrails abeam. He was stiff with cold and beyond self-help. As he lay in the cockpit surrounded by his rescuers, they saw that he was being throttled by a cord in his clothing. Catherineau yanked at it with all the strength he had until it snapped. The man breathed freely again and they took him below. All seven of *Griffin*'s crew were saved.

Alain Catherineau was awarded the YJA Yachtsman of the Year Trophy in 1979 for this rescue. An unexpected sideshow was offered when Stu Quarrie's wallet, lost with the yacht, was dredged up by a fishing boat and returned to him, intact, by his bank.

A post script to this story is that I should have been on *Griffin* for this race, but circumstances prevented me. If I had been, I might not be writing this now.



Published by Harper Collins 1982



Published by Adlard Coles 2001