

Wyatt Earp: The little ship with many names. Trish Burgess (2020). Brisbane, Australia: Connor Court Publishing. 124p, paperback. ISBN 9781925826937. AUD 29.95. Further details at <https://www.connorcourtpublishing.com.au>

One Wyatt Earp, according to Wikipedia, was not only a US deputy marshal but also a professional gambler and a buffalo hunter. In addition, he owned several saloons, maintained a brothel, mined for silver and gold, and refereed boxing matches. And, of course, he took part in the famous gunfight at the O.K. Corral, with which he is often, erroneously, regarded as the central figure.

Another Wyatt Earp, a single deck motor vessel originally built of pine and oak, explored the Southern Oceans. This Wyatt Earp also had multiple careers and actually had four formal names: Fanefjord, Wyatt Earp, Wongala (an indigenous word for boomerang) and Natone though this doubles to eight if the various nautical prefixes for navy and merchant vessels are included plus the nickname “Twerp” (p.73). The names related to its multiple careers with Wyatt Earp being consistent with its voyages to the Southern Oceans.

Launched as the M/S Fanefjord in 1919 in Molde, Norway as a coastal herring ship, its first career was carrying cargo around the European coast and to Greenland. In 1933, it was purchased by the Australian polar explorer, Sir Hubert Wilkins who was searching for a suitable ship on behalf of the wealthy American Lincoln Ellsworth who planned to explore Antarctica. Renamed the M/V Wyatt Earp and sheathed with oak and armour plate, it made five trips to the Antarctic. Four of these were with Ellsworth between 1933 and 1939 as a base ship for his aircraft including the first Transantarctic flight in 1935. In the 1947–1948 Antarctic season, Australia’s first exploration since Mawson’s voyages of 1929–1931 was undertaken in a reconditioned Wyatt Earp. This expedition was the direct result of the establishment of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions (ANARE) as a move by the Australian Government to consolidate its claim to Antarctic territory. The voyage was fraught with obstacles and hazards of all kinds, including a breakdown halfway to Antarctica, but nevertheless the expedition accomplished a running survey of the glaciated Balleny Islands and called at Macquarie Island. In late 1951, it was sold to a commercial operator and renamed Wongala with a further change of ownership changing the name again, this time to Natone. Under this name, it plied the east Australian coast until wrecked in a storm off Queensland, in January 1959.

In an earlier book (1995), Phillip Law, the Senior Scientific Officer on board the Wyatt Earp’s ANARE expedition, gave an account of primitive conditions, the stormy seas, shipboard routines and scientific work. However, Trish Burgess focuses much more on the life and times of the ship itself. She does so in a clear and concise manner, providing comprehensive facts, details, maps including some delightful line drawings of the ship’s design and crisp, clear photographs from various stages in the ship’s lengthy career though focusing mostly on its time in the Antarctic. Excerpts from diaries, notebooks and newspaper reports from the various Antarctica voyages add immensely to an understanding of what it must have been like to have been on board. The book also hints at the very privileged lifestyle of Lincoln Ellsworth who had an “annual visit to Switzerland then took the Graf Zeppelin airship to Rio de Janeiro (p. 29)” (May 1935) and in 1938 “spent five weeks on safari in Kenya” (p. 37) on either side of his various flights attempting to cross Antarctica. It would have been interesting to have heard more about the extent to which this was a prerequisite of inter-war Antarctic exploration and how this worked with government ambitions towards Antarctica especially as this is brought up in relation to Douglas Mawson and Hugh Wilkins public statements and representations to government in 1946 (p. 59 and 91).

Like the Erebus almost a hundred years earlier, the Wyatt Earp’s name was given to a mountain. In this case, one discovered Ellsworth’s trans-Antarctic flight on 23 November 1935 in the northern part of the Sentinel Range. It would have been good to have heard more about the reasons for this. However, Burgess takes a much narrower sweep across history than, for example, Michael Palin does in relation to the Erebus. Nonetheless the book presents its material in an engaging way with excellent illustrations. In so doing, it fills

a gap in the historical record of benefit to students and researchers especially those interested in Antarctic nautical history between the peak of the Heroic Era and prior to the International Geophysical Year. (Bob Frame, Gateway

Antarctica, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand (research@frameworks.nz)

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