

WoodenBoat REVIEW

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Schooner *Building a Wooden Boat on Martha's Vineyard*

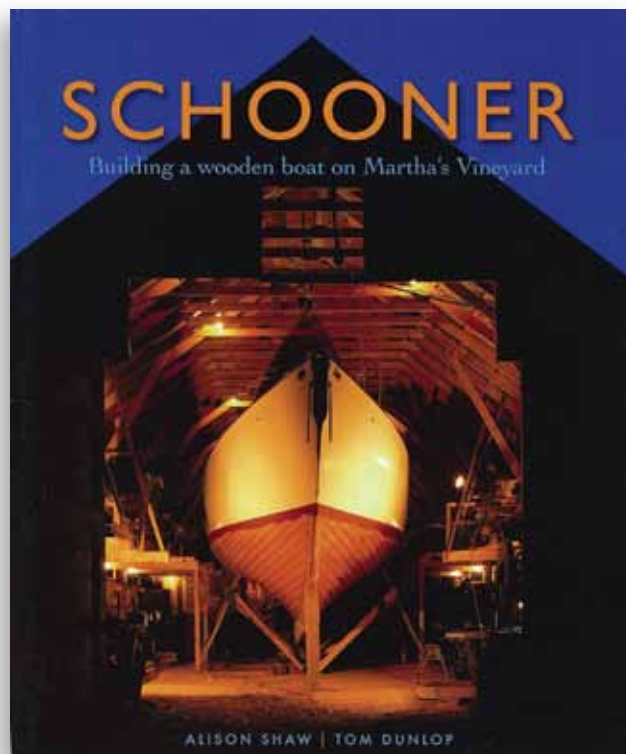
Schooner: Building a Wooden Boat on Martha's Vineyard, by Tom Dunlop. Photographs by Alison Shaw. Vineyard Stories, RR 1, Box 65-B9, Edgartown, MA02539. 159 pp., \$44.95.

Reviewed by Matthew P. Murphy

Several years ago, a Maine-based mail-order clothing catalog began offering “boatbuilder shirts” and “boatbuilder pants.” I’d bet dollars to doughnuts that the quickest way to get yourself alienated on the first day of work in a boatshop would be to have shown up proudly wearing a set of these duds. This was manufactured authenticity, and it didn’t last long: Boatbuilder pants and shirts are gone from the company’s offerings. It’s the paint splatters, varnish stains, threadbare knees, and frayed cuffs that define a boatbuilder’s pants. The clothes don’t make the boatbuilder; the boatbuilder makes the clothes.

If you want to see a *real* boatbuilder shirt, look no farther than the Gannon & Benjamin (G&B) Marine Railway of Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts. Located on Martha’s Vineyard, this shop is an island of authenticity surrounded by a sea of consumption. Indeed, its very founding 30 years ago was a reaction to the nationally publicized thwarting of a set of golden arches that nearly graced the town’s waterfront. “We rode in on the victory slipstream,” recalls yard co-founder Nat Benjamin in his afterword to *Schooner: Building a Wooden Boat on Martha's Vineyard*. The plank-on-frame-specialist, community-oriented boatshop that he and partner Ross Gannon founded in 1980 is located, says Benjamin, “on the very beach where the fryolators were intended to envelop potatoes in hot grease.”

The Benjamin-designed, G&B-built 60' schooner REBECCA, launched in 2001, is the subject of this



book. The boat was the largest sailing vessel built on Martha’s Vineyard in 141 years, and *Schooner* is a magnificent recounting, in words and photographs, of that project. Vineyard photographer Alison Shaw made the images, a comprehensive set from the schooner’s keel laying through to launching and sailing; editor-writer Tom Dunlop wrote the words. *Schooner* also succinctly tells the three-decades-and-counting history of the Gannon & Benjamin Marine Railway—the idealism of its founding, the fire that destroyed its physical space

10 years later, and the seeming inevitability of its resurrection. In the decade before that fire, Gannon & Benjamin had become a rare and necessary institution to the wooden boat aficionados of its greater environs. The fire that could have ended it all turned out to be but a hiccup in the yard's timeline, and perhaps even a catalyst for its future growth. Hundreds of volunteers turned out to rebuild the place in a remarkably short period of time. Nat Benjamin writes that the partners were "propelled forward by the energy and goodwill of the Island community and beyond. The message was clear: rebuild the boatyard and get back to work."

There are many books, some very good, that teach one how to build a wooden boat. In laborious detail, they unpack the mysteries and nuances of lofting, framing, planking, decking, and joinery. There are likewise many other books that celebrate the aesthetic of wooden boats. Some of this latter type are very good, too, exciting the reader's heart while also educating. So many other picture books suffer from a saccharine and misinformed approach, the words almost serving as a design element—a picture crop—rather than information. *Schooner* delights the eye while informing the mind.

It's a challenging mission for a writer to develop a boatbuilding narrative for the uninitiated while also holding the attention of the already-informed. Wooden boats are rife with arcane language and processes, often requiring the ballast of parenthetical definitions in order to bring the beginner along. The challenge is to propel the reading without weighing it down with parentheses. Dunlop strikes a good balance, celebrating the gestalt of wooden boats without teaching you how to build one.

Alison Shaw's images are primarily artful, often with minute details popping sharply against shallow depths of field. She's found sculpture in some of the most routine objects in a boatshop: a plank full of freshly cut bungs glowing in natural light here, a fistful of shavings there. Her extemporaneous portraits of the people who built REBECCA are stunning, and perhaps unparalleled in the annals of boatbuilding documentation. My favorite is of rigger Dominic Zachorne leaning against a weather-beaten door, thumb looped in pants pocket, handlebar mustache groomed, gold key and chain dangling from wool dress vest. The caption calls him a "nineteenth-century man working in the most traditional of maritime trades two centuries later." It would be tempting to roll eyes and cast off his image as an



act, except that the accompanying spread is surrounded by workmanship so exquisite that his 19th-century peers might humbly tip their bowlers to him. The consistency of documentation deserves mention, too: This was a six-year project, and Shaw did not miss a beat in its coverage.

Upon reading this book and viewing the images, you might feel some tug of the delusional romance that gave rise to REBECCA. Dan Adams was the spark behind the schooner's creation, but his heart got out in front of his head. We learn here that Adams brought a decrepit ketch to G&B in hopes of having it restored, only to learn from Gannon & Benjamin that the boat needed a new...well, it needed a new boat. With this *tabula rasa* before him, Adams aban-

dons the ketch project and decides to focus the effort of the would-be restoration onto a new boat, a schooner to be designed by Benjamin. Adams ran out of money halfway through the project, shutting it down for a year, filing for bankruptcy, and losing the boat in the process. (We learn these things in deeper detail in Michael Ruhlman's 2001 *Wooden Boats*, in which the author spent a year at the boatyard, immersed in the technicalities and business of boatbuilding.) The partially completed REBECCA was purchased by a Scottish couple, Brian and Pamela Malcolm, who saw the boat through to launching. Aside from this foray into the drama of ownership, and the history of the Gannon & Benjamin partnership, *Schooner's* focus is on the boat's construction, with chapters called "Lofting," "Keel," "Framing," "Planking," "Interior," "Deck," and "Aloft." These are followed by a description of the festive launching, a poetic if none-too-technical description of sailing the boat, and the afterword by Benjamin.

"We hope you felt both the joy and the beauty in the pages of this book," writes Benjamin in his afterword. I did—especially when I encountered the photographic vignette on page 115. In it we see a pair of legs, from mid-thigh to ground. The knees are wrapped in dark-green foam plastic. The foam is tattered, speckled with wood shavings, and secured with shopworn duct tape. The caption reads "improvised kneepads provide welcome cushioning." It would not have been so difficult to run down to Shirley's True Value in Vineyard Haven for a pair of \$10 knee pads, but that might have violated the G&B ethos of resourcefulness. For pictured here are *real* boatbuilder knee pads—the ones you'll never find in a catalog.

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