

**C**RYSTIC Week, which starts on Sunday, gives us good enough reason for swopping yarns about one of the greatest sea legends, the Flying Dutchman.

Veteran journalist Bruce Heilbuth has been scanning the records about the most famous phantom sailing ship of all time, and writes:

About once every decade somebody, somewhere, reports a sighting of the Flying Dutchman. And 10 years ago this month Bernie Wills, a retired building contractor, swears he saw her off Hangklip, in False Bay, as the mists momentarily shifted.

"She was just as described in the history books, with sails full set, and rolling hard — although there was hardly any wind in False Bay. The day was misty but I saw her clearly. I was in my back garden and stone-cold sober!

"Before I could rush inside to fetch my binoculars for a closer look the ship — a 17th century square-rigger like the Flying Dutchman is said to have been — had disappeared into the mist."

But perhaps the most remarkable of the periodic "sightings" in False Bay involved a large group of holidaymakers on the beach at Glencairn, in 1939. It is hard to believe ALL were hallucinating — they shouted with surprise when they saw what seemed to be a fine, full-rigged sailing ship gliding out of the mist over the bay.

A newspaper report next day read: "The ship, with all her sails drawing well, although there was not a breath of wind at the time, appeared to be standing in towards Muizenberg."

The British South African Annual reported, in the somewhat fruity idiom of the time, that "with uncanny volition the ship sailed steadily on while the Glencairn beachfolk, shaken from their lethargy, keenly discussed the whys and the wherefores of the vessel, which seemed to be hell-bent on destruction somewhere on the sands of Strandfontein.

"Just as the excitement reached a climax, however, the mystery ship vanished into thin air as strangely as it had, cor

## NATAL FEVER

Garry Brennan



# Flying Dutchman still flying

The incident was the talk of the town for a week. Capetonians have a fey streak and, like the Scots, love nothing better than a good mystery. The sheer weight of numbers professing to have seen the ship — inevitably dubbed the "long-lost Flying Dutchman" — brought in the scientists, who were more intrigued than derisive.

One theorised that what the crowd had seen was a manifestation of the laws of refraction. He said ships had been sighted from great distances through this phenomenon. For instance a P and O liner bound for India had been seen by a lookout at Aden, at a time when her log book subsequently showed her to have been at least 200 miles away — with no similar ship in neighbouring seas.

But perhaps the hardest "evidence" to reject on this nebulous subject comes from a King of England! George V was a midshipman sailing on HMS *Bachhante* in July 1881 when "the Flying Dutchman" crossed her bows.

George wrote in his diary that "the lookout man reported her close to our port bow". His own chilling description can be read in the British Museum . . . "A strange red light, as of a phantom ship all aglow, in the midst of which light the mast, spars and sails of a brig two hundred yards distant stood out in strong relief as she came up."

Two other ships in the fleet also saw the Flying Dutchman in its macabre red flow — and the first man to spot her died a few hours later when he fell to his death from the cross-trees.

In fact sailors, with their strong streak of superstition, believe that this "accursed ship, doomed to sail forever round the Cape of Storms", will bring bad luck to any who see her.

Poets, composers — Richard Wagner's "Der Vliegende Hollander" spread the legend wider than seafaring circles — and eminent writers have embroidered the theme down the centuries. Thomas Moore wrote a poem about it in 1804, and Sir Walter Scott wrote of . . .

That phantom ship whose form shoots like a meteor through the storm

full spread and crowded every sail the demon frigate braves the gale.

If there wasn't a Flying Dutchman, where did the idea originate? Some suggest it was based on a Dutch ship, *De Snoeper*. Built in Holland in 1677, it was the fastest thing afloat in that era. Her captain, Barend Focke, was an impatient, free-cursing giant who kept a full spread of canvas on his ship, whatever the weather.

*De Snoeper* arrived at the Cape in January 1678 after a record run from Holland. From there he sailed to the Indies — and on the way scythed through the startled ranks of the pirates, who never knew what hit them. English and other privateers, who preyed mercilessly on other, unarmed ships were given a taste of their own medicine by the formidable captain Focke. With white sails fully spread and all guns spitting, he became a spirit of doom to them all.

Soon *De Snoeper's* reputation spread through the seven seas. He seemed to appear from nowhere. Perhaps this was indeed what led to the legend of the Flying Dutchman, which survives to this day.

And still in the storm as the sailors say

Sere and wan and white

The phantom ship drives in the gale,  
And an old man stands on her deck,  
alone