

Photo: Brian Lello

# A SALUTE TO Frank Wightman BY FRANK ROBB

THE news headline *Death of Frank Wightman: Yachtsman and Author* on Tuesday, February 24, was not unexpected. Frank had been ailing—and failing—for a long time, so it was no shock. But, as death always does, it foreshortened the backward perspective of memories of an unusual man and an unusual life.

Wightman building his yacht *Wylo* single-handed, as far as any yacht can be built without help. Not because of lack of offers of assistance, but because he detested accepting favours. I helped him to drive the keel-bolts (a two-man job) and from this small mutual effort arose a friendship—an intermittent and occasional relationship, because our paths crossed seldom during succeeding years.

I sailed with him once or twice, and at widely-separated intervals we found ourselves together for an hour or a day. He would unburden himself to my wife and to me more freely than to most others; perhaps the fact that my wife was a ballet dancer counted, for among his complicated likes and dislikes was an ardent balletomania.

He took off the lines for *Wylo* from the round-the-worlder ketch *Islander* when that earlier "loner" Harry Pidgeon passed through Cape Town during his second circumnavigation.

They were both small men—little men—thin, bleached, wiry. But there the likeness ended, for Pidgeon's easy, tolerant, homely humour had little in common with Frank's biting, spitfire ripostes, pointed and edged with the keenest words of a formidable vocabulary. He could not abide fools and/or pompous people and, as he did not always suffer their presence silently, the dislike often became mutual—for he was no respecter of persons and the edge of his tongue was sharp indeed.

He lived for years aboard *Wylo*, anchored in Saldanha Bay, first in The Hole and later up in the lagoon at Kraal Bay under Constable Hill. Few—strangers or acquaintances—were welcome aboard. (But few cared, anyway).

A hermit—certainly. A surly, selfish misanthrope? Who casts that stone? I at least can bear witness not only to his extraordinary range of interests and knowledge but to a sensitive—and easily hurt—soul beneath the hard-case crust. Those who can read may learn from his books *The Wind is Free* and *Wylo Sails Again* of a cultured and keen appreciation of beauty, expressed with enviable mastery of the English language.

A vignette: We (my wife and I), cruising in *Caprice*, one day long ago sailed into Saldanha Bay and anchored close by *Wylo* swinging to her semi-permanent mooring. In the evening Wightman came aboard and we talked far into the night.

We ranged far and wide over music, science, ballet, sailing. And because World War II had just broken out we talked of war—or rather, Wightman talked of war, because he held the field with a bitter denunciation of the folly, the stupidity, the cruelty and the crime of this war that had been foisted on the world by venal, stupid, greedy, power-mad politicians. He included a scathing word-picture of Churchill ("his soul stained with the blood of murdered and as yet un-murdered innocents") manipulating a corrupt and cynical so-called Democracy in the interests of war-mongers and land-grabbers.

Frank then rowed back to *Wylo* and remained incom-

municado for two whole days.

On the evening of the second day he rowed across to us again—a wet exercise, because it was a filthy winter evening, cold, miserable, with a northerly gale whipping rain-squalls across the sea. In the curt, unceremonious manner he used to disguise the fact that he was absolutely forced to ask a favour, he explained that he was about to sail for Cape Town but that—having no winch—he was having difficulty in raising and clearing away from his heavy mooring.

As we had a winch . . . ?

We were justifiably astounded: "For heaven's sake, Frank! If you've got to go to Cape Town why leave on a night like this? Wait for it to blow over, man."

But he was adamant. Rain or blow, hail or snow—he would sail for Cape Town that night.

And when Constance said: "Well, anyway—join us in a plate of good hot stew to set you up for the trip," it constituted another favour. But he had no need to accept it and said hastily: "No thank you—I've got a rice pudding waiting aboard."

He rowed back to this grisly meal.

When he had finished he hailed us, and we motored across, got *Wylo* ready to slip her mooring, and collected his dinghy.

When we were about to cast off I said: "I hope there's nothing serious in Cape Town."

He said: "No—as a matter of fact, I'm just going down there to join up. The Navy, I hope." As our astounded faces voicelessly demanded an explanation, he added defensively: "Democracy and Churchill are no good—but they're better than Hitler and his gang . . ."

He cast off.

## 3 AT ONCE . . .

← 32 have been taken away to the properties of the respective owners, for final completion.

Altogether it took more than 8,000 hours of work with the help of their wives and casual labourers, to bring the boats up to this stage. John Lomass said that this was nearly an impossible task, as it required most evenings after a hard day's work at the office and week-ends on the job. This toil, however, proved most rewarding since the lowest tender totalled R12,000 each, including the paint-work, while they themselves managed to do this for one-third of the cost.

Each of the owners will work at their own rigging to suit their requirements. John's boat, which will be named *Juanita* after his wife, will carry 1,100 sq. ft. of sail. The boat will have three cabins with six berths while the others are planned for two cabins. Decks will be of teak and John managed to acquire the necessary sitka spruce for the 57 ft. mast.

A similar boat completed in Holland in 1966 was sold for R30,000. When John Lomass, who is secretary of the S.A. Power Boat Association, was asked why he and his family attempted this big project, he replied that he is just fond of messing around in boats. And that, of course, is simply the best possible reason of all!

We accompanied *Wylo* downwind to the channel entrance, where he trimmed sheets for the reach out past the headlands to the open sea.

That is how I like to remember Frank Wightman: *Wylo* deep-reefed, reaching out to the dark stormy night and the open ocean, and the small figure at the helm, sure of his boat, confident in his skill, sailing out to fight the devil and the deep blue sea.

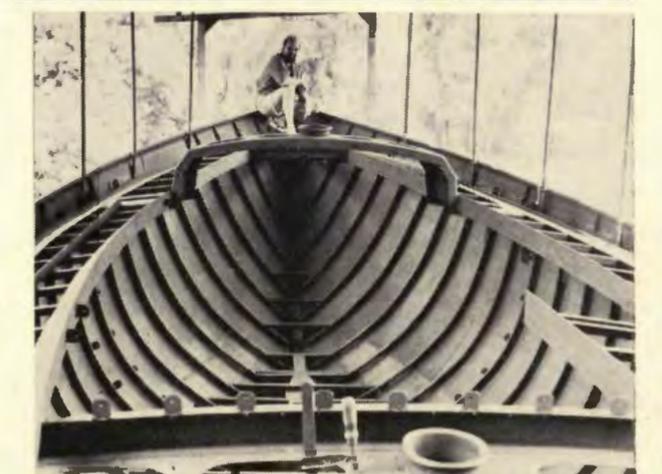
FRANK WIGHTMAN: AUTHOR AND YACHTSMAN  
—MAN OF WORDS AND DEEDS.

POSTSCRIPT: An article by Frank Wightman, accompanied by the portrait on the facing page, appeared in the first issue of "S.A. Yachting" back in 1957. He described how he came to live at the place he loved most, the Langebaan Lagoon, and tried to tell how grateful he was for being given "the time to live". This tremendous appreciation of the good things in life is worth remembering now that he is dead.

Eventually, when he could no longer row the small dory, designed for him by the editor, to fetch mail and drinking water he sold "*Wylo*" and came to town where he languished for a while. Then he put his pride in his pocket and went back to live at Oesterwal for the best part of two years. He loved every minute of this last bit of "time to live", and even mellowed to the extent of vivid verbal battles with whoever turned up worth talking to. He wandered alone by day and late at night, continually observing and appreciating . . .

Twice he was picked up, struggling to breathe, from the poppies at the side of the sandy road and taken to hospital. Finally he came to town for good to stay, convenient to the hospitals, at the home of the editor.

When he died, it was easy, quickly, without pain, as his heart slipped moorings quietly and without warning . . .



ABOVE: A craftsmanlike job of plating and framing. . . .  
BELOW: This Iscor photo shows the triplets on parade before O.C. John Lomass, before dispersing for finishing off by their owners.

