

Communication: Thomas C. Gillmer and John Summers on *A History of Working Watercraft of the Western World*

To the Editors:

John Summers' review in *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du nord* (V, No. 4, October 1995) of my book, *A History of Working Watercraft of the Western World*, is a very negative and opinionated statement about a simple descriptive story of many types of watercraft observed over some sixty years.

Authors seldom write books exactly in a manner and style that a critic wants. However, it would be fairer if the reviewer would read and comment on the book's content rather than finding fault with the writer. Summers does not like it that I am not sophisticated, which I suppose I am not. My "accomplishments as a historian are not secure" — perhaps not, but they sometimes have had impact. The reviewer would like me to be the historian he expects and not what I am — the book for him does not live up to its promise. I am not sure what promise, if any, he feels was made.

I would like to respond to his disappointment in not finding any notes or references to support the text. I also believe he is misinterpreting the title of the book by misreading it. It is "*A History*," not "*The History*." While I have chosen not to provide footnotes or references, where it seems advisable I do refer to sources. The major part of the book's discourse arises from my experience and personal sightings as stated in the acknowledgements; except where otherwise noted all photography is from my own camera and most of the drawings from my own board — and the philosophy is also my own. The reviewer apparently requires more discipline in writing, but this book does not adapt to that. It is not a text. Although the reviewer appears to believe that such disciplined writing is beyond me, he might wish to consult one or two of my textbooks, such as *Modern Ship Design* or *Construction and Stability of Naval Ships*. Or, in ship history, my published papers from several naval symposia, such as "Signposts Toward the Origins of Ship Design" or "USS *Constitution*, An Assessment for Her Future."

I am afraid that John Summers feels I am not prepared to write even on working boats which, like myself, are less sophisticated. I do believe that *on-sight observation and interpretation* are basics and requires no literary footnotes or tabular references. On the origins of maritime construction, much is to be found in *small* and *working* craft. This most frequently exists in *indigenous* watercraft on the beaches and small fishing ports. My book is a *record of such observations*.

The reviewer disagrees with my contention that boat development has arisen from the builders of simple and traditional watercraft over the centuries. He apparently sees the origins as coming from drawing boards and scientific developments. He indicates this in

his reference to my comments on west-coast troller sterns, where I take little notice of the choice between double-ended hulls and transom sterns. He notes a more sophisticated choice where power plants are considered. Such choices would have to be determined in towing-tank tests of models. This determination is generally beyond the reach of most of the world's fishermen, even if they were aware of it.

Altogether, I am proud that my book is unsophisticated mainly because it is written about unsophisticated water craft.

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John Summers replies:

As I endeavoured to make clear in my review, I have the greatest respect for Mr. Gillmer's design abilities and long experience as a naval architect. It was not he whom I felt was unsophisticated, but rather the approach of his book.

One criterion for book reviews in *TNM/LMN* is that the reviewer should evaluate the book as a contribution to scholarship. On this ground, I maintain my earlier conclusion that the lack of references seriously compromises its usefulness and thus delivers less than the title promises. Were I reviewing the book as a pleasant read by a writer of considerable experience, I may have reached a different conclusion, but that was not the task. The book may be "a record of...observations" in a personal sense, but it falls far short of the work of others who also based their judgments on observation.

As for the claim in Mr. Gillmer's letter that working craft are "less sophisticated," nothing could be further from the truth. They may have fewer structural members, but in their design, evolution, function and cultural context, they are every bit as meaningful (if not more so) than more elaborate boats. Here again, the book falls short, and offers simple and largely anecdotal observations on what are in fact complex watercraft.

Finally, regarding the stern shapes of west-coast trailers, I did not suggest that fishermen needed tank tests. I suggested that it was Gillmer who treated the subject simplistically. The evolution in stern shapes was caused by a complex of forces acting on watercraft form, some implicit and some explicit. A similar example can be observed in the power launches of his beloved Chesapeake, where it was the fishermen themselves who began to add squat boards to the sterns of their deadrises as larger powerplants and increasing speeds caused the boats to squat. A study of such boats which did not take this factor into account or treated it as a strictly stylistic change would ignore a crucial causality in the evolution of those particular boats.

If I understand Mr. Gillmer's letter correctly, he feels that I did not read his book. In preparing this response, I re-read it, and I stand by my review. I might ask that he, in his own turn, re-read my review. There are no unsophisticated watercraft — that view reflects an outdated and simplistic notion of the primitive. However, there can be unsophisticated books written about watercraft, and that is more to the point here.

John Summers
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