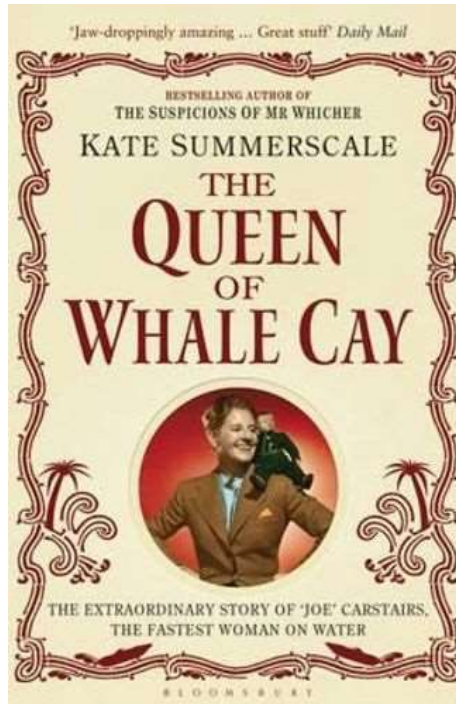


BOOK REVIEW



THE QUEEN OF WHALE CAY

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF 'JOE' CARSTAIRS, THE FASTEST WOMAN ON WATER

By Kate Summerscale. (Bloomsbury)

You may well ask 'where have I heard that name?' If you open p.244 of Bugattis in Australia and New Zealand, 1920 – 2012, you will find a brief reference to Betty Carstairs in regard to a Sunbeam-engined Type 44 special with an unknown chassis number: 'The very special Sunbeam engine was one of the type built in 1925 for successful attempts on the 1 ½ litre speedboat records by Betty Carstairs'. This reference may not have been sufficient to justify a book review in the Bulletin on the life of said 'Betty' Carstairs, but hers is an amazing tale that has several indirect Bugatti references and even another Australian connection.

Journalist Kate Summerscale was, in 1993, asked to write an obituary of Carstairs for the London *Daily Telegraph*. No-one at the *Telegraph* had heard of her, but when Kate went to the library files, she 'found a thick packet of newspaper cuttings, most of them reports of motorboat races. It seemed that MB Carstairs, born in 1900, had been famous in the 1920s. Always dressed in men's clothes, she had raced for Britain and had established herself as the fastest woman on water'. Having written the obituary Kate felt she needed to know more about this extraordinary cross-dressing woman. This quest took her to London, Lucerne, New York, Long Island, Florida and the Bahamas where she visited Whale Cay (pronounced 'key'), a small island where Carstairs ran a benign dictatorship from the thirties through to the seventies before she retired to Florida.

Born in London in 1900 to a promiscuous American oil heiress and a British army captain she inherited a large fortune; her grandfather had been treasurer to John D. Rockefeller's Southern Improvements Company, which was to become the Standard Oil Company. Christened Marion Barbara, she was known to the press as Betty, but preferred the name Joe which fitted her masculine persona. While only 16 years old, Joe was driving ambulances in war torn France; she had already crossed the Atlantic seventeen times and had fallen in love with ships as well as the lesbian scene in Paris. Post-war she enlisted with the Women's Legion Mechanical Transport Section in Ireland, serving as a driver. Having already 'succumbed to the motoring fever', she spent another period in France where she was engaged as a driver performing war reparation work, after which she returned to London where she set up a chauffeuring business with some other young women, using Daimler limousines. They used these to drive their clients all over Europe, even as far afield as Tunisia. In a brochure for their 'X Garage' they had as their Australian agent, 'Alice Anderson, Kew Garage, Kew, Melbourne'. Interestingly Alice, who was three years older than Joe, had established her all female chauffeuring and car workshop three years before Joe; could Joe have received inspiration from Alice? There is no mention of Alice travelling overseas, or being involved in war work. For more on Alice, see <https://www.whichcar.com.au/features/alice-anderson-australias-first-all-female-garage>

In 1920 Joe worked for a period as a demonstrator at the Bugatti Showroom in London; in the light of subsequent associations, one wonders whether this was with Malcolm Campbell? Her favourite liner for transatlantic crossings, of which she made many, was the Berengaria, also used by Campbell when he went to Daytona Beach with Bluebird to break the world land speed record. Joe had donated £10,000 to this cause, and much later she was his hostess on her private Bermudian Island, Whale Cay.

Joe's motor boating career began with 1 ½ litre hydroplanes and she had early successes with 'Gwen', named for one of her girlfriends. When Gwen capsized, she showed her sense of humour by renaming it 'Newg'. Ever chasing more speed, Joe eventually set-up her own boat building company and Newg was eventually powered by a supercharged 1 ½ litre Sunbeam engine given to her by her friend Wolf Barnato; this was the engine that powered the Sunbeam Bugatti that Alan Sinclair brought to Australia in the late 1930s. From her boatyard she developed larger and faster craft and on three occasions she crossed the Atlantic to take on Gar Wood and others for the prestigious Harmsworth Trophy, with one of her boats, 'Estelle IV', powered by three specially constructed Napier Lion engines of 1000HP each. She was unsuccessful in her attempts to rest the trophy from the Americans, but did claim to have achieved a speed of 105mph. As well as speedboats, she had a twelve-metre yacht constructed, also several high-speed cruisers, one of which, equipped with Napier Lions, she intended, just like Ettore Bugatti, to attempt the record for a trans-Atlantic crossing. This was never to be; by 1929, after three failed attempts on the Harmsworth Trophy at a cost of £500,000 it was time to retire from motorboat racing and enjoy herself with a variety of self-built schooners and high-speed luxury cruisers. After a trip around the world, including Australia, she purchased Whale Cay, where she set up her own colony. The story of Whale Cay is sufficient in itself to justify this biography, not to mention some of her associates and lovers, including Tallulah Bankhead and Marlene Dietrich. On each page one expects to find Noel Coward or Ian Fleming popping up on the Cay, but it would appear that they missed out on this exceptional experience.

This book is a 'good read' and well written, although the reproduction of photos is let down by the matt paper in this paperback edition. The life and times of Joe Carstairs could only happen in the first part of the twentieth century – where have all the eccentrics gone? The book is highly recommended for those who lust after 'forbidden fruit'. It is yours for \$17.58, including postage from Book Depository, via Amazon.com

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