SPECIAL REPORT

His wind is free

By Chaitali B. Roy
Special to the Arab Times

But one cannot just go to Arabia and expect to find out about Arab sailing commerce, or anything else. It was not the slightest use to go in steamships, to sit in ports however interesting and talk with Europeans or a few selected Asians whose English perhaps was better than their seafaring knowledge. No. I had to sail in Arab ships and stay with them, for years if necessary – learn the seaman’s language, gain their confidence.”

So wrote Alan Villiers, the Australian mariner, adventurer, photographer and maritime historian in his riveting book ‘Sons of Sindbad’. And Villiers did just that. He sailed with the natives on an Arab dhow up and down the Arabian and African coast for several months. In the process, he documented the dying moments of an old way of life and etched his name alongside more celebrated adventurers, travel writers and chroniclers like Charles Doughty, T.E. Lawrence, Wilfred Thesiger, Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark. Although Alan Villiers is a name that is not usually bandied about as the rest, his contribution to the understanding of Arab seafaring is indisputably singular. He did what no Anglo-Arab writer did before him. He wrote of the Arabs as seafarers and chose to travel down the timeless East African coast and back to the Gulf aided by the monsoon winds. “I tried to find out how much was known of Semitic seafaring, what records already existed. At the time, there were almost none. I was informed there was nothing in Arabic and nothing later than a few references in the Old Testament in Hebrew either. The Semitic mariners had been a closely-guarded lot, for good reasons: they kept the trade secrets they had painfully learned to themselves... As far as I could discover, the most recent European chronicler of some shipping in Asian

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