

“ Mitchell was really a three-sport star: all-star sailor, writer and photographer. He was the great yachting writer of his time. ”

— John Rousmaniere

couple began cruising to the islands, and his magazine stories about those adventures, along with his book “Islands to Windward,” are credited with helping foster the Caribbean charter business.

In the next six years Mitchell wrote four books, the best of which, according to Rousmaniere, is “Passage East,” the story of a trans-Atlantic race. “It’s a wonderful book about what it’s like to be at sea,” Rousmaniere says.

Margaret Nayden, whom Mitchell hired through an employment agency while living in Annapolis, remembers how he wrote on yellow legal pads in longhand. As to his style, she says, “He was very meticulous and followed details. He didn’t embroider things at all. He had a brilliant way of describing a scene or an action,” says Nayden, who is not a sailor. “He had anecdotes about various crewmembers. He described their personalities and the way they did their jobs. He valued his way of being able to describe to an armchair traveler how it felt to be at sea.”

“His prose is really unpretentious,” says Nick Nicholson, editor-at-large of Practical Sailor, who at age 10 discovered Mitchell’s writing in National Geographic and considers him a personal hero. “It’s not plain and simple like Hemmingway. Sometimes he gets a little flowery and philosophical. His writing is always good. You can read it aloud, and it absolutely rolls off your tongue. The concepts are often timeless, those insightful things that you might think of when it’s happening but you never write it down. He took all that stuff and put it on the page and managed to distill what sailing offshore is all about.”

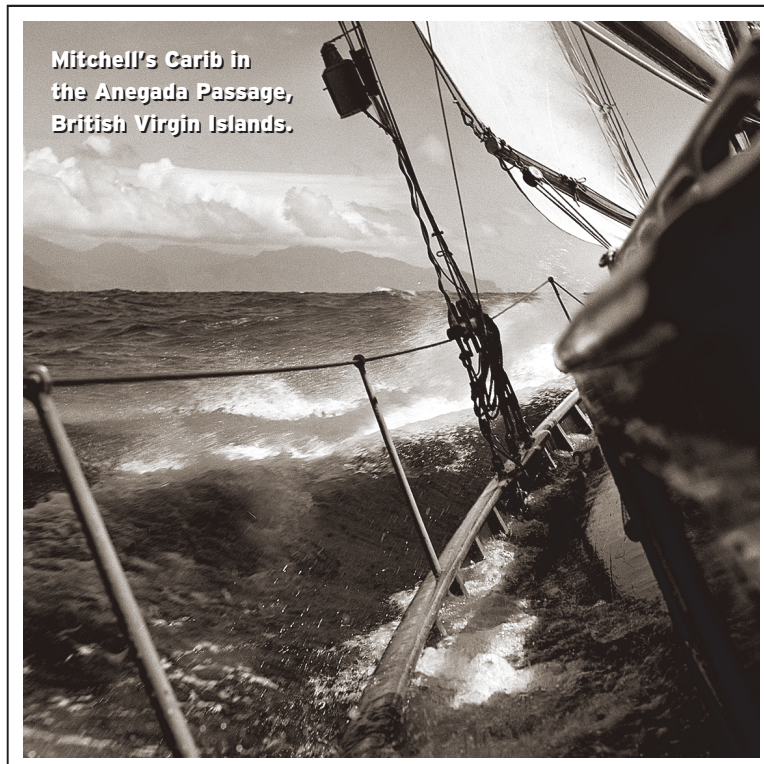
Nicholson says writing and photography were Mitchell’s way to keep sailing. “To pay for what he really loved to do, which was to sail,” he says. “He loved to cruise. He said the greatest thing was when you got to the finish line [of a race] and the ocean extended beyond the finish line.”

While Mitchell was sailing on Carib and then on Caribee, a Philip Rhodes design, and writing, he was “scheming about his ideal boat and thinking about what he wanted,” Rousmaniere says. “He wanted a boat small enough for a couple to handle easily, beamy enough to be comfortable, shallow enough to cruise in the Bahamas, strong enough to cross an ocean, and fast enough to have a chance at winning a race or two,” Rousmaniere writes in his book, “A Berth to Bermuda.”

The result was Finisterre, a 38-foot wooden yawl with an 11-foot beam and a centerboard that provided shallow draft. In addition to such structural features as bronze floorboards and a bronze centerboard trunk, the boat “had a record player and refrigerator and a shower,” not standard racing equipment, Rousmaniere says.

Built at a small yard on the Connecticut River, Finisterre began winning races immediately and in 1956 won the Bermuda Race on corrected time, a feat he would repeat in the next two races in 1958 and 1960. Her success spawned a new breed of small yachts, making offshore sailing, once the sport of tycoons, accessible to boaters of more modest means.

“She was especially good when it blew hard,” Rousmaniere says. “He pushed hard. He pushed people hard and himself hard and his boat hard.” And Mitchell was a “demon on preparation.”



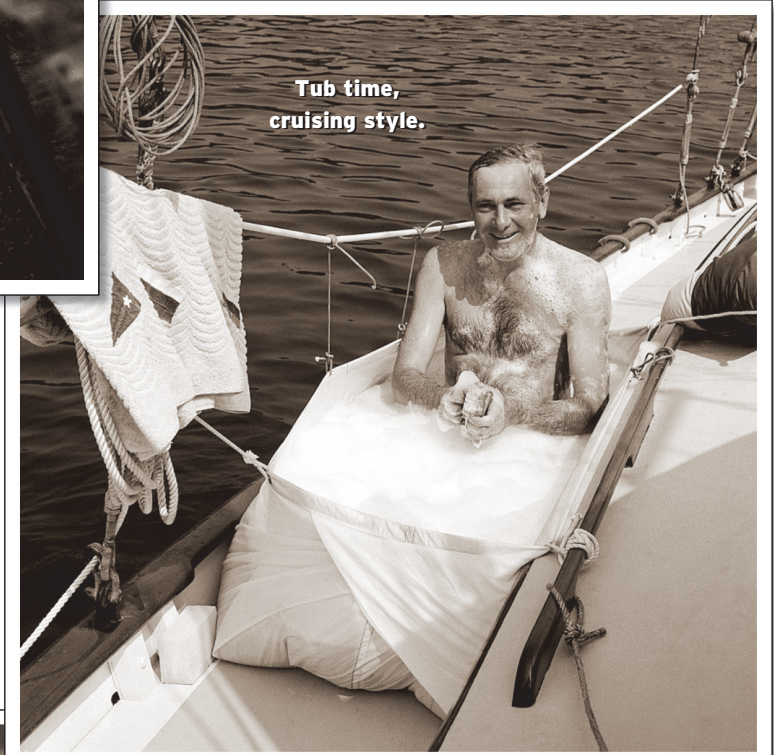
Mitchell's Carib in the Anegada Passage, British Virgin Islands.

making last-minute adjustments. In all the bustle, there was Finisterre, sails neatly flaked, total calm the order of the day because Mitchell already had taken care of all the details.

Nayden, Mitchell’s secretary for most of his life, recalls him as “very forthright.”

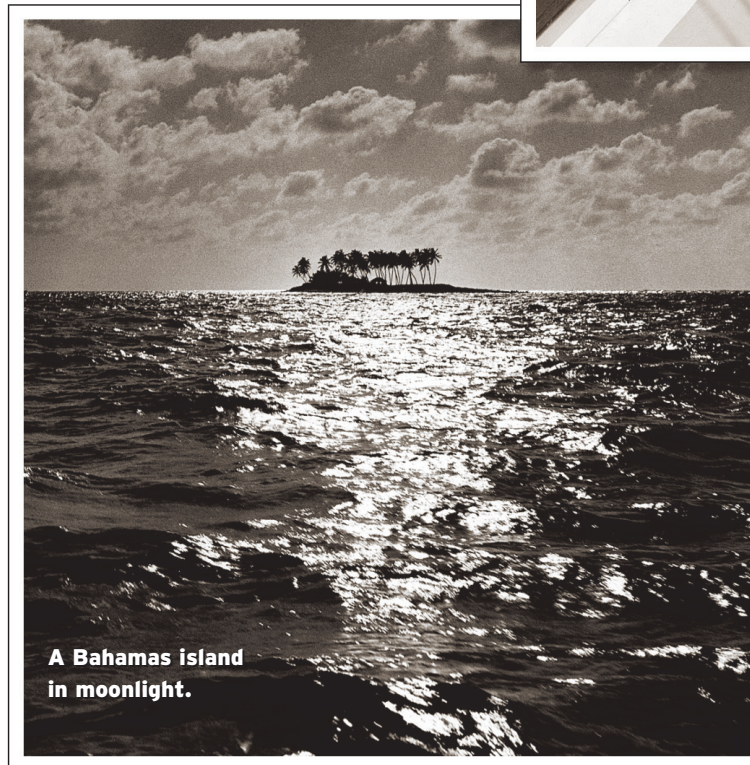
“He didn’t suffer fools very lightly,” she says. “However, he was very courteous. He had command of a situation.” And he was “very good company.”

In his final years, Mitchell was afflicted with Parkinson’s disease and was confined to a wheelchair. (He had ended his major racing career



Tub time, cruising style.

ABOUT THE CARLETON MITCHELL COLLECTION: Several years ago Mystic Seaport was the recipient of Mitchell’s photograph and manuscript collections, the preservation and cataloging of which he also supported. For information about the collections or to order note cards or prints, contact the Seaport in Mystic Conn., at (860) 572-0711, ext. 5367, or e-mail collections@mysticseaport.org



A Bahamas island in moonlight.

after the 1960 Bermuda win and had turned to powerboats, helping introduce the public to trawlers, Rousmaniere says.) He bought the houseboat — named Yayas, a Greek word meaning a long and happy life — to accommodate his wheelchair and kept it docked at the home where he and second wife Ruth lived on an inlet off Biscayne Bay.

Despite his disabilities, Nicholson says, Mitchell’s presence was overwhelming. “He was always one of those people who, when he was there, you knew he was in charge.”

And yet Mitchell did not seek the limelight. “I asked him once to come up to Mystic Seaport and participate in a yachting symposium,” Rousmaniere recalls. “He said just the thought of standing up in front of an audience struck terror in his heart.”

Yachting historian Llewellyn Howland III relates a story told by his uncle, Waldo Howland, creator of the Concordia yawl. Walking down a Newport, R.I., dock before the start of one Bermuda Race, Howland found crews swarming over the various yachts and

Rousmaniere discovered his friend was “deadly shy.” While he thrived on competition with others, he dreaded where it led. “He said trophy presentations were misery for him,” Rousmaniere says. “He felt he had lost control.” ■