

**T**he construction and voyaging of ships cast a spell over me from my earliest childhood. And so, shipbuilding was to become a strand of my life, answering a need to build, to make; a need to perpetuate tradition; to honour the artistry of craft skills which would find their test in the elements, if not the gallery.

Ships had been built for hundreds of years at Troon, at the southernmost end of the Firth of Scotland's River Clyde, even before the industrial explosion which caused the name of the Clyde to become synonymous with great shipbuilding.

I learned, during a visit to Scotland with my parents and fiancée in July 1971, that the Ailsa yard — at that time State-owned — was to be closed at the end of 1972, and shipbuilding forever abandoned at Troon. The craftsmen who had shaped history by building the greatest navy for the greatest empire were to be cast aside, more as a reflection of the lack of historical perspective of the society than because these men could no longer contribute. And so, in a campaign which briefly captured the Scottish imagination, I mortgaged my properties and acquired the yard, taking on the responsibility for the men and their families. And when the yard was taken over by another owner a decade later, it was clear that it would continue to build ships. The era when shipbuilding was to be abandoned had, at least partially, passed. There was an opportunity, then, that the foundations of the maritime nation might not be lost, and a continuum of history might not be ended.

It was a mighty gamble. Over a decade it was to cost me dearly in terms of emotion, finances, time, and my attitude toward my fellow man. I learned to respect the skills of Scottish craftsmen, but to despair that Scots could truly work together selflessly, for the common good. But history was served by my effort to save the Ailsa yard, and there was satisfaction in knowing that, for a brief moment, I had helped stem the tide of decline in a great maritime nation. I remained, after the Troon adventure, a part of this maritime endeavour: with the Ailsa-Perth shipyard at Chatham, in Kent, at the old home of the Royal Navy, at the docks where Viscount Horatio Nelson's flagship, *Victory*, was built. I remained associated, too, with a great naval architectural studio which through luck I was able to save at a moment of crisis: G. L. Watson & Co. After it was founded in 1870, Watson designed the glorious State yachts of the King of the United Kingdom, the Tsar of Russia, the Kaiser, the Presidents of the United States, and others. It also designed some of the great *J*-class vessels of the America's Cup and *Big*-class racing yachts in the golden era of yachting.



*The Steam Yacht Warrior was typical of the yachts created by Watson and Ailsa.*

## *The Celebration of Ailsa*

~ T from the graving berth  
Sing of the work at Ailsa-Perth,  
For a year ago, and none too soon  
The men of the yard and the Town of Troon  
Learned that times would not eclipse  
Their centuries of building ships.

~ One by one the forges died  
And new ships rarely left the Clyde.  
Thirty-thousand hulls were built  
On waters now asleep with silt.  
But Troon, the guard of the Clyde's great Firth,  
Rebuilt the yard of Ailsa-Perth  
(Ailsa at the port town's headland  
first built ships for the Duke of Portland).

~ No earthly forge had e'er been seen  
Like the mighty forge Strathclyde had been,  
Until for a moment it broke stride  
And men had drifted away from the Clyde.

~ But a vital core of the craft remained  
As fathers and sons at the yard refrained  
From leaving Troon and its ghostly fleet  
Of ships they built and now would meet  
When their own ships came sailing in.

Troon, December ,