

The QP Bookshelf: Stocking Fillers

Ken Kessler

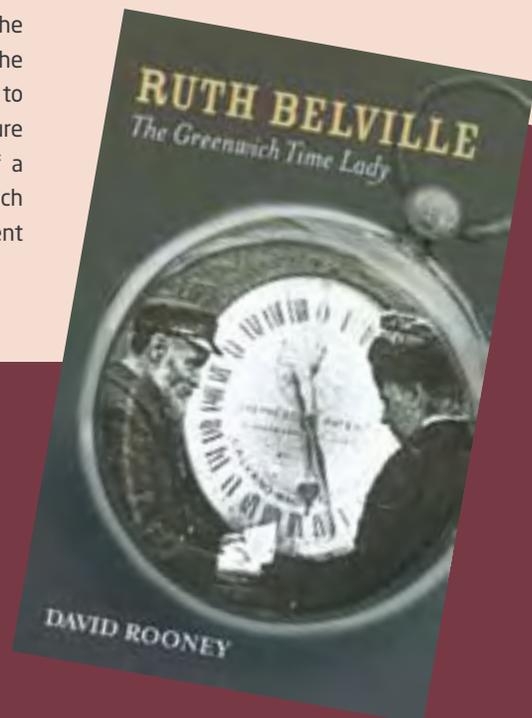
RUTH BELVILLE: THE GREENWICH TIME LADY

by David Rooney

Published by National Maritime Museum, Greenwich Observatory, London SE10 9NF.
Hardback, 192pp, b&w illustrations.
ISBN 978-0-948065-97-2.
Price £12.99.

Non-fiction publishing, post-Dava Sobel's sublime *Longitude*, has embraced everything from the saga of the early days of trade in nutmeg to the history of salt. The key is readability, giving human warmth and interest to what would otherwise be the dry history of an obscure topic. Before Sobel made Harrison 'sexy', for lack of a better term, the BBC used the same technique with much success when producing populist shows about ancient history, particularly those of Michael Wood.

While Sobel's best-seller kicked off a craze for scholastic detective work applied to unlikely subjects, it is one of the very few that relates to our favourite subject: watches. True, *Longitude* has been followed by more books about Harrison himself, as well as a splendid biography of R T Gould, restorer of Harrison's clocks, but for the most part, horological topics benefitted little from the trend. David Rooney's study of Ruth Belville, while - alas - lacking the 'high seas' drama and political treachery





Sir William Christie, Astronomer Royal 1881-1910, at his desk, c.1890s.

of *Longitude*, is a welcome shelf-mate to that book, and will amuse the same audience. Low key it may be, but its charm is palpable.

It's clear that the publisher would like to see another *Longitude* on its hands, the pitch in the press release enticing the reader with this racy come-on: 'Commercial

propaganda, dirty tricks and failing technologies come together in the extraordinary story of the Greenwich Time Lady with a will to succeed in Edwardian London.' While it's true that all of the above are present, the reader might leave this delightful tome thinking that the Belvilles - mother and daughter - were merely classic British eccentrics, anachronistic crackpots embracing Victorian/Edwardian doggedness, nascent feminism and an almost unnatural devotion to timekeeping.

Ruth Belville: The Greenwich Time Lady tells the story of a woman who, in total defiance of the march of, say, electricity, kept alive the tradition of schlepping all over London with her Arnold chronometer, visiting clients who needed weekly assurance that their clocks were running accurately. We now take some things for granted: everything from computers to mobile phones boasts excruciatingly accurate clocks.

David Rooney, Curator of Timekeeping at the Royal Observatory Greenwich, uncovered a story ripe for the telling. I'll be the first to admit that I had never heard of Belville before this book arrived; equally, I have a sneaking suspicion that Ruth Belville's saga is well-

known only to the sort watch enthusiasts who wallow in the *Horological Journal* as if it were the latest Jeffery Deaver. The truth lies somewhere in-between: Belville should either be canonised as a saint of sorts, or regarded merely as a peculiar footnote in the history of time keeping.

Rooney's style mercifully avoids the arid tone of a scholar, though there's more than a hint of trying too hard to make this something suitable for *Panorama* or *The South Bank Show*. Still, it's a breezy read, and the shenanigans undertaken by what are now called 'male chauvinist pigs' exhibited the same malice and bitterness familiar to those who recall the way John Harrison was treated. Obstacles created for Harrison smacked, in retrospect, of professional jealousy, the shabby treatment of Maria and Ruth Belville was more likely the unabashed sexism of the time.

Rooney blends the story of Greenwich Mean Time and the Belvilles' devotion to their clients with perfect fluidity. Charting the changing cast at Greenwich alongside a century of technological developments in timekeeping. I won't spoil the surprises for you, but most readers will be staggered at how early a date in the 1800s electricity was being used to signal the correct time to various locations and outposts. Those who hate quartz and other battery-driven watches will snigger when they learn that electricity didn't displace mechanical timekeepers at Greenwich without a fight. It's like LPs versus CDs.

As the publicity material states in another attempt at rendering this book more racy than it is,

Maria Belville in the Daily Graphic, 1892.



"GRANDFATHER'S OLD TIME" WAS OBSOLETE, WHO STRUCK THE HOUR DIALS AT THE GREENWICH OBSERVATORY FOR THE BENEFIT OF LIVING TRANSLATORS. (From a Photograph by James A. Hallett, Ch. 1892)



The Royal Observatory, Greenwich. Photograph, c. 1870.

'Ruth Belville, the last of the time sellers, was such a threat to one commercial time supplier - the Standard Time Company - that it tried to put her out of business by using a "dirty tricks campaign" and suggesting that "no mere man" could have got access to the astronomers at the Observatory.'

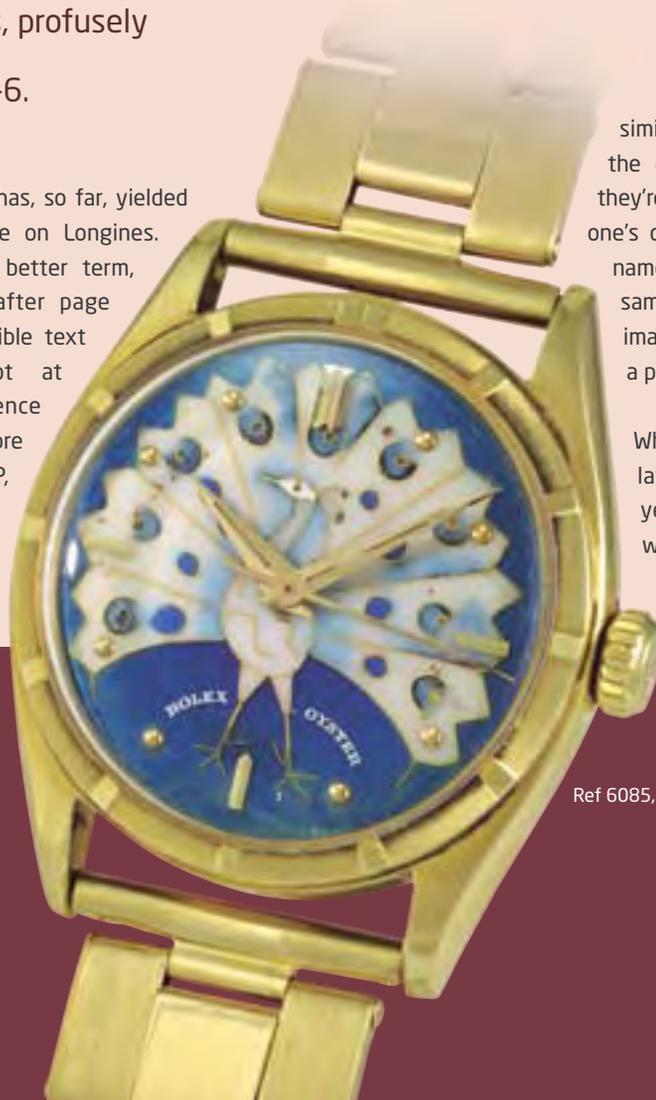
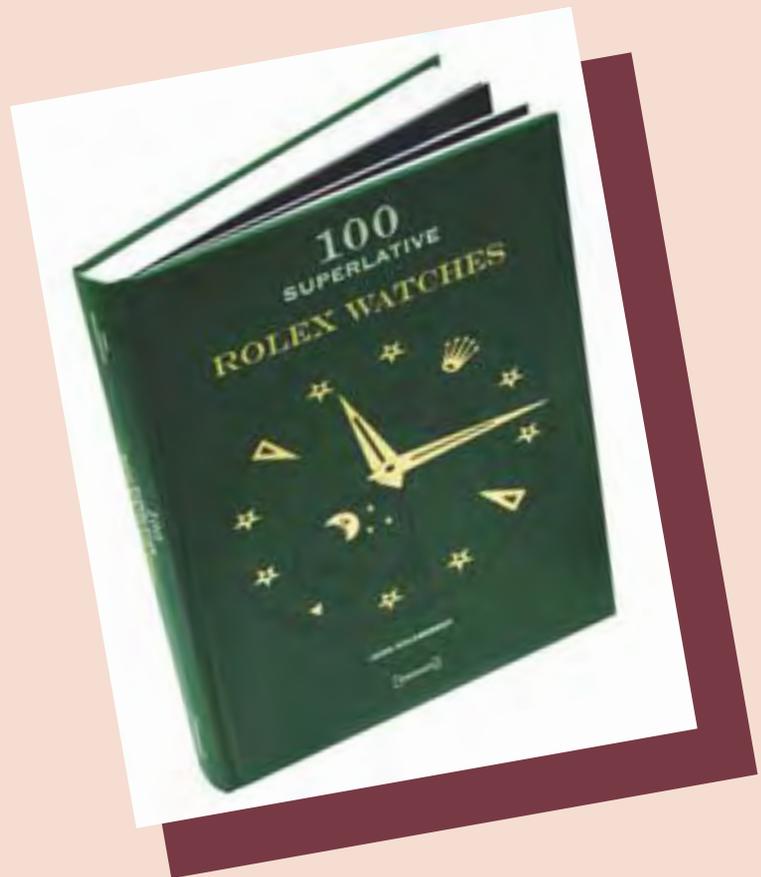
Even after reading the book, I was left wondering why Maria, and then Ruth, were prepared to put up with so much intransigence on the part of the Greenwich establishment, with the dangers of London, and with the steady flow of challenges from rivals selling more modern technology. Maria was clearly devoted to her husband John, who worked at Royal Observatory and was her inspiration, while Ruth was exhibiting a good old fashioned sense of duty: carrying on the family tradition. She retired three years before her death in 1943 - over a century after Maria first braved 19th Century London with a valuable watch in her handbag.

100 SUPERLATIVE ROLEX WATCHES

by John Goldberger

Published by Damiani.
Hard covers, 264 pages, profusely illustrated.
ISBN 978-88-6208-31-6.
Price £99.99.

John Goldberger's mini-industry has, so far, yielded two books on Omega and one on Longines. What they are, for lack of a better term, is 'wristwatch porn' - page after page of glorious photos, with negligible text and absolutely no attempt at completeness or even reference status. These are books to pore over in-between issues of QP, or the arrival of auction catalogues. His watch selections are arbitrary, the accompanying



Ref 6085, 1952.

descriptions minimalist to a fault. But the books do have a function, which is exactly like similar works in other fields where the objects of desire are beautiful: they're fun to thumb through, fuelling one's collector fantasies. I could easily name 50 books about cars with the same imbalance between text and images. Then again, Goldberger *is* a photographer.

What frustrates so much about the latest volume, published in the year of Rolex's centenary (and which probably accounts for the number of watches included in



From top:
'Sub-Aqua', Ref 620, 1954.
Ref 8171, 1950.
Ref 6063, 1955.
Ref 6062, 1953.

its pages), is that it joins a groaning shelf of other Rolex books, all of which suffer the same fatal flaw: Rolex simply will not open its archives to authors. Thus, *every single book on Rolex is pure speculation*. One day, perhaps, the definitive, authorised work will arrive. Until then, we make do with books by what I call 'SARAs': Self-Appointed Rolex Authorities. And while they have delivered some books of epic scope, especially those from Mondani, all suffer from that lingering doubt.

[My all-time favourite demonstration of Rolex insanity was in the presence of a SARA who was attacking volubly and unjustifiably a delightful book on sport Rolexes. The point in question was so trivial that I've since forgotten what it was. Rather than simply listen to and accept his erroneous outburst, in his presence I phoned a watchmaker who worked at Rolex in the early 1970s, assembling the very Submariners in question. I asked the watchmaker to clarify the point, which he did, stating that the book was absolutely correct. I relayed this response, to which the SARA snapped, 'WELL, HE'S WRONG!!']

Goldberger, of course, avoids that dilemma entirely by choosing a selection of watches rather than promising any sort of completeness or reference status. To add gravity to this picture book, however, he even includes a magnificent four-page potted history by Giampiero Negretti, one of the finest watch journalists on the planet. And yet,

while the photography is to die for, the production luxurious (would you believe a padded book cover?) and the concept is not without its appeal, his choice of watches is of little use even as a cursory overview of the brand's output. Bluntly stated, the book needed an editor, someone with a better grasp of balance.

Examples: Do we need eight 'James Bond'-style Submariners in a row, the versions without the 'shoulders' on either side of the crown, and all so similar that only a Rolex anorak might identify them? Why include five cloisonné-dialed Oysters? Why is there such a dearth of pre-WWII pieces, when there were so many wonderful (and photogenic) Bubblebacks from which to choose?

Such complaints are largely irrelevant, it's Goldberger's book and he can do what he likes. But - especially given the momentousness of this year - it's a missed opportunity, particularly for a brand that could easily yield 100 uniquely different models. Goldberger needn't worry, though, as the Rolex hardcore will buy and worship this book.

As I said before, the photography is simply wonderful. One suspects this could achieve best-seller status in Italy. And that green padded cover, reminiscent of a Rolex watch box, promises so much! But this is a case of style over substance, and its purchase is mandatory only relative to your love for the brand.

ROLEX | PATEK PHILIPPE | CARTIER

David Duggan

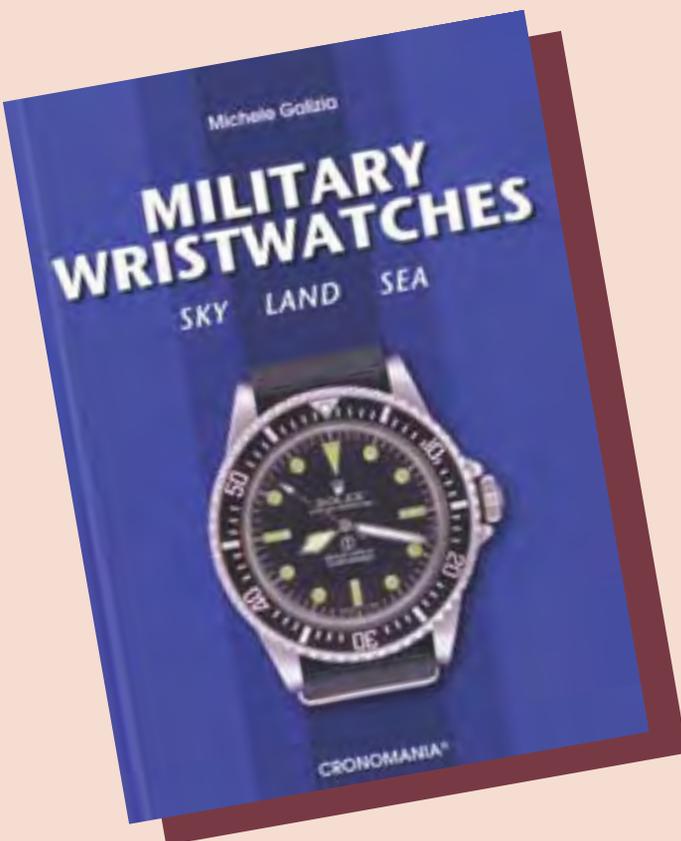
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MILITARY WRISTWATCHES: SKY LAND SEA

by Michele Galizia

Published by Cronomania, Via G. Tartini 16, 35128 Padua, Italy.
Hardback, 376pp,
colour illustrations.
ISBN 978-88-902882-1-0.
Price €140 plus shipping.
Available from www.cronomania.it

Pray hard enough, and you never know... I've been dreaming about a book like this for, oh, 30 years. It's not that we haven't had any books before about military watches. In fact, some of them have been exemplary. But what was needed was a comprehensive guide with immaculate photos and hard facts, no more, no less. Something to complement the 'histories' or the ones with narrow themes. With *Military Wristwatches: Sky Land Sea*, produced by Cronomania's Michele Galizia, we have a reference work that comes closer than any to being a *catalogue raisonnée* for military watch enthusiasts.

Let's make it clear what this book is not: It is not a price guide; you can pore over auction catalogues for that. It does not purport to be a catalogue of every military wristwatch ever produced; Galizia is the first to admit that there are more to include (even my paltry collection contains two models not in the book). There are very few entries which pre-date WWII; this is not the book that will provide information about, say, Girard-Perregaux's offering for the German Navy in the 1880s.

But for most of us, that is unimportant: the bulk of collectible military watches date from the mid-1930s onward, while the most accessible (and wearable) are post-WWII. If anything, this begs a companion volume, which

Panerai Vintage Luminor
Marina Militare.



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could also cover pocket watches. What remains is, for the hardcore enthusiast, simply astonishing.

Military Wristwatches: Sky Land Sea is a luxurious, 376-page volume measuring 330 x 216 x 30 mm, with laminated covers and heavy-grade paper stock. Inside are ultra-clear spreads describing 274 watches issued by 30 countries, augmented with 1030 oversized photos, including inside shots of movements and casebacks. And it was clearly compiled by a collector who knows what other collectors want or need: not one but two indices list the watches, one by brand and another by country. Within each national category - the countries form the 'chapters' - the watches are presented alphabetically by brand, and chronologically within each brand. You can locate whatever you want quickly and easily.

A typical entry will include, at the very least, front and back shots, a photo of the movement, and primary description, e.g. 'Rare wristwatch for German Army,' followed by dates, description of the case, a description of the dial, details of the actual watch in the photograph, and movement type. More famous or important pieces might merit a double-page spread, and icons such as Panerai, Rolex, Blancpain, Omegas and Breguets enjoy multiple entries to show the variants of a given model.

There are some odd omissions. The famous and massive *fliegeruhren* of the Luftwaffe, for example, are represented by Laco and Lange, but not with an IWC - surely the most desirable and important variant. Omega's 6B from 1953 is shown, but not the equally unusual 1956. Galizia has chosen not to include a chart (as found in the milestone volumes by Canetoli) that explains each country's markings; on the other hand, every individual entry has its engravings described in detail. A separate and comprehensive chart, though, would help collectors to identify their own examples, but with minor detective work, you can use this book to explain pretty much all of the US and UK codes.

Surprises are plentiful. I never expected to see such detailed coverage of watches that I knew only by rumour, including the West End Watch Co timepieces made for the Indian Army, and the Tudors used by France and Israel. The book helps to identify the magnificent Longines pilot watches of the 1930s, as issued to Czechoslovakian forces, and there are detailed studies of hard-to-find models from Iraq and Egypt, the Netherlands and Japan. Another surprise is the litany of brands that supplied military watches, including some unlikely suppliers such as Movado and Minerva.

When I first learned of this book, though it was released last year only in Italian, I couldn't wait to order a copy. I timed it just right: an English edition was published this September. It is worth every Euro, and I hope that it sells in the thousands so that Galizia can update it every five years or so; I have no doubt that pedants like myself will send him details of watches not included in the first edition (Like my Timor 6B...). Until then, if you love military watches, or you only want one book on the subject, this - hands down - is the volume to own. It is simply sensational. And Christmas is almost here... 🕒

Breguet Type XX, Réf 4100.



Blancpain Fifty Fathoms.