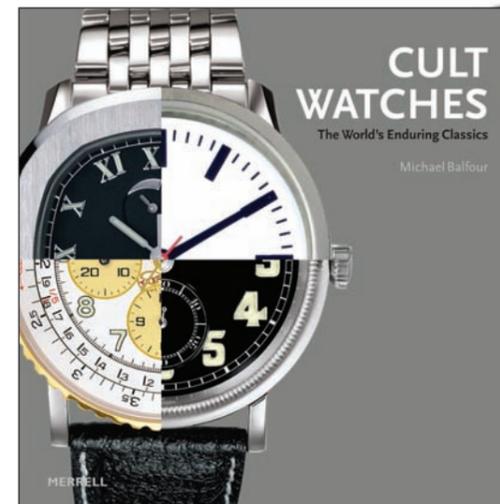




## The QP Bookshelf Part 9:

# Cult Watches

Ken Kessler



**Cult Watches:**  
**The World's Enduring Classics**  
By Michael Balfour  
Hardcover, 192 pages, £29.95  
Published by Merrell Publishers, 2007  
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Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore, which came out in 1993, takes its name from a series of Royal Navy vessels from the heights of Imperial Britain. The hexagonal bezel with its eight visible screws draws inspiration from the ships' portholes.

By their very nature, lists cause arguments. And books that are, in effect, highly-detailed or expanded listings inspire the same, brawling-in-the-pub disputes as those moronic Channel 4 '50 Greatest Film Moments' shows. You know the type, wherein a trite piece of fifth-rate bunkum like *Grease* is regarded as superior to *The King & I*, *My Fair Lady* or *Fiddler On The Roof*. But even worse than mindless ratings are complete exclusions.

Legendary British watch scribe Michael Balfour almost completely avoids that dilemma in his latest volume, *Cult Watches*, by addressing the issue directly in his introduction. Even to approach this book without first reading the section, 'Notable Omissions' (as did our esteemed editor in the last issue), is to do the book a disservice: Balfour knows in his bones that no two watch enthusiasts will ever compile the same list of 30 cult watches... let alone agree on the definition of the term 'cult'.

And therein lies the rub. Unlike the plethora of single-marque books that have appeared over the past five years, *Cult Watches* falls under the heading of 'General Watch Literature' and this classification might therefore automatically prevent its perusal by snobs. They might think that, by its very nature, it's too rudimentary for them because of what has happened over the past 15 years: they are among the growing number of people with no connection to the watch industry beyond a love for timepieces who have become seriously learned enthusiasts. And they all feel that they have transcended "Watch Studies 101".

To miss this book because of the assumption of too much knowledge would be a shame. It really is filled with delicious trivia, solid history and a great understanding of what makes a watch something out of the ordinary. And yet, equally, this book is a fine primer for novices - which rather contradicts my belief that it's worth the attention of enthusiasts... some of whom will probably love it just because it's so contentious.

Balfour has assembled 30 watches that, by his definition to be sure, qualify as 'The World's Enduring Classics' - the book's subtitle. Now, I do not intend to engage in a heated, probably drunken debate with Michael at a watch event - after we work some serious damage on a few bottles of Barolo - about what the hell possessed him to rank a current Ulysse-Nardin GMT or the so-bling-it-transcends-vulgarity Corum Coin Watch in the same company as genuine legends like the Patek Philippe Calatrava, the Rolex Submariner or the Breguet Type XX.

With gun to head, I would admit only to agreeing with slightly more than half of Balfour's choices. But that simply proves my point: no two watch lovers will concur on either choices or definitions. But once you get beyond that, the book is a delight.

Among the 30 watches - I'll let you read the book to find out what's missing - are blue chip classics like IWC pilot watches, the Hamilton Electric, Breitling's Navitimer and others beyond question. Equally, Balfour has no problem with ignoring price as a point of merit, so affordables such as Swatch and Mondaine are included to show nascent collectors that a love for interesting watches needn't equate with bank-busting values.

Breguet Type XX is the brand's highly prized pilots watch designed by Louis Breguet, the great-great grandson of Abraham Louis. First launched in 1950, the Type XX became the official watch for the French Royal Air Force from 1954 to 1970.



Once past the intro, which also includes tips on collecting and investing, definitions of watch types, facts about auctions and observations about the watch industry, the book is divided into uniform chapters for each individual entry. They start with a full-page illustration and title page, forming an elegant double-page spread, followed by a reasonably detailed history of the manufacturer and the watch, including offshoots and variants, as well as its descendants, if such exist.

A perfect example of a classic still in production, with progeny, is the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak, which has spawned countless variations while staying true to its original form. Its chapter contains a brief history of the brand, the story of the watch itself, and a comprehensive and well-illustrated overview of the range it sired. The images are beautifully reproduced, on fine stock, and the feel of the book - including the overall format - is elegant and consistent throughout, belying a price tag of only £29.95.

On the other side of the coin are the watches locked in the past, such as the 'tuning fork' Bulova Accutron or the Ingersoll character watches, which have no real modern-day equivalents. (True, the Accutron name is back, but it doesn't bear the innards that made the original a cult item.) But I find such watches' inclusions particularly heartening because it shows that Balfour didn't write this for the industry, to curry favour. He wrote about those watches because he feels they merit inclusion.

Which still doesn't explain some of the lesser choices.

But that is to carp in exactly the manner that Balfour's introduction is meant to preclude. There is, by his measure, a definable consistency to the choices, and the amount of text devoted to each model is sufficient to allow the reader to leave the book with a well-supported appreciation of each model. But there is a slight caveat.

Balfour assured me that his research led him to each manufacturer for absolute veracity. Unfortunately, some of the manufacturers need their archives sorted. Minor errors in the Panerai chapter, for example, include putting the wrong watch on Sylvester Stallone's wrist in the movie *Daylight*: he wore a Luminor, not a Mare Nostrum. The Longines 'Lindbergh' Angle Hour Watch is described without any mention of the Weems from which it was derived. (And God knows what photos of the Longines Ultra-Quartz and Delirium are doing in that chapter.)

But enough nit-picking. This book is not meant to be a bible, but a delightful study, in digestible-to-all form, of 30 out-of-the-ordinary watches. But I will never forgive MB for leaving out the Doxa 300T, the Rado Diastar, the Blancpain Fifty Fathoms, the Eterna Kon-Tiki, the Le....

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Bulova Accutron Tuning Fork was not the first electronic watch, but it was the first to use a bipolar transistor, it was also used to correctly map the dimensions of Greenland for the first time.