



**DONALD
CAMPBELL**

DAVID TREMAYNE

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

Generations are familiar with the haunting television footage of Donald Campbell somersaulting to his death in his famous Bluebird boat on Coniston Water in January 1967. It has become an iconic image. His towering achievements, and the drama of his passing, are thus part of the national psyche. But what of the man himself?

The son of the legendary Sir Malcolm Campbell who was famous for being the ultimate record-breaker of the inter-war years, Donald Campbell was born to speed. He was outgoing and flamboyant, yet carefully orchestrated the image he presented to the world. Some saw him as a playboy adventurer; others as a reckless daredevil with a death wish. *Donald Campbell: The Man behind the Mask* paints a fascinating portrait of an intense, complex, superstitious yet abnormally brave man who was partly driven by the desire to prove that he was worthy of the mantle of his father. This book generates a unique insight into how his desperate fear of failure finally lured him into taking one risk too many.

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DONALD CAMPBELL

THE MAN BEHIND THE MASK

DAVID TREMAYNE

This book is for Donald Malcolm Campbell CBE

For providing an heroic role model.
For teaching by example that life is worth nothing if it is lived dishonestly, vaingloriously, or without a dream and the persistence, courage and bloody-mindedness to realize it; that victory is sweeter when adversity has been overcome; that fear does not matter so long as you know what to do with it; and that nothing worthwhile is won without sacrifice.

And for those who loved him and fought toe to toe alongside him in the eternal challenge whenever he stepped down into the arena to prod the tiger one more time.

ELEGY TO CAMPBELL

by Andrew Wintersgill

A man sits alone in the grey light of morning,
The heart and the brain of a powerful machine.
The eyes of a hawk glare bright with a purpose;
A helmet he dons, the battle begins.

Months of preparing, bitter despairing,
The funds have run out, so it's on the attack.
A cold winter's morning, like an ice age is dawning,
The engine screams out, and the gods answer back.

OVER THE MOUNTAINS, FOLLOW THE RIVER
DOWN THROUGH THE VALLEY AND TO THE LAKE
SHORE
WHERE BLUEBIRD LIES BURIED 'NEATH CONISTON
WATER
AS GREY AS A GHOST AND AS STILL AS THE DAWN.

See how she runs as she climbs on the water,
See how she flies as the spray falls like rain.
Plus forty-seven and the waiting is over,
Wait for the calm and try once again.

Frozen in time now the black and white newsreel,
As Bluebird leapt forward in a circle of death.
Shot in mid-flight she plunges face downwards,
Ballast bags bobbing was all that was left ...

OVER THE MOUNTAINS, FOLLOW THE RIVER
DOWN THROUGH THE VALLEY AND TO THE LAKE
SHORE
WHERE BLUEBIRD LIES BURIED 'NEATH CONISTON
WATER
AS GREY AS A GHOST AND AS STILL AS THE DAWN.

The boathouse is empty, the jetty lies rotten.
New heroes are basking in the spray of champagne.
Speed is the king in the realm of ambition,
Great are the glories but short is the reign.

FOREWORD

When David Tremayne came to see me while he was writing this book, at some point I said, 'I've never read anything about my family.' David looked at me rather quizzically, so I went on to explain that it can be so annoying to hear people say that they are going to write the 'definitive true story' etc. and then when you read it it is full of errors and inaccuracies. In fact, it is probably nigh on impossible for someone to write a 'definitive' account of the lives, loves and fast machines of a family that has achieved so much, particularly when it has to be put together from hearsay, hefty research and word of mouth; so much boils down to how the author and the reader interpret the information put before them. Also, the main characters will have made sure that their own accounts of events are favourable to themselves, and where the Campbells come into the equation there are, I am sure, some minor embellishments of the facts!

Then I read David's highly researched and very accurate interpretation of all the information he has amassed, in the most part from people he has made a huge effort to track down and visit. In my view, he has written the best 'definitive' account that will ever be available for the many people who are still intrigued by and interested in the achievements of my forefathers.

This account - and I prefer to call it that - has imparted to me more information and facts about my family than I ever thought was possible. There were so many things I

hadn't either appreciated or known that they had got up to. The more I read, the prouder I became, and the more I came to understand after so many years why my forefathers had, and still have, such a huge following, not only in their homeland but all over the world. It has taken me a lifetime to realize that I have the blood of truly amazing characters and achievers flowing through my veins. David gave me this insight. This in turn leaves one with a huge responsibility and a heavy burden to carry. I always wanted to feel and be 'worthy' of this precious blood, but however hard you try you can never quite match these astounding men.

I'm so delighted now that I complied with David's request, broke with tradition and read 'something' about my family. We are all fortunate to have this most fascinating, painstakingly accurate piece of literature, the research for which has taken more than twelve years. It will, I know, enthral people, irrespective of whether they are full-blown 'Campbell anoraks', folk with a keen interest in the history of water and land speed records, or those interested in historical achievements and heroes. We had men like Sir Henry Segrave, John Cobb, Sir Malcolm and Donald Campbell, true heroes who battled against adversity to realize their dreams and ambitions by the seat of their pants. There was not the technology available then as there is today; their exploits were truly life or death. Some paid the ultimate price, but none of them shirked his commitment to enhancing the greatness of Great Britain.

David, whom I am honoured to call a friend, God bless you, this is a marvellous piece of work. You have done my family and yourself proud. Thank you, too, for the privilege of contributing this foreword. And to all who have the good sense to include this book in their libraries, I know you will now get the best possible account of 'The Man Behind the Mask'.

Gina Campbell, QSO
Leeds, July 2003

INTRODUCTION

It is a beautiful tale, Maurice Maeterlinck's play *The Blue Bird*. The children Mytyl and Tytyl wander through the Land of Memory, having been told by the Fairy Beryline that if they find the Blue Bird they will again meet their departed brothers and sisters. Tytyl is a little god in the eyes of his faithful dog Tylo, and how like Donald Campbell and Leo Villa the two characters are: when the brave Tytyl stands to fight his enemies, it is always Tylo who remains steadfast by his side. There is danger in pursuing the Blue Bird, for it is said that all who accompany the children will also die at journey's end. Yet still, just like Campbell, they keep pushing ahead, past the point of no return.

It is an emotional story, yet it radiates happiness too. When the children meet their late grandparents, they learn how the dead can always be made gloriously happy whenever the living remember them. They learn, too, that the Blue Bird is the great secret of happiness, that it cannot be caught and caged, but may only be shared with others. There was pathos, too, in the story of Donald Campbell's life. 'I have always burned to write a book,' he once told Peter Costigan of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. 'Not about speed, but about the human struggle and suffering behind the Campbell efforts to break speed records. Behind the glamour of the record runs was an incredible story of frustration and human effort.'

I had just turned fourteen when I saw the television news film of Campbell's accident on the evening of 4 January 1967. Weeks later, I happened upon a copy of

Richard Hough's *BP Book of the Racing Campbells* in a local department store sale. It cost me at least a week's pocket money, so much that I didn't dare tell my parents. I read it in one go, and was hooked for ever, on the Campbell legend, on land and water speed records, on the whole speed thing. I had found a calling.

But who was Donald Campbell?

The writer Leslie Charteris once wrote of his most famous creation, 'I sought to create a situation whereby the man who has not heard of The Saint is like the boy who has never heard of Robin Hood.' One might substitute the name Donald Campbell for that of The Saint. Generations of adults watched the television footage as the *Boy's Own* speedking of the fifties and sixties somersaulted to his death. His achievements and the drama of his passing are thus forever remembered, but what of the man himself? Only two books ever got anywhere close to probing the fascinating riddle of Campbell, John Pearson's *Bluebird and the Dead Lake* and Arthur Knowles' *With Campbell at Coniston*. But each focused more on individual attempts than on the overall character and career of the actor on centre stage, because they were written when he was alive, and that was the way Campbell wanted it.

So who was he? The playboy adventurer, as Fleet Street so often portrayed him? A reckless daredevil with a death wish, as a radio producer tried to suggest on the twentieth anniversary of his passing? Or a man in his later years often frightened, continually trying to prove himself to himself and to his illustrious late father, in whose long, long shadow he forever felt trapped? Why were there so few written interviews with him? What really caused the crashes at Bonneville in 1960 and Coniston in 1967? Did Bonneville really change him? Why was he so obsessed with spiritualism? Was he really just trying all along to prove himself to the memory of his dead father?

These were some of the questions that kept spilling around my head until my friend, the motorsport writer Nigel Roebuck, finally cajoled me into concrete action. I wanted to tackle Campbell in a way he had never allowed anyone to in life. To shrug off the tired opinions based on superficial perceptions, established dogma which turned out to have little factual basis, even Campbell's own carefully orchestrated publicity. To cover a fifties and sixties story with a fresh perspective, but without the contemporary spite of icon-debunking. I wanted to look at the man himself, in the context of his well-chronicled achievements and his elegant machinery, by talking to those who were closest to him. I knew what he had done, and what he had done it in, but there was a still undiscovered prize: what made him do it the way he did? What factors pushed him in the direction he went, and how did they affect him and those around him? Could it ever have ended other than the way it did?

I have an open mind on spiritualism, a subject with which Campbell was obsessed, but during the course of researching this book I had some interesting experiences. While I was interviewing the medium Marjorie Staves, she spoke of my making trips abroad, across water. That mightn't have been too difficult to suggest, given what little she knew of my profession. She also mentioned that I had recently been in a bungalow. That could conceivably have been the one Donald Campbell had stayed in during his final spell at Coniston. I was intrigued by that, because she couldn't possibly have known that I had been there the previous week. But it was hardly unconditional, and it could have been interpreted any number of different ways.

Then she mentioned the names Leonard and Peter, the month of March, and news that would please me. Leonard Peter is my doctor, and I wondered if it might have something to do with the medical I was about to undertake for my hydroplane racing licence. It wasn't. The Leonard

part proved to be a red herring. But the Peter bit wasn't. I saw Marjorie on a Tuesday. She had been convinced that whatever relevance Leonard or Peter had, it was to do with something that was worrying me, something I wanted. At the end of that week, on the Friday, I received a phone call. It was Peter Collins, one of my closest friends and at that time the managing director of Team Lotus. Moreover, a man whose sister Chris claims to have had psychic conversations with his former boss and Team Lotus founder Colin Chapman. PC wanted to know if I was interested in writing daily press releases for Team Lotus at each Grand Prix. It was a timely offer that eased some financial worries, and an honour given my regard for the team's heritage and aspirations. The job would start in March ...

The other odd experience came, fittingly enough, at Coniston. Each January the Speed Record Club meets in the village in commemoration of Campbell's death. It's a chance to see old faces, meet some new ones, and to share record-breaking stories and swap memorabilia in a glorious setting and a friendly atmosphere. In 1994, I stayed as usual with Tony and Elizabeth Robinson at the Coniston Lodge Hotel, and, as tends to be my habit, I retired late to bed after an evening of camaraderie at the Sun. I turned in around one in the morning but rose early. I love to drive around Coniston in the very early hours, although on this occasion my six o'clock start rather backfired as the sky steadfastly remained black until minutes before eight. More than once I ventured onto the jetty near the Bluebird Café on the western shore to marvel at the flatness of the water. It was a cold morning, born of the previous night's clear sky. Ice all over the jetty demanded care. A few lights peppered the darkness of the Grisedale Forest behind the eastern shore. Though I could see little by the moon's feeble light, I felt peacefully alone. Only the incessant yadder of the wild ducks broke the morning's stillness each time I walked out there. I found myself wondering how

similar it was to another 4 January so many years ago. The third time I drove down there, the light was just beginning to reveal Coniston in its mirror-calm beauty. I sat in the car and played Andrew Wintersgill's wonderful 'Elegy to Campbell' tape as my own little tribute. Watched a robin so tame that it damn near hopped in through the open window.

Each of the three times that I walked from the car to the jetty and back I was struck by a smell of paint. It was strong enough for me to know that I hadn't imagined it, yet initially faint enough not to be all-pervading. The first time I thought little of it. The second, I subconsciously took care to avoid stepping in anything and treading it into the car. I even checked that I hadn't. The third time it finally struck me consciously as being downright odd. There was no sign whatsoever of any spillage. No discarded cans. The Bluebird Café had not been redecorated recently. The boatyard was surely too far away to matter. Yet the smell was now definite enough.

Later that day, I collared Carolynn Seggie, an ardent believer in the paranormal, who had brought along for me that weekend some photocopies of newspaper features about Campbell and his interest in psychic phenomena. She had absolutely no idea what had happened by the lake, nor of the context, when I asked her what, if anything, a smell of paint meant in the psychic world. 'It upsets me sometimes,' she said straight away, 'how strong the smell can be for me. In the psychic context it means that somebody is trying to pass on a message, trying to communicate.'

Well, who knows? I can't explain it.

Donald Campbell has been without question the greatest influence on my life, consciously and subconsciously. Some may simply view this book as an unconditional tribute to him, but I promised myself from the start that it would be warts and all. There are warts here, but there are no

skeletons in the cupboard, simply because there were none to find. Much has been made of Campbell's infidelity, but he was always open about it, especially with his last wife Tonia, who admits that she herself was far from blameless. And of his fears ... what man would not have been apprehensive about such a cold-blooded game, especially after the horrific accident in Bluebird CN7 at Bonneville in 1960? His record (and his records) speaks for itself.

He never did get beyond a brief draft of the book, *The Eternal Challenge*, about which he had spoken so passionately. I hope this may be the next best thing.

David Tremayne
Harrow and Stapleton,
October 2003

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THE LAST THROW OF THE DICE

Winter 1966

'You look over there and you can see another mountain, the real mountain, and you are going for it, boy. And what hurts, what really hurts, is when you come to the last one and you go down the other side.'

DONALD CAMPBELL TO JOURNALIST GEOFFREY MATHER, CONISTON WATER, DECEMBER 1966

AS DONALD CAMPBELL'S life moved into its final full year in 1966, he was torn by doubt. Should he carry on with the project to design a rocket car, not just to return the land speed record to Britain but to go supersonic? Should he make another attempt with the venerable Bluebird K7 hydroplane with which he had set his seven water speed records? Have a crack at the 300mph mark? Or was it time to quit a dangerous profession while he was still young enough to enjoy a more peaceful existence? He had, after all, planned precisely that six years earlier, voicing his intention to quit should he reach the land speed barrier of 400mph at Bonneville.

The 1960s were largely unkind to him. He had been the toast of the 1950s, a glamorous young knight on a blue charger doing dangerous and daring deeds for Queen and country at a time when the post-war world was still

fascinated by such things. His exploits with his Bluebird K7 speedboat had made him a household name. He was a celebrity. But the 1960s had begun with a spectacular crash at more than 300mph in the Bluebird CN7 car on the Bonneville Salt Flats in America, where his father Sir Malcolm had broken that very barrier a quarter of a century before. Then his subsequent attempts in Australia with a rebuilt Bluebird had been washed out. Eventually he reached 403.1mph to break the official land speed record, but when success finally came, after an abnormally brave effort in nightmare conditions, it was qualified. Time, ill fortune and an American hot-rodder called Craig Breedlove had overtaken his project.

He had considered settling in Australia. After the land record, during a demonstration run down King William Street in Adelaide, Australia had given him the sort of ticker-tape welcome his own country had never even considered. Later, on the last day of 1964 on an Australian lake, he had broken his own water speed record too, becoming the only man in history to break both records in the same year. It was the apogee of his career.

Quitting was anathema to a charismatic man who had spent his childhood indulging in the sort of scrapes that induce wrath in parents and give them white hairs, his adult years chasing the elusive Blue Bird of happiness on the dark waters of a cold lake or across the mesmerizing white glare of a lonely salt flat. But suddenly Campbell had become less sure of himself and his place in things. Australia had given him his finest hour, but he was still desperate to lay to rest the ghosts of Bonneville, and to wipe away the accusations that his desperate triumph at Lake Eyre had somehow fallen short. He wanted, too, to redress the inescapable fact that his Bluebird car had become a white elephant. It was a 1950s project that had played by the rules but had overrun, for a variety of reasons, into the 1960s. There it had been overtaken by a

bunch of American speed merchants who turned their noses up at regulations which demanded that a car should drive through its wheels. Even before Campbell had achieved his 403.1mph on the treacherous surface of Lake Eyre, Breedlove had done 407.45mph, literally blown along on his wheels by a pure jet engine. And he had done it at Bonneville. Even before its desperate moment of triumph, Bluebird, the car to end all cars, was obsolete. Now Campbell passionately wanted the chance to play the Americans at their own game, to build his own jet-powered projectile.

But times had changed. He could not shake off his own self-made mask. He remained the pin-striped Establishment figure with *The Voice*. The plummy, perfect vowels, the deliberate, clipped inflections. The carefully combed-back hair. He was almost a Churchillian caricature to a new generation interested only in escaping such things. New raiders who basked in the glory of speed, such as Breedlove, wore their hair like the hippies with whom the younger generation more readily identified. They preferred to speak the hip argot of the new breed of role models. In appearance, at any rate, the two cultures of record breaker were as different as champagne and chardonnay. The real Donald Campbell was in reality Craig Breedlove's kindred spirit, and had practised his own philosophy of free love long before it became the mantra of the sixties, but the new teens and twentysomethings freshly weaned on the Beatles and the Rolling Stones weren't about to waste time looking beneath a middle-aged man's apparently fuddy-duddy external appearance.

It might have been the right time to stop, for though Lake Eyre was a qualified victory, the subsequent water record at Lake Dumbleyung at the end of 1964 was a brilliant triumph against the odds. Proof that he really was a speedking. But there was something else old-fashioned about a man who drove Bentleys, Jaguars and Aston

Martins and who usually looked more like a merchant banker than the fastest man in the world on water. He was intensely patriotic. He believed, so intrinsically that he never even considered questioning the belief, that a country's virility could be measured by the willingness of its inhabitants to push frontiers. He admired the Scotts and the Shackletons that Britain had spawned, just as he admired the men whose explorations had been of a different nature, airmen such as John Boothman and Sidney Webster, or racing drivers and record breakers such as Sir Henry Segrave and John Cobb. And, of course, the most prolific of that genre, his own father, Sir Malcolm.

Record breaking was the family tradition. The wire in the blood. It was what he did. It was what he saw himself doing whenever he considered his self-image. Donald Campbell, speedking. 'Speed is my life,' he once said. No four words better summarized his *raison d'être*.

So he vacillated. He ought to have stopped, but he couldn't. Something inside kept prodding him forward.

There was talk of dragging CN7 out of mothballs and getting it to run again in the hope of achieving the 500mph for which it had been designed, but it didn't take the American jetcars long to shatter that milestone too. So he talked instead of a new boat to do the 300. But what he really wanted to do was the supersonic record car - until press reaction to it in 1965 proved so feeble that for perhaps the first time in his life he became genuinely demoralized. Still, speaking of the Bluebird legacy, he once wrote:

The name passed from one car to another, from track racing to world speed records, from land to water, from father to son. In the passage of time, as world record succeeded world record, each became just one more milestone of human progress, a single word in the book of human endeavour. A book, perhaps,

without an end. A book in which every man has something to write, of his struggles, successes and failures on his ascent of the mountain of progress. But each can only go so far since the mountain has no summit, for it leads to the stars. It has to be climbed, for man cannot regress; he may pause momentarily, but there is no going back on the path of life.

Early in 1966 he went on a trip to America, and returned to Britain refreshed. Exploration was still big news in the United States, where man was reaching for the moon. There was none of the apathy he had encountered in Britain. The idea of someone wanting to strap himself into a landbound rocket to become the first man at ground level to blast along faster than the speed of sound was still cool. Something magical and worthwhile. That naive enthusiasm kickstarted his own once again. It was so devoid of the youthful cynicism of Carnaby Street, or the boardrooms of a jaded British industry fatigued after the prolonged encounter with Bluebird CN7. It was precisely the antidote he needed.

So he was not going to stop. He now understood that he had just been pausing on his ascent of that mountain of progress. He was not going to give up, or let the apathy drag him down into the oblivion he so detested and feared. By his own code of classification, he was a runner. And runners ran. So he would carry on running, and to hell with those who did not want to come along for the ride.

A new boat was out of the question, not just because of the timescale but because he could no longer afford to have one designed and built, as he had with Bluebird K7 back in 1953. But with a more powerful engine he believed that the old warhorse had one last great run in it, so he set about making plans accordingly. Two American firms had indicated their interest in paying him worthwhile bonuses if he could deliver a 300mph water speed record by the end

of the year. He never identified them, but the bonuses would help to generate support for the all-important supersonic car.

When Donald Campbell had set out on what he liked to call 'this rather stony path' back in 1949, using his father's old Bluebird K4 boat, it had been just him, his faithful companion Leo Villa, and a small but dedicated team. They had toiled on with their backs against the wall, and with the thousand-yard stares of men with distant horizons as their target. Now the wheel had come full circle and they would be a tight little team once again. There was none of the big-budget backing and support of the past from publicity-hungry fuel companies such as Mobil, BP or Ampol. He would have one last daring throw of the dice, one final push to break the 300mph barrier, with the old hydroplane that had served him so well. Together they would recapture the old glories at Coniston. 'Who says Campbell is old hat?' he demanded to know.

But not everyone shared his fresh enthusiasm. Some were worried about Bluebird's age, not the least among them Leo Villa. 'You can't put new wine in old bottles,' the old man grumbled. But Campbell and designer Ken Norris were satisfied that the twelve-year-old boat was still up to the task despite the rigours of its numerous record attacks and a long tour of Australia. 'The only way to beat the Americans, who are spending thousands of dollars trying to break our record,' Campbell said, 'is to bump it beyond their reach.'

There was much scepticism about the American challenge. To some it was merely a figment of Campbell's imagination, something convenient he had dreamed up in jingoistic self-justification. But the Americans *were* coming. There was no doubt about that. Even a modicum of basic research would have confirmed it. In 1958, the famed American hydroplane designer/builder Les Staudacher had created a jet-engined boat perhaps presciently called the

Slug, which handled like its namesake. Equally revered rival Ted Jones envisaged a Bluebird-like jet craft shortly afterwards. But though neither project amounted to much, the Tempo Alcoa challenger created for bandleader and race boat driver Guy Lombardo by Staudacher in 1959 was much more serious. Lombardo had aspired to the record back in 1949, and his plans for Aluminum First had been the spark that ignited Donald Campbell's fire and determination to protect his father's mark set in 1939. Testing had shown Tempo Alcoa to have clear 300mph potential, even though Staudacher damaged it in an incident at Pyramid Lake in Nevada. But in 1960, the boat exploded when a sponson broke during further testing under remote control on the Salton Sea near Los Angeles. Still Staudacher would not relent. The Miss Stars & Stripes II that he built for industrialist Robert Beverley Evans in 1963 showed even greater potential, hitting 285mph, until a mishap on Lake Hubbard left the boat severely damaged and Staudacher hospitalized with extensive injuries.

Still Campbell could not rest on his laurels. American challengers just kept on coming. That same year, Californian Lee Taylor commissioned well-known boatbuilder Rich Hallett to create a record contender around a Westinghouse jet motor with far greater power than Bluebird's Metropolitan-Vickers Beryl engine. Taylor, like Staudacher, was lucky to survive an accident after crashing his Harvey Aluminum Hustler on Lake Havasu on the California/Arizona border in April 1964. He spent eighteen months learning how to walk and talk again, then went back on the water to build up to a fresh attempt. Like Campbell, Taylor was not a man who gave up.

As if all that was not enough to have any record holder looking anxiously over his shoulder, two land speed record gunslingers were also considering aquatic attempts. In 1964 and 1965, Craig Breedlove and Art Arfons had played a high-speed game of Russian roulette on the Bonneville

Salt Flats; the victim was the land speed record as they boosted it in stages from 413mph to 600mph. Both had survived terrifying high-speed accidents along the way that reminded Campbell of his own upset at Bonneville. Now Breedlove planned his twin-engined Aquamerica, Arfons another Green Monster based on his Cyclops jetcar mounted atop two aluminium pontoons. Neither was a man to dismiss lightly, however unorthodox or bizarre their concepts.

So if Donald Campbell had decided that he was not going gentle into that good night, he had only one realistic option: breaking 300mph on the water. Through his old friend Bill Coley, who had given him invaluable moral support and the seed capital to finance the initial design of K7 back in 1953, he was able to buy a complete Folland Gnat trainer aircraft. Stories of him paying £10,000 (£112,600 at today's values) were laughably wide of the mark, given the parlous state of his finances; he actually paid £200 (£2,250). The Gnat came complete with a Bristol-Siddeley Orpheus turbojet engine, capable of generating 4,800lb of thrust. This was comfortably more than the Beryl he had used for all of his previous runs, and the engine was lighter too. Campbell once again engaged Norris Brothers to design the installation, and to incorporate the tail fin from the Gnat to enhance Bluebird's directional stability.

He had no problem deflecting the comments of the doubters:

Life is to be lived, lived to the full. We all live close to death or failure, or some kind of disaster. It could be a disaster of life, or status, or just any small personal ambition. It is a question of sphere.

So what is the point? The point is this, chum. There are in this life the starters, the runners and the critics.

Everyone can do something splendid, or heroic, or even just worthwhile and exciting. The war showed that. Folk who thought they weren't cut out for heroes found that they were doing fantastic things.

Well, all folk are starters. Some get a better start than others. But most get stuck with the idea that they are ordinary folk - the nine-to-fivers. The runners are those who try. I am one of the runners.

Then there are the critics. I don't know if they are in the majority or not nowadays.¹

In the middle of 1966 he moved from his home, Roundwood, to Prior's Ford, in Horley, and by November he was ready to go back to Coniston Water, scene of so many of the heartaches and triumphs that lay in his golden past. Typically, he had dismissed Villa's misgivings about the new project with his own brand of bonhomie and gung-ho enthusiasm, and pushed forward with his customary determination and courage. But as winter wrapped its cold embrace around the little Bluebird team, the omens multiplied and gripped them as surely as Sir Ernest Shackleton's Endurance had so famously become trapped in the ice half a century before. There were technical problems. Then, when they appeared to be solved, the weather gods scowled. Campbell found himself becalmed and at bay again, an animal caught haplessly in a trap of its own making. Perhaps the mantle had been preordained for him. He worried about his dwindling finances, and became more edgy in the face of continual press criticism. There was little tolerance for the ongoing failure, despite the mechanical woes and inclement weather that so obviously kept him from his goal.

Record breaking makes a poor spectator sport for those not directly involved, especially when they understand little or nothing of it. Ennui can be as destructive a visitor as rain and high wind. Coniston's chill exacerbated the

problems. The pressure gradually became intolerable as the enforced inactive days drew out, until the scene was finally set for the disaster that would elevate Campbell to the pantheon. 'The game can be hell,' Campbell admitted:

One often wonders how Hillary might have felt. They have climbed the highest mountain there is, and that's it. In my life, the top at the moment is 300mph. Life is a succession of these mountains. All of us are struggling up and, oh God, isn't it a swine? You get there and you look around and it's great. And you just have time to breathe before you start getting everything in perspective. Then you realize it wasn't a mountain after all. It was a molehill. You look over there and you can see another mountain, the real mountain, and you are going for it, boy. And what hurts, what *really* hurts, is when you come to the last one and you go down the other side.²

But there would be no last peak on Donald Campbell's journey into legend. Not for him the lonely vigil he had described atop a final summit. Nor the horrible awareness that his greatest achievements lay in his past.

What drove him on in the face of such inhuman and intolerable odds? What train of cruel circumstances ultimately pushed a lonely, beleaguered, frightened yet determined man to take the final chance that cost him his life? To understand the complex and deep-rooted forces that took him to the brink of disaster at Coniston Water in that harsh winter of 1966/67, we have to go back. A long way back. For it is impossible to understand Donald Campbell without knowing also the character and achievements of the man who so profoundly influenced his life. One of the greatest record breakers of them all. His illustrious father, Sir Malcolm Campbell.

2

THE BIRTH OF THE SHADOW

1885 to 1921

'Fined ten shillings, and let that be a lesson to you not to go so fast in future, Malcolm Campbell.'

MAGISTRATE TO SPEEDING CYCLIST MALCOLM CAMPBELL, 1897

IT WAS TYPICAL of Malcolm Donald Campbell that when he decided to change the colour of his racing cars in search of better luck, the thought occurred to him late at night when the shops were closed; he still went out, located one in Kingston, and knocked up the shopkeeper so he could obtain the paint he wanted immediately.

Photographic images capture the essence of the man: small and wiry, with the mien of a lightweight pugilist; thin brown hair neatly brushed flat, oiled and parted in the centre; eyes blue, their stare piercing and intimidating. He was charismatic, but those eyes were the signal that he was not one to let circumstance dictate to him. They could see right through you, as if he could look into your soul and see what lay there.

Campbell knew what he wanted in life. And he would not be thwarted when he set his mind on something. That day in 1912, his decision to change the colour of his car could never have been seen as the momentous event it became.

He sought only better luck, but he would be starting the most famous dynasty in motorsport.

A friend had advised him to see a new opera that had opened in London, written by the celebrated Maurice Maeterlinck. It was called *The Blue Bird*. Campbell enjoyed it, and was feeling benign as he drove home to Sundridge Park in Bromley. And then it suddenly occurred to him. *The Blue Bird* was a play about the pursuit of happiness, synonymous with hope and success. It was the perfect name at a time when the cars that raced at Brooklands were habitually given colourful sobriquets. Count Louis Zborowski had his Chitty Bang Bangs, Parry Thomas his Babs; even more exotic were Hoieh Wayarych Giontoo or Winnie Praps Praps. Campbell's cars were called Flapper, after a partner at Lloyd's who owned and bred racehorses advised him to place his bets on one of his stock bearing that name. It also appealed because he liked to pull the pigtails of his flapper cousins. But both horse and car failed to win with the name.

Campbell followed through his spur-of-the-moment idea with immediate action. He was due to race at Brooklands later that day, and once he had an idea in his head he would pursue it relentlessly. It was gone midnight, but he found an oil chandler and hammered on his door until the bewildered man opened up and sold him all the pale-blue paint, brushes and turpentine he had. In the small hours, Campbell's Flapper III was transformed, and the first Blue Bird was born. He finished the job at four o'clock and the paint was still wet in places when he lined up for his first race.

When Malcolm Campbell saw something he wanted, he pursued it with a determination and speed that bordered on obsession.

Malcolm Donald Campbell was born in Chislehurst on 11 March 1885 to William and Ada Campbell. Sister Freda was

five years old. The family came from Tain, Scotland, where clansmen had fought for Mary Queen of Scots, and for Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden. In 1745, one Campbell declared himself for the 'Young Pretender', and his son David, born in 1730, is the first of Malcolm Campbell's ancestors it is possible to trace with authority. David Campbell married Isabella MacGregor, and their son Andrew was the first to move down to London where he set up as a diamond merchant. He handed the business on to his son Joseph when he retired in 1838, and Joseph later passed it on to one of his four sons, another Andrew, who married Jane Mosley from Wolverhampton. Andrew and Jane Campbell had two sons, Andrew and William, the latter born in Chislehurst in 1845. He continued to work in the diamond business, and his success in expanding the enterprise into other spheres saw him leave an estate worth £250,000 (some £10 million today) when he died in 1920.

Donald Campbell liked to describe his grandfather William as 'an astute, industrious man with a broad sense of humour and a kindly disposition', and his grandmother Ada as 'a fabulously beautiful woman, insular, narrow-minded and not a little selfish'. They believed in discipline. Given his ancestry, it was perhaps not surprising that William's word was law in his house, and he was a firm believer in the adage that sparing the rod spoiled the child.

Malcolm grew up self-sufficient and confident. He was sent to a preparatory school in Guildford, where he taught himself to box as a defence against bullying. 'The gruesome stories he used to recount about the floggings, burnings and brandings made the place sound more akin to *Oliver Twist*,' Donald wrote. Later, Malcolm went to Uppingham public school in Rutland, near Grantham, where he got by without ever distinguishing himself as a scholar. His reports always provoked paternal wrath. On the one occasion that he won an award, and returned home