

Dan van der Vat obituary

Journalist who investigated a scuttled First World War fleet

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Dan van der Vat's natural curiosity led to the book *The Grand Scuttle: The Sinking of the German Fleet at Scapa Flow in 1919* ALAMY

One of the most successful of Dan van der Vat's prolific military histories was the result of a botched journalistic assignment. Over the course of his career in newspapers he was sent to cover the seal cull in the Orkney Islands by three separate publications — *The Journal*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Times*.

The first two culls were cancelled because of bad weather and a broken boat. The third was postponed by a Greenpeace protest. A final trip led him not only to joke that he had "claim to be the most successful talisman of the British seal population", but also that he had been left with nothing much to report and time on his hands in a remarkably beautiful spot.

When he saw that half of Fleet Street had signed the visitors' book at the splendid St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, he ventured farther afield. He found himself driving up to Scapa Flow and exploring on land and by boat what he called "the marine garage of the British fleet" during the world wars. He also learnt that the German fleet had been "parked" there at the end of the First World War and that it was sunk in 1919, which British records had preferred to say little about.

Wandering the nearby Stromness Museum he found a few relics of the German ships and was sufficiently interested to visit the local library to ask what books had been written on the subject. Among numerous histories of Orkney there was no full account. When shortly afterwards *The Times* temporarily closed down publication in 1978, he began his research.

A stickler for detail, he claimed that his books contained no "faction" — all quotations were documented. His Scapa Flow book took him to Freiburg, where he found files relating to the lost fleet that if stacked would have been two metres high. British records at Kew were suspiciously sanitised and slim. He also spoke to German naval veterans and was given a personal written account in German. The resulting book, *The Grand Scuttle: The Sinking of the German Fleet at Scapa Flow in 1919*, was republished multiple times.

Daniel Francis Jeroen van der Vat was born in Alkmaar, in the northern Netherlands — or as he liked to say, "16ft below sea level". He was the son of Daan, a Dutch journalist and author, and an English mother, Kathleen (née Devanney). The Nazi occupation began when he was little more than six months old.

The house next to his family home was taken over by the SS, who stacked bikes they stole from the locals against the chicken-wire fence. "As any other small boy would, I was idly pushing and pulling the fence when the bikes fell over," he later wrote. "I fled what I remember as a great distance (it turned to be as far as a neighbour's house round the corner)." As a result he had an early interest in Germany and military history, and later persuaded his mother to write down her wartime recollections, which he published as *Kathleen's War* in 2011.

In 1945 the family moved to London. He went to the Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School in Holland Park and then to St Cuthbert's Society, Durham, from where he graduated in classics in 1960. He started in journalism with *The Journal in Newcastle*, and then the *Daily Mail* in Manchester. In 1965 he was recruited by *The Sunday Times*, transferring two years later to *The Times* to become a foreign correspondent.

At Durham he met Chris Ellis and they married in 1962 without telling their parents — his being strongly Catholic and hers Protestant. They had two daughters: Karen, a facilities manager for property in London; and Sara, a freelance events and web designer based in the Scottish Borders. Chris, who worked as a classics teacher, died in 2013.

When he opened *The Times's* bureau in South Africa in 1969, he at once clashed with the apartheid government. He was jailed in Lusaka for a short period after being sent to Zambia to cover a conference, and joked that he was "making the news instead of writing it". In a letter to friends he wrote: "They say you aren't really a proper foreign correspondent if you haven't been in the nick at least once, preferably in some god-forsaken hole with a ridiculously uncomfortable climate." He returned home with lice and was later proud to be described as a "pernicious liberal".

In 1972 he moved to Germany to become bureau chief in Bonn. His fluent German won him respect from politicians. As someone who believed in the ideal of European unity, he was deeply upset with Brexit, although he fully understood the shortcomings of the EU. Five years later he moved back to London as a features writer, but fell out of favour when Rupert Murdoch's News International bought *The Times* in 1981. He joked of being "unable to speak Australian".

He eventually moved to *The Guardian* as chief foreign leader writer. Having written four histories in his spare time he left in 1988 to become a full-time author. His publisher had said that he should give up his day job and rectified the situation when Van der Vat said that there was not enough money on the table for him to do so.

A book about Pearl Harbor became a best seller and gave him a chance to visit Hawaii. He also travelled around East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He made headlines when he was brought in to provide historical rigour by co-authoring a book called *The Riddle of the Titanic*, which claimed that the ship never sank, but he distanced himself from some of the wilder claims.

In 1976 he and his wife bought a house on Eel Pie Island, an islet on the Thames barely 500m long that was a gig spot for the Who and the Rolling Stones. The house was the site of the burnt-down, 19th-century Eel Pie Hotel, later a venue for rock bands; his children used to tell people that the Stones had played in their living room. He became chair of the Eel Pie Association and co-wrote a book on the area's history. He enjoyed travelling, including a trip to Australia, where he was dismayed by the fashion for untidy beards, and organising a group of friends to go to the Proms every year.

Having written *The Dardanelles Disaster* in 2010 he joined the Gallipoli & Dardanelles International committee — and marched with veterans past the cenotaph on November 11, 2018, a century after the end of the First World War.

Dan van der Vat, journalist and

author, was born on October 28, 1939. He died of natural causes on May 9, 2019, aged 79