Patrick O'Brian

Patrick O'Brian, CBE (12 December 1914 - 2 January 2000), born Richard Patrick Russ, was an English novelist and translator, best known for his Aubrey-Maturin series of sea novels set in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, and centred on the friendship of the English naval captain Jack Aubrey and the Irish-Catalan physician Stephen Maturin. The 20-novel series, the first of which is Master and Commander, is known for its well-researched and highly detailed portrayal of early 19th-century life, as well as its authentic and evocative language. A partially finished 21st novel in the series was published posthumously containing facing pages of handwriting and typescript.

O'Brian wrote a number of other novels and short stories, most of which were published before his success with the Aubrey-Maturin series. He also translated works from French to English, and wrote two biographies.

His major success as a writer came late in life, when the Aubrey-Maturin series caught the eye of an American publisher. The series drew more readers and favourable reviews when the author was in his seventies. Near the end of his life, and in the same year he lost his beloved wife, British media revealed details of O'Brien's early life, first marriage, and post-war change of name, causing distress to the very private author and to many of his readers at that time.

Personal life and privacy

Childhood, early career and marriages

O'Brian was born Richard Patrick Russ, in Chalfont St. Peter, Buckinghamshire, to Charles Russ, an English physician of German descent, and Jessie Russ (née Goddard), an English woman of Irish descent. The eighth of nine children, O'Brien lost his mother at the age of four, and his biographers describe a fairly isolated childhood, limited by poverty, with sporadic schooling and long intervals at home with his father and stepmother Zoe Center in Lewes, East Sussex. His literary career began in his childhood with the publishing of his earliest works, including several short stories, the book 'Hussein, An Entertainment', and the short story collection 'Beasts Royal', the latter two brought him considerable critical praise especially considering his youth. He published his first novel at age 15, 'Caesar: The Life Story of a Panda Leopard', with help from his father.

In 1934, he underwent a brief period of pilot training with the Royal Air Force, but this was not successful, and he left the RAF. Prior to that, his application to the Royal Navy had been rejected on health grounds. In 1935, he was living in London, where he married his first wife, Elizabeth Jones, in 1936. They had two children. The second was a daughter who suffered from spina bifida; she died in 1942, aged three, in a country village in Sussex. When the child died, O'Brien had already returned to London, where he worked throughout the war.

The details of his work during the Second World War are murky. He worked as an ambulance driver, and he stated that he worked in intelligence. (Political Intelligence Department (PID). Sean King has claimed that O'Brien was actively involved in intelligence work and perhaps special operations overseas during the war. Indeed, despite his usual extreme reticence about his past, O'Brien wrote in an essay, 'Black, Choleric and Married?', included in the book Patrick O'Brien: Critical Appreciations and a Bibliography (1994) that: 'Some time after the Blitz had died away I joined one of those intelligence organisations that flourished during the War, perpetually changing their initials and competing with one another. Our work had to do with France, and more than that I shall not say, since disclosing methods and stratagems that have deceived the enemy once and that may deceive him again seems to me foolish. After the war we retired to Wales (I say we because my wife and I had driven ambulances and served in intelligence together) where we lived for a while in a high Welsh-speaking valley...' which confirms in first person the intelligence connection as well as introducing his wife Mary Wicksteed Tolstoy as a co-worker and fellow intelligence operative. Nikolai Tolstoy, stepson through O'Brien's marriage to Mary Tolstoy, disputes this account, adding that O'Brien worked as a volunteer ambulance driver during the Blitz. Doing this work, he met Mary, the separated wife of Russian-born nobleman and lawyer Count Dimitri Tolstoy. They lived together through the latter part of the war, and after both were divorced from their previous spouses, they married in July 1945. The following month he changed his name by deed poll to Patrick O'Brien.

Sailing experience

As background to his later sea-going novels, O'Brien did claim to have had limited experience on a square-rigged sailing vessel, as described within his previously-quoted 1994 essay:

The disease that racked my bosom every now and then did not much affect my strength and when it left me in peace (for there were long remissions) sea-air and sea-voyages were recommended. An uncle had a two-ton sloop and several friends had boats, which was fine, but what was even better was that my particular friend Edward, who shared a tutor with me, had a cousin who possessed an ocean-going yacht, a converted square-rigged merchantman, that he used to crew with undergraduates and fair-sized boys, together with some real seamen, and sail far off into the Atlantic. The young are wonderfully resilient, and although I never became much of a topman, after a while I could handle, reef and steer without disgrace, which allowed more ambitious sailing later on.

However, in 1995, venture capitalist Thomas Perkins offered O'Brien a two-week cruise aboard his then sailing yacht, a 154 ft ketch. In an article about the experience written after O'Brien's death, Perkins commented that: ‘...his knowledge of the practical aspects of sailing seemed, amazingly, almost nil’ and ‘...he seemed to have no feeling for the wind and the course, and frequently I had to intervene to prevent a full standing gybe. I began to suspect that his autobiographical references to his months at sea as a youth were fanciful.’

Life after the Second World War

Between 1946 and 1949 the O'Brians lived in Cwm Croesor, a remote valley in north Wales, where they initially rented a cottage from Clough Williams-Ellis. O'Brien pursued his interest in natural history; he fished, went birdwatching, and followed the local hunt. During this time they lived on Mary O'Brien's small income and the limited earnings from O'Brien's writings.

In 1949 O'Brien and Mary moved to Collioure, a Catalan town in southern France. He and Mary remained together in Collioure until her death in 1998. Mary's love and support were critical to O'Brien throughout his career. She worked with him in the British Library in the 1940s as he collected source material for his anthology A Book of Voyages, which became the first book to bear his new name – the book was among his favourites, because of this close collaboration. The death of his wife in March 1998 was a tremendous blow to O'Brien. In the last two years of his life, particularly once the details of his early life were revealed to the world, he was a ‘lonely, tortured, and at the last possibly paranoid figure.’

He continued to work on his naval novels until his death in early 2000. He spent the winter of 1998-1999 at Trinity College, Dublin, and died there on 2 January 2000.

Media exposure and controversy in his final years

O'Brien protected his privacy fiercely and was usually reluctant to reveal any details about his private life or past, preferring to include no biographical details on his book jackets and supplying only a minimum of personal information when pressed to do so. For many years reviewers and journalists presumed he was Irish, and he took no steps to correct the impression.
One interviewer described the man in his late seventies as "a compact, austere gentleman... his pale, watchful eyes are clear and alert." He is polite, formal, and erudite in conversation, an erudition that Horowitz said could be intimidating. He learned from those who worked with O'Brien that the erudition did not go unnoticed, while they remained friends. "Richard Ollard, a naval historian, calls this particular habit "blowing people out of the game." Ollard, who edited the early Aubrey/Maturin Novels, urged O'Brien to tone down the most obscure allusions, which O'Brien deflected direct inquiries about his private life, and when asked why he moved to the south of France after World War II, he stops and fixes his interrogator with a cold stare. "That seems to be getting rather close to a personal question," he says softly, walking on.

In 1998, a BBC documentary and an exposed in The Daily Telegraph made public the facts of his ancestry, original name and first marriage, provoking considerable critical media comment. In his biography of O'Brien, Nikolai Tolstoy claims to give a more accurate and balanced account of his late stepfather's character, actions and motives, particularly in respect of his first marriage and family. O'Brien returned to writing after the war, when he moved to rural Wales. His non-fiction anthology A Book of Voyages (1947) attracted little attention. A collection of short stories, The Last Pool, was published in 1950 and was more widely and favourably reviewed, although sales were low. The countryside and people around his village in Wales provided inspiration for many of his later novels. In September 1933, O'Brien married Mary Verity, who was then a nineteen-year-old student at Oxford University. O'Brian claimed that he wrote "like a Christian, with ink and quill"; Mary was his first reader and typed his manuscripts "pretty" for the publisher. O'Brien wrote all of his books and stories by hand, shunning both typewriter and word processor. The handwritten manuscripts for 18 of the Aubrey-Maturin novels have been acquired by the Library of Virginia.

In 1995 he was awarded the inaugural Heywood Hill Literary Prize for his lifetime's writings. In his acceptance speech in July 1995, O'Brien, then age 80, said it was the first literary prize of his adult life, in the amount of 10,000 pounds. He received a CBE in 1997. Trinity College Dublin awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1997. Trinity College Dublin awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1997. In 1998, a BBC documentary and an exposed in The Daily Telegraph made public the facts of his ancestry, original name and first marriage, provoking considerable critical media comment. In his biography of O'Brien, Nikolai Tolstoy claims to give a more accurate and balanced account of his late stepfather's character, actions and motives, particularly in respect of his first marriage and family. O'Brien returned to writing after the war, when he moved to rural Wales. His non-fiction anthology A Book of Voyages (1947) attracted little attention. A collection of short stories, The Last Pool, was published in 1950 and was more widely and favourably reviewed, although sales were low. The countryside and people around his village in Wales provided inspiration for many of his later novels. In September 1933, O'Brien married Mary Verity, who was then a nineteen-year-old student at Oxford University. O'Brian claimed that he wrote "like a Christian, with ink and quill"; Mary was his first reader and typed his manuscripts "pretty" for the publisher. O'Brien wrote all of his books and stories by hand, shunning both typewriter and word processor. The handwritten manuscripts for 18 of the Aubrey-Maturin novels have been acquired by the Library of Virginia.

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Nikolai Tolstoy also possesses an extensive collection of O'Brian manuscript material, including the second half of Hussein, several short stories, much of the reportedly "lost" book on Bestiaries, letters, diaries, journals, notes, poems, book reviews, and several unpublished short stories (Tolstoy, various pages).

Bibliography

**Aubrey-Maturin series**
2. *Post Captain* (1972)
3. *HMS Surprise* (1973)
5. *Desolation Island* (1978)

**Fiction (non-serial)**
- *Caesar* (1930, his first book, which led him to be often labelled by critics as the 'boy-Thoreau')
- *Wang Khan of the Elephants* (1932)
- *Hussein. An Entertainment* (1938)
- *Testimonies* (1952) (Three Bear Witness in the UK)
- *The Catalans* (1953) (The Frozen Flame in the UK)
- *The Road to Samarcand* (1954)
- *The Unknown Shore* (1959)
- *Richard Temple* (1962)

**Short story collections**
- *Beasts Royal* (1934)
- *The Last Pool and Other Stories* (1950)
- *The Walker and Other Stories* (1955)
- *Lying in the Sun and Other Stories* (1956)
- *Collected Short Stories* (1994; The Rendezvous and Other Stories in the US)

**Non-fiction**

**English translations of other authors' works**
- *Banco: The further adventures of Papillon* by Henri Charrière, New York, William Morrow (1973)
- Works by Simone de Beauvoir

**Published biographies of O'Brian**
Since his death, there have been two biographies published, though the first was well advanced when he died. The second is the first volume of a planned two-volume biography by O'Brian's stepson.

Dean H King's life of O'Brian, *Patrick O'Brian: A Life Revealed* was the first biography to document O'Brian's early life under his original name.

In November 2004, Nikolai Tolstoy published *Patrick O'Brian: The Making of the Novelist*, the first volume in a two-part biography of O'Brian using material from the Russ and Tolstoy families and sources, including O'Brian's personal papers and library, which Tolstoy inherited on O'Brian's death.

**See also**
- *Lord Cochrane "the sea wolf"* (1775-1860)
C S Forester, (1899-1966), author of the *Horatio Hornblower* novels.

References


Sources


Also of importance when studying O'Brian's works:


External links

- [Patrick O'Brian Home Page](http://www.patrickobriannet.com) - introduction to the author and his books, by his US publisher.
- [Stephen Becker](http://www.patrickobriannet.com/obriannet recebe conjuntos de encontros de O'Brian)
- [WikiPOBia](http://www.wikipobia.org) - wiki to annotate the written works of Patrick O'Brian.
- [Patrick O'Brian Mapping Project](http://www.patrickobriannet.com/maps) - A Google Maps mashup project to map all 21 books in the Aubrey-Maturin series.
- [A Gunroom guide to Patrick O'Brian Web Resources](http://www.patrickobriannet.com/guide) - comprehensive annotated link list
- [Daisya obriani](http://www.daisyaobriani.com) - Lesser Weevil named for O'Brian
- [Patrick O'Brian's Telegraph obituary](http://www.telegraph.co.uk)

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- Albuquerque, New Mexico
- Anchorage, Alaska
- Atlanta, Georgia
- Arlington, Texas
- Aurora, Colorado
- Austin, Texas
- Bakersfield, California
- Baltimore, Maryland
- Baton Rouge, Louisiana
- Billings, Montana
- Birmingham, Alabama

Popular Artists
Patrick O'Brian’s Aubrey-Maturin tales are widely acknowledged to be the greatest series of historical novels ever written. To commemorate the 40th anniversary of their beginning, with Master and Commander, these evocative stories are being re-issued in paperback with smart new livery. This is the tenth book in the series. It is still the War of 1812. Patrick O’Brian takes his hero Jack Aubrey and his tetchy, sardonic friend Stephen Maturin on a voyage as fascinating as anything he has ever written. Patrick O’Brian, CBE (12 December 1914 – 2 January 2000), born Richard Patrick Russ, was an English novelist and translator, best known for his Aubrey-Maturin series of sea novels set in the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic Wars, and centred on the friendship of the English naval captain Jack Aubrey and the Irish–Catalan physician Stephen Maturin. The 20-novel series, the first of which is Master and Commander, is known for its well-researched and highly detailed portrayal of early 19th-century life.