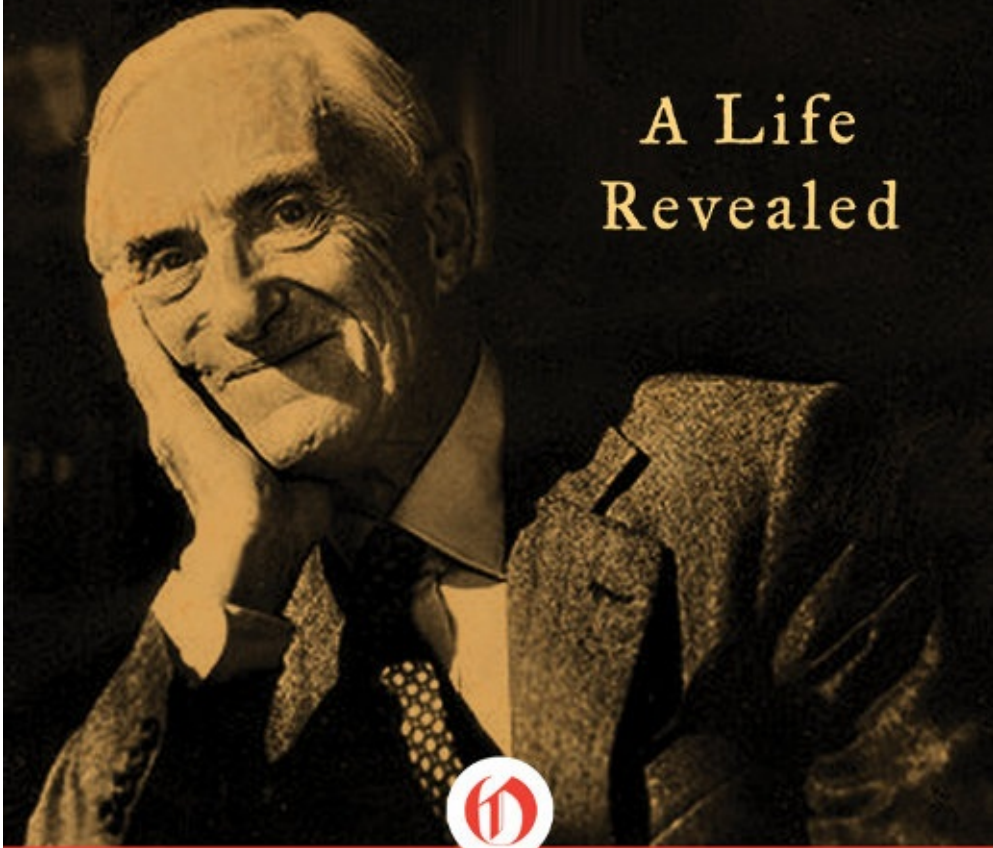


# DEAN KING

PATRICK O'BRIAN

A Life  
Revealed



# Patrick O'Brian

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## A Life



**Dean King**

O P E N  R O A D  
INTEGRATED MEDIA  
NEW YORK

*For Jessica, Hazel, Grace, Willa, Nora, and Betsey, with love*

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Patrick ... is sixteen, the son of a London doctor. He began this story when he was fourteen and finished it in March of this year. "I did it mostly in my bedroom and a little when I should have been doing homework."

—*Caesar*, 193

Patrick O'Brian was born in the West of Ireland and educated in England. During the war he drove an ambulance in London and later joined the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office. Mr. O'Brian began writing at an early age and had already produced four novels before the war, as a kind of literary exercise.

—*The Walker and Other Stories*, 193

As to the personal side, the *Spectator* for March 1st 1710 begins, "I have observed, that a Reader seldom peruses a Book with Pleasure, till he knows whether the Writer of it be a black or fair Man, of a mild or choleric Disposition, Married or a Batchelor, with other particulars of the like Nature, that conduce very much to the right understanding of an Author." To gratify this curiosity, which is so natural to a reader, we may state that Mr. O'Brian is a black man, choleric, and married.

—*Lying in the Sun*, 193

Nothing is more unjust, however common, than to charge with hypocrisy him that expresses zeal for those virtues, which he neglects to practise; since he may be sincerely convinced of the advantages of conquering his passions, without having yet obtained the victory, as a man may be confident of the advantages of a voyage, or a journey, without having courage or industry to undertake it, and may honestly recommend to others, those attempts which he neglects himself.

The interest which the corrupt part of mankind have in hardening themselves against every motive to amendment, has disposed them to give to these contradictions, when they can be produced against the cause of virtue, that weight which they will not allow them in any other case. ... In moral or religious questions alone, they determine the sentiments by the actions, and charge every man with endeavouring to impose upon the world, whose writings are not confirmed by his life. They never consider that they themselves neglect, or practise something every day, inconsistently with their own settled judgment, nor discover that the conduct of the advocates for virtue can little increase, or lessen, the obligations of their dictates; argument is to be invalidated only by argument, and is in itself of the same force, whether or not it convinces him by whom it is proposed.

—Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, no. 14, May 5, 175

When does one ever know a human being? Perhaps only after one has realized the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it. But then what one achieves is no longer knowledge, it is simply a kind of coexistence; and this too is one of the guises of love.

—Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*, 1955

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# Introduction

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WHEN AN AMERICAN AND AN ENGLISH publisher jointly commissioned Patrick O'Brian to write a naval novel in 1967, no one expected it to be a great work of literature, and certainly no one knew that the book had set in motion what would become one of the publishing phenomena of our time. The book was the commercial brainchild of an American editor who hoped to find the next C. S. Forester. A master of depicting naval battles, Forester had died the year before, leaving behind ten novels and a companion book about the exploits of Horatio Hornblower, officer of the Royal Navy. These well-written naval tales, published over the course of three decades, had captured the imagination of British schoolboys and statesmen alike—Winston Churchill included—and sold well on both sides of the Atlantic.

Based on O'Brian's previous historical naval novels, *The Golden Ocean* (1956) and *The Unknown Shore* (1959), the editor at J. B. Lippincott, a Philadelphia publishing house, felt that the fifty-three-year-old novelist, whom he believed to be Irish, was well suited to duplicate Forester's success. The editor knew he could expect an entertaining adventure story, including black squalls, weevils in the hardtack, and graphic sea battles, liberally dusted with O'Brian's sprightly humor.

What he got from O'Brian was vastly more profound.

*Master and Commander*, published in 1969, was the first volume of what would turn out to be a monumental extended novel set during the Napoleonic wars, a roman-fleuve that filled twenty volumes, currently having sold more than three million copies in twenty languages and changed the lives of countless devotees, in the way that only great books can. However, at first, this seemed an unlikely scenario; neither of the publishers that commissioned *Master and Commander* would succeed with the series. Macmillan of England rejected the manuscript out of hand (William Collins published it instead), and Lippincott, after several poorly selling sequels, also dropped the author.

Nevertheless, O'Brian toiled away on the saga of his two fictional characters—the bluff Royal Navy captain “Lucky” Jack Aubrey and his disheveled “particular friend,” the naval surgeon and political intelligence agent Stephen Maturin, whose many passions included nature, music, and opium. Each new book was anxiously awaited by a small dedicated group of British intellectuals and naval veterans. O'Brian was routinely praised by scholars for his accurate naval history and his portrayal of Regency England. They also raved about his prose, which evoked the period authentically without the woodenness of so much historical fiction. Ironically, the books suffered from their own success and verisimilitude. Critics classified them as historical novels, a lowly genre that by definition precluded them from serious attention.

But O'Brian, a serious-minded writer, knew that his work was unfairly pigeonholed. His reputation had once briefly flared in the literary firmament in the 1950s when his novel *Testimonies* received a stunning endorsement from Delmore Schwartz. “*Testimonies* makes one think of a gre



ballad or a Biblical story,” the critic wrote. “The reader, drawn forward by lyric eloquence and the story’s fascination, discovers in the end that he has encountered in a new way the sphinx and riddle of existence itself.” Schwartz placed the book above recent works by Angus Wilson, Evelyn Waugh, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway.

But O’Brian’s reputation had receded as he continued writing tortured novels and short stories. He had turned to translating to make money, doing many of Simone de Beauvoir’s books and dozens of others, including the international best-seller *Papillon*. Returning to fiction in the Aubrey-Maturin novels, he had in a sense started writing afresh, with greater distance and less anger, about his former themes—love and friendship.

“The essence of my books is about human relationships and how people treat one another,” he later told the *Financial Times*. “That seems to me what novels are for.” In fact, he made that clear at the beginning of his naval series. In *Master and Commander*, when Aubrey, newly made captain of the pint-size warship HMS *Sophie*, asks Maturin to sign on as her surgeon, Maturin responds:

“For a philosopher, a student of human nature, what could be better? The subjects of his inquiry are shut up together, unable to escape his gaze, their passions heightened by the dangers of war, the hazards of their calling, their isolation from women and their curious, but uniform, diet. And by the glow of patriotic fervour, no doubt.”—with a bow to Jack—“It is true that for some time past I have taken more interest in the cryptogams than in my fellow-men; but even so, a ship must be a most instructive theatre for an inquiring mind.” (P. 43)

By 1990, O’Brian, seventy-five and working largely in obscurity in the south of France, where he had lived for the past four decades with his second wife, Mary, had written thirteen novels in the series, in which Aubrey and Maturin circumnavigate the globe, win and lose battles and their fortunes, fall in and out of love, marry, have children and, in Aubrey’s case, numerous affairs. While Aubrey’s wife is the motherly Sophie, and Maturin’s wife, the dashing, impulsive Diana, frequently embellish the narrative, the primary fuel of the series is O’Brian’s study of the relationship between Aubrey and Maturin.

Maturin is a philosopher—cold, saturnine, secretive—a careful examiner of man and nature, and at times a shrewd operator. Aubrey is a jovial, sanguine warrior, devoted to the Royal Navy and more proud that he has twice been spoken to by Horatio Nelson, Britain’s great naval captain:

“The first time it was to say, ‘May I trouble you for the salt, sir?’—I have always said it as close as I can to his way ever since—you may have noticed it. But the second time I was trying to make my neighbour, a soldier, understand our naval tactics—weather-gage, breaking the line, and so on—and in a pause he leant over with such a smile and said, ‘Never mind manoeuvres, always go at them.’” (P. 115)

While Maturin keeps a coded journal and frequently has to decipher his mail, Aubrey lives by Nelson's dictum. He is a straight-shooter. Despite their differences, Aubrey and Maturin find common ground in their shared values (courage, loyalty, honor, and dedication to their careers), in their mutual goal—the defeat of Napoleon—and in the pleasure of each other's company. Nowhere are the two more in harmony than in the captain's cabin in the evening playing a Mozart or Boccherini duet together, Maturin on the cello and Aubrey on the violin. In *Post Captain*, the second Aubrey-Maturin novel, the two happily seek refuge from oppressive shipboard responsibilities in their music:

The cabin was filled with the opening movement of Boccherini's Corelli sonata, a glorious texture of sound, the violin sending up brilliant jets through the 'cello's involutions, and they soared up and away from the grind of pumps, the tireless barking [of a lunatic sailor], the problems of command, up, the one answering the other, joining, separating, twining, rising into their native air. (P. 236)

Naturally, each also has a selfish and a sometimes self-destructive side, particularly Maturin, who grows moody and volatile and doses himself with increasingly large amounts of laudanum. Aubrey tends to make impulsive and naïve decisions ashore, being easily duped by swindlers, gold-digging women, and political enemies. Sometimes the two friends' personalities clash. Twice they come close to duels.

Forty years after O'Brian's fleeting fame with *Testimonies*, the stage was set for a remarkable comeback. The British critic Peter Wishart had once called the intelligentsia's failure to recognize Patrick O'Brian as a literary wonder of the age "as baffling as the Inca inability to invent the wheel." However, that oversight was about to be corrected. The New York publisher W. W. Norton took a gamble and reissued the Aubrey-Maturin series in the United States. In the January 6, 1991, *New York Times Book Review*, the editor of *American Heritage* magazine called O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin books the "best historical novels ever written." The bullet hit home. Suddenly, it became apparent that while O'Brian may or may not have surpassed Forester in sea action, he had created great novels that did not look quite like anything that had come before. His evocation of Nelson's Royal Navy was as escapist world as appealing as J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, as culturally rich as William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and as intriguingly ritualistic as Umberto Eco's medieval monastery in *The Name of the Rose*. In this setting, almost flawlessly sustained in the more than five thousand-page opus, O'Brian had examined his two primary themes, love and friendship, from myriad angles, with extraordinary lucidity and a stylistic range to rival the best novelists. Critics no longer compared him to C. S. Forester but to Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy, Marcel Proust, and Homer.

O'Brian became a literary juggernaut, with a newsletter and Internet sites devoted to his books, companion books to the series, compact discs of the music mentioned in the novels, and even a sle

of bumper stickers. He appeared on stage for interviews before sold-out audiences in the United States. One reader drove from South Dakota to Washington, D.C., just to have his book signed. While this new status as both a meritorious and popular writer was gratifying and financially liberating for O'Brian, he bristled at the media intrusion—encouraged by Norton's publicity machine—that accompanied his anointment as a star.

Those familiar with the series now recognized Maturin's secretive nature in the author. His disdain for personal questions made him testy with reporters and fans. Though he had himself written a biography of Picasso that thoroughly examined the artist's personal life and its effect on his painting, O'Brian insisted that his own life had nothing to do with his writing. Maturin's edict in the novel *The Truelove* (in Britain, *Clarissa Oakes*)—"Question and answer is not a civilized form of conversation"—was clearly O'Brian's own.

When freelance journalist Mark Horowitz, writing a profile of O'Brian for the *New York Times Magazine* in 1993, went to interview O'Brian's former editor before meeting the author himself, he discovered that even the editor had no idea where O'Brian was born and confessed that he did not trust much of what O'Brian said about himself, since he had contradicted himself in the past. O'Brian's current editor bluntly warned Horowitz: "Patrick will make you feel ... odious and wormlike if you look into his private life."

"There is something the English would say was a bit precious about Patrick," another editor who had worked with O'Brian told Horowitz. "His language, his address ... there's something slightly finicky, and even almost rather colorful about him in that way. He may have been trying to reshape an idea of himself."

In fact, he had. He was not the Irishman he claimed to be, but a Londoner with an intricate personal history. In 1998, a BBC television profile suggested something was amiss in O'Brian's account of his past, and the news of O'Brian's secret identity was soon made public for the first time in an exposé in the London newspaper the *Daily Telegraph*. By the time of this revelation, I was already well into my research for *Patrick O'Brian: A Life Revealed*, seeking the motives that led O'Brian—born Richard Patrick Russ—to begin transforming his life into fiction at a very early age and eventually also to fictionalize his life. This effort took me first to the west of Ireland, where O'Brian had said he was born, then to a house called Walden, near the town of Chalfont St. Peter outside London, where he actually was born, and on to various sections of London and the towns of Kempsey and Lewes, where he spent much of his childhood.

Having lived through most of the troubled twentieth century, O'Brian has shared amply in its pain, developing a dualistic relationship with himself, both loving and hating his own life. As a child he was sickly. His mother died when he was four, and his father was an aloof bankrupt. Patrick was apparently a misfit in his own family. In his foreword to the 1999 reprint of his novella *Caesar* (first published in 1930) and his novel *Hussein* (1938)—books written under his original surname and

whose existence, until recently, he refused to acknowledge—O’Brian gazed seventy years back in his life and observed, “I doubt if my present self would have liked the twelve-year-old boy who wrote this tale—he was certainly not very popular among his brothers and sisters.” Just before World War II, he would walk out on his wife and two children. At the end of it, he would change his name and cultivate an Irish persona to match it, and in 1964 he would cease altogether to communicate with his only son (he had two granddaughters he never met).

In 1989, O’Brian’s brother Barney Russ wrote to their youngest sister, Joan: “I have had the most fearful letter from Patrick. I really think he thinks he is not my brother ... but I have his birth certificate anyway and whether he likes it or not, I claim him as my brother. ... The tone of his letter is so violent that I think we have to call an end to friendly correspondence.”

At age seventy-five, after having long since separated himself from the society of his family and peers—first moving to Wales and then to southern France—O’Brian was still severing family ties.

Though strange, none of this would be noteworthy if it were not for the fact that O’Brian, who failed in the most basic male relationships—son and father, father and son—was writing arguably the most profound literature of the century on the subject of male friendship.

Aubrey and Maturin are, in O’Brian’s own words, “variations on a theme of a man and himself.” That divided “man and himself”—two parts English, one part Catalan, and one part Irish, with passionate interests in riding and hunting, natural history and astronomy, music and language, wine, medicine, and the Royal Navy—is the author, as he was, as he perceived himself, and particularly as he wished to be.

While neither Aubrey nor Maturin is wholly autobiographical, the effort of examining their characteristics and circumstances through the prism of O’Brian’s life is certainly illuminating. Aubrey’s loss of his mother at an early age and intermittent poverty reflect O’Brian’s experience, while Maturin’s obsession with secrecy mirrors the author’s, and Maturin’s professional preoccupation with venereal disease matches that of O’Brian’s father. The ability of Aubrey and Maturin to overcome personal differences and to find and respect the boundaries of friendship creates an ideal relationship, something O’Brian sorely missed in his family.

It was O’Brian’s own loss and failure that created Maturin’s highest quality and principled goodness—his indignity at injustice and his love for and protection of the weak. When O’Brian twice had Maturin rescue a pair of children in the series, certainly he was thinking of his own two children abandoned in the flatlands of Norfolk.

Perhaps the most telling moment of this interrelationship between O’Brian and the physician-philosopher Maturin comes when Maturin helps save his young daughter, Brigid, from the netherworld of autism. In this he is aided by his giant and near-mute Irish manservant Padeen Colman, a character born of O’Brian’s fascination with the blurred border between human and animal spirit.

Together, science and nature combine to bring to Brigid a salvation that O'Brian, or Russ, as he then was, could not provide for his own daughter, Jane, who died of spina bifida at age three.

When in *The Hundred Days*, the nineteenth book of the series, O'Brian revealed (in a few cavalier words from a Greek chorus of passed-over lieutenants on the Rock of Gibraltar) the momentous death of Diana Villiers, the searing love of Maturin's life, O'Brian did so knowing of the impending death of his wife, Mary.

While the tortuous route that O'Brian's snubbed novels took to their proper recognition as one of the century's major literary achievements speaks about the nature of an artistic masterpiece and our inability to recognize one, the story of how these novels came to exist, what inner forces drove O'Brian to persevere during those long decades, is one about the sublime act of creation.

In his book *Against Saint-Beuve* (1909), Proust wrote that "a book is the product of a different self from the one we manifest in our habits, in society, in our vices. If we mean to try to understand this self it is only in our inmost depths, by endeavoring to reconstruct it there, that the quest can be achieved." And it is only in knowing the truth about O'Brian's life that we can fully grasp the magnitude and nature of his accomplishment. It is to be hoped that in this attempt to plumb the depths of O'Brian's real life, the reader will come to agree that his genius was largely that he had continually connected with this "different self" to create from disappointing reality—quite magically—extraordinary fiction, fiction that, for so many of us, embodies the sheer joy of reading.

# Author's Note to the Paperback Edition

SO MUCH HAS HAPPENED SINCE I submitted the typescript of the first edition of *Patrick O'Brian: A Life Revealed* to my publisher in the fall of 1999. Sadly and suddenly, it seemed, O'Brian died in Dublin on January 2, 2000. He was eighty-five years old and had recently finished his twentieth Aubrey-Maturin novel. His death was veiled in secrecy just as his life had been. In the onslaught of publicity that followed, however, O'Brian's fame reached new heights.

Ironically, as the biography was on the verge of going to press, new sources were becoming available to me.

In the original research and writing of this book, I faced the challenge of assembling the elusive facts of the life of a person who had changed his name and attempted to bury his past. (He did this so assiduously that his own stepson and heir, Nikolai Tolstoy, told *The Times* that he had to figure out for himself that his stepfather was not Irish.) On the subject of his personal history, O'Brian consistently dissembled, or permitted others unwittingly to dissemble for him. His own sinuous autobiographical accounts, usually contrived under pressure from his publisher or his audience, were misleading.

Nor did O'Brian, for obvious reasons, cooperate with this book. In some cases, he instructed friends and colleagues not to talk to me. Thus, uncovering his identity and his life story was a painstaking business. But it was also one with many rewards. Once I found out about and located O'Brian's son from a first marriage, I had a candid source of the truth, grateful to be heard at last. Likewise, I tracked down other forgotten family members in Canada and Britain, as well as O'Brian's best friend from World War II, a Welsh shepherd boy he befriended after the war, his oldest friend in France, and his principal agents and editors in England, Scotland, and the United States. Using the firsthand accounts as well as public records, letters, manuscripts, and documents from publisher archives, I slowly pieced together the fascinating, complex life story of the man (some would say the genius) behind the Aubrey-Maturin tales.

In this edition, I have been able to add a few important new pieces of the puzzle. Following the serialization of the book in Britain in February, I was contacted by readers who knew O'Brian in various capacities throughout his life, chief among them a lover from the 1930s whose story told me, among other things, that O'Brian claimed to be Irish long before he abandoned his original surname, Russ. I also had the pleasure recently of talking to Mary O'Brian's family: her brother, H. F. S. Wicksteed; his wife, Dorothy; and their children, Peter, Jane, and Joanna. The latter three spent summers with the O'Brians in France during the 1960s, and their memories and letters shed a warm glow on that period. Peter became the only person to attest to the fact that O'Brian actually could sail.

All of this has helped round out this new paperback edition of the biography, now simply titled *Patrick O'Brian: A Life*, which I offer as a celebration of O'Brian's monumental achievement, the

Aubrey-Maturin novels, in the context of his fascinating, troublesome, often beguiling life.

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—Dean King, September 28, 2000

# PROLOGUE

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## London July 1945

SATURDAY, THE SEVENTH of July, 1945, was a signal day in southern England. For a luxurious fourteen hours the sun bathed village greens and city row houses, visibly parting the lingering miasma of war and revealing the wonderfully immutable aspects of English life. At Eastbourne, Lord's, and Westcliff, joyous crowds watched cricket matches on freshly mown pitches. On the River Thames, the Henley Royal Regatta had resumed, and spectators thronged the riverbanks for the All Comer Eights. And at Ascot, King George VI, Princess Elizabeth, and the fashionable cheered the Gold Cup sprint of Ocean Swell, offspring of sire Blue Peter.

In 1945, the barley wine had truly made the cuckoo stutter, and Britannia still ruled. Now the swallows of July were joined by the irrepressible din of humanity on the mend. Like the survivors of a shipwreck, those who had outlived Hitler showed an amazing capacity for looking at the bright side of life and moving on. Almost reflexively, England set about the task of righting itself. Committees met to plan the rebuilding of churches and neighborhoods. Military couples reunited or, all too often, faced up to sad truths and parted company. The past and future were now. Forgive or not, but move on, chuck up.

Now that the war in Europe had ended and the Union Jack flapped triumphantly over Berlin, things were happening quickly for foreign office intelligence agent and erstwhile fiction writer Richard Patrick Russ. At last, there was a modicum of breathing room from war duties and war worries, and Russ, a slim, dark-haired, wan-complected resident of Chelsea, London's tony, if somewhat bruised neighborhood of artists and writers, was busy implementing certain changes in his life, preparing for his own new start after the war.

The first change was his marriage, his second, on the fourth of July, to Mary, the pretty English-born Russian countess Russ had known intimately, despite many complications, since the beginning of the war. Now, on the twentieth of July, a little more than two months after VE-Day, he was about to inscribe his signature—the last time he would use that particular one—on an important deed, a bold move but one, given the unpleasant circumstances, that he was determined to make. To take care of this bit of business, Russ traveled to Leadenhall Street in the City.

So much had changed since war had descended on Europe and on the self-absorbed twenty-five-year-old writer of nature and adventure stories he had been. The flood of war had in many ways



scoured his slate clean. In the fight against Hitler, Russ had, to a degree, become his own antithesis. As a writer, he had been a revealer of truths—a promising voice, the critics had proclaimed. But the foreign office had needed his skills for other purposes. He had become a broker of secrets. The war had made him proficient at deception.

All of this was in the back—if not the fore—of Russ's mind as he entered London's devastated financial district. At one stretch, during the Blitz of 1940–41, London had been bombed on fifty-seven consecutive nights and some days as well. Waves of German bombers had dropped high-explosive bombs, capable of boring through fifty feet of earth, and incendiary bombs, whose fires raged throughout the city. Each night, Londoners had huddled for cover in underground stations, in brick-and-concrete neighborhood shelters, or in family lean-tos of corrugated steel and earth. Each night hundreds had been crushed to death and thousands more wounded. An ambulance driver during the Blitz, Russ had seen his share of destruction firsthand.

Just west of Leadenhall Street, St. Paul's Cathedral, a lonely survivor, stood watch over the wreckage. South of the cathedral, between Cheapside and Queen Victoria Street, much was obliterated, although miraculously the ruined church of St. Nicholas Cole Abbey had not been felled. To the east of Cheapside, where Leadenhall Street lay, the devastation was more complete still. On September 29, 1940, during the Blitz, the heart of the London book publishing industry, on Paternoster Row, near the cathedral, had been destroyed by bombs. The offices of Simpkin Marshall, the wholesaler and distributor for many publishing houses, perished. Six million books turned into pulp and ash in a single night.

How different, how frightening the ruin seemed now that the war in Europe was over. Without the immediate threat and passion of the war with Germany, the evil that caused it was almost incomprehensible. The sight of the destruction sobered him. Nothing, no amount of repair or rebuilding, could mitigate this disaster. Only time could remove its memory.

On Leadenhall Street, the magnificent centuries-old St. Katherine Cree Church had suffered only minor damage from the bombing, unlike the almost equally ancient Chelsea Old Church in Russ's own neighborhood, where a German bomb had destroyed the sacred stone building in 1941, killing five fire watchers. But no matter how unaffected Cree Church appeared to be, Russ knew this was an illusion. No one and no place living through World War II was unaffected, and those directly in the warpath were in many ways changed forever.

Russ, his pulse elevated a notch, to be sure, opened the cut-glass doors of the three-story brick building at 77 Leadenhall Street and entered the offices of Baddeleys and Co. Solicitors. Through the window he could see the bomb craters, where pasts had been erased and where new buildings would soon rise. Anxiously, he awaited his turn to appear before the solicitors' managing clerk, and then he conducted his business: he was there to sign and file the form that would give him, his new wife, and his son by his first marriage a different surname.

Russ was canny enough to sense that this turning point in world history cleared the path for a break in his own history. It was nothing short of a chance to start over, to put his personal failures behind him. He knew the power of a name. Whether “unsoil’d” or “black,” as Shakespeare had once qualified, a name had a defining nature.

If the war had encoded a new message on his slate, Russ would now choose which parts to reveal to others. Ironically, for a writer of fiction, and one who would prove to be among the best at his craft, the ultimate act of creating fiction came down to filling out a legal document:

By this deed which is intended to be enrolled in the Enrolment Department of the Central Office of the Royal Courts of Justice, I the undersigned Patrick O’Brian of 1 Upper Cheyne Road, Chelsea, London S.W.3 in the county of London, Foreign Office Official, described in my certificate of birth as Richard Patrick Russ, a natural born British Subject DO HEREBY for myself and my wife Mary and remoter issue absolutely renounce and abandon the use of my said surname of Russ and in lieu thereof assume as from the date hereof the surname of O’Brian.

AND in pursuance of such change of Surname as aforesaid I hereby declare that I shall at all times hereafter in all records, deeds and instruments in writing and in all actions and proceedings and in all dealings and transactions and upon all occasions whatsoever use and sign the name O’Brian as my surname in lieu of the said surname of Russ so renounced as aforesaid.

AND I HEREBY authorise and require all persons to designate and address me and my wife and remoter issue by such assumed surname of O’Brian only.

IN WITNESS whereof I have hereunto signed my first names of Richard Patrick and my assumed name of O’Brian this twentieth day of July one thousand nine hundred and forty-five.

SIGNED, Sealed, and Delivered by the above named Richard Patrick O’Brian in the presence of: E. Rowe, Solicitors Managing Clerk, 77 Leadenhall Street, London E.C.3.

[signatures] Richard Patrick Russ Richard Patrick O’Brian (Legal Seal)

Although the paperwork would take another month, for all practical purposes the deed was done. What the name change signified was this: Farewell, Richard Patrick Russ. You bore your pain. You made your mistakes. You served your country. Now, thank God, the madness is over.

With a stroke of the pen, he had dumped some of the baggage that weighed him down. He could now go where he wanted, do what he wanted, and make a fresh start in life with his new wife.

However, to one so sensitive to the power of words, the act of changing his name could not have been taken lightly. Symbolically, he was annihilating his past, and there was a taste of death in it. He was burying the child-writer prodigy he had been along with his problems. Or was he?

# Part I GREEN

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## 4th NOVEMBER 1893

CHRISTIAN CHARLES GOTTFRIED RUSS, my dear Husband and our good Father, died at 27 Clifton Hill, John's Wood, N.W. on Saturday Nov. 4th at 4:35 p.m.

He was born at Brandis, near Leipzig—on the 10th of February 1842. The fourth child and the second son of Christian Karl Gottfried Russ, citizen, houseowner, furrier and cap manufacturer in Brandis and of his wife Fredericka Wilhelmina geb. Rüdiger; baptized on the 13th of the same month and the following were his godfathers and godmothers:—

Gustav Arudt, tanner in Brandis.

Eleanor Rost, wife of Karl Rost shoemaker in Brandis.

Friedrich Hansmann junr., ropemaker in Brandis. The above details have been taken from the register of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Brandis, 16 vol. 1842 according to birth and baptism certificate[s] sent by M.A. Müller, Pastor, and countersigned and certified by Mr. Döbler, Mayor of Brandis with the official stamp of the Council attached.

He was married January 25th 1872 to Emily Callaway at Albany Street, Regent's Park by Rev. Burrows. She was born in London December 29th 1849. There was issue of this marriage 13 children, four daughters and nine sons; of whom twelve were alive at the day of his death.

—from the ledger of Emily Callaway Russ, grandmother of Patrick O'Brian

# A Top Hat, a Clean Collar, and Clean Boots

1850–1900

THY WIFE SHALL BE as the fruitful vine: upon the walls of thine house. Thy children like the olive branches; round about thy table.

—Psalm 128

It was once the custom in Germany that a young craftsman who had apprenticed for four years, usually with his father, took to the road to work for and learn from other masters at his craft. He was then a journeyman, and he carried a “wandering book,” which the masters inscribed with testimonials and the dates of his service. Before moving on to a new master to serve and learn in another town, the journeyman also acquired the signatures of the burgomaster and police chief and recorded the travel time to his next destination to prove his diligence. After several years on the road, the successful craftsman returned home or to another town where his services were needed and became a master of his own right.

Carl Russ’s good friend Carl Müller, a ropemaker seven years his senior, did just that, wandering from the town of Taucha, six miles northeast of Leipzig, in Saxony, all the way down to Bavaria and back. In 1858, at the age of sixteen, Carl, Patrick O’Brian’s future grandfather and the second son of a furrier in Taucha, a town of two thousand people, set his sights a bit higher. He had already worked in Leipzig, one of the fur centers of Europe. He now traveled to Paris, and after honing his skills there, he and an older cousin caught a ship bound for Edinburgh in 1862. Carl’s father had perhaps urged his son to go abroad, for he had fallen deeply in debt and would soon have to auction off his property.

As family lore has it, after the two cousins disembarked, they were walking along and saw a sixpence lying on the ground. They picked it up. A little farther along, they found a half crown, which they also collected. “There’s money in this city,” the cousin said to Carl. “I’m staying. You go down to London.” Russ dutifully headed south.

In London, the fur capital of the world, he found a burgeoning industry ripe for an ambitious young man. Pelts of every imaginable sort arrived there from around the globe: those of fur sea animals encrusted in salt, wrote an industry observer, were “moist, dirty, brown and most repulsive objects”; those of beaver, “flat and hard as a board”; and of mink and ermine, “frequently inside out; exhibiting a singularly unpleasing appearance.” Sold at auctions in Mincing Lane, they were then transformed by

the furrier.

By 1869, Russ had settled in Clerkenwell, a workingman's district just northwest of the City where he Anglicized his given name to Charles (although, for the purposes of this story, I will continue to call him Carl to differentiate him from his oldest son). Once a breezy hillside known for its spas, Clerkenwell had absorbed wave after wave of immigrants after the Napoleonic wars, creating a quagmire of sweatshops and noisome alleys.

The process of converting a "skin" into a "fur" took hours of tedious, often noxious, labor: blubbering, washing, unhairing, leathering, dying, fluffing, and combing, among other things. Once then was the skin called a fur, ready to be matched, styled, and assembled as a garment. A creative and enterprising sort, Russ fared well at his trade, which he knew thoroughly, from the dull tasks of transforming the foul hide to the most artful: designing a voluptuous garment to sit on the shoulder of a rich woman. At twenty-six, he established his own business, leasing a residence and shop on Northampton Square for ten years at £50 per year.

Russ would do well both in business and family-making. After pledging his loyalty and fidelity to Queen Victoria and to the United Kingdom, he married Emily Callaway, the twenty-two-year-old daughter of a manager of one of London's old-line furriers. By 1876, Emily, a raven-haired beauty with sparkling black eyes, a deep voice, and a curvaceous figure, had given birth to four of the couple's thirteen children: three daughters and a son, Charles, Patrick O'Brian's future father.

Russ set up a shop on New Bond Street, in London's fashionable shopping district, and he quickly made a name for himself as one of the most innovative furriers of his day. By improving dressing and dying techniques, he popularized alternatives to expensive Russian sable. His work won a gold medal at the Paris Exhibition in 1878, and his furs caught the eye of Queen Victoria. But, as his advertisement indicates, he was not too proud to appeal to all women:

[Carl] Russ, court furrier, invites inspection of his Large Assortment of all articles of Fashion in Furs, Embracing all the newest designs in Jackets and Paletots, lined and trimmed fur. Sortie de ball, etc, etc. Specialties. Genuineness of quality and excellence of workmanship at manufacturer's prices. 70 New Bond Street.

"Never have sealskin jackets been so well and so elegantly shaped, and for the first time they fit the figure accurately," the *Queen*, a women's newspaper, wrote about his furs in 1888. And if sealskin was too expensive, one could try his musquash (muskrat), which resembled seal quite nicely.

Russ was not just good at his trade; unlike his father, he was a shrewd businessman as well. He owned several London properties and shares in four merchant ships: *John Redhead*, *Carl Rahtken*, *Fernbrook*, and *Baron Clyde*. He grew rich and moved the family to St. John's Wood, an upper-middle-class neighborhood, where nurses watched children playing in gardens and men in bowler hats

commuted into the City on horse-drawn omnibuses. Russ's grand home, Clifton Villa, filled with mahogany and walnut furniture and brass beds, was a monument to success. Thirty-one gilt-framed oil paintings and four watercolors decorated the dining room, which was furnished with a table for twelve, a couch and chairs, a massive mahogany sideboard, and both a Story and Clark organ from the United States and a pianoforte. After dinner, Russ and his male guests retired to the garden and smoked pipes or Egyptian cigarettes of the finest tobacco.

Clifton Villa teemed with children. Nonetheless, Emily, with her piercing eyes and lively manner, always looked the part of an elegant woman from a fine family. She wore gold spectacles, a sable cape, and diamond jewelry. She was unflappable, with a firm but pleasant manner that made the servants prompt and demure.

Carl was a stout, taciturn man, commanding, sometimes stern, but not unkind. His broad face was defined by an imposing beard, close-cropped on his square chin but hanging Poseidonlike from his cheeks. A dense mustache bridged his sidebeards. Naturally, to a man in his field, dress was important. At age sixteen, Fritz Müller, the third son of Russ's boyhood friend Carl Müller, came to stay with the Russes in London, and Carl often admonished the boy, "Never forget, a top hat, a clean collar and clean boots make a gentleman." But Russ had few words for his children, though he was good at providing for them. With Teutonic precision, he saw to it that they were all baptized at St. George's Church in Hanover Square and given accounts at Westminster Bank. The family went to church twice on Sundays, and grace was said before each meal.

This industrious and happy life was tragically interrupted shortly after Emily delivered Walter, her twelfth and next-to-last child, on July 13, 1886. Five months later—on the evening of December 13—a cinder sparked from the fireplace and caught fire to the linen in his crib. Walter burned to death.

Soon thereafter the eight surviving boys were dispatched to Shebbear College, a long-established boarding school in North Devon. Charles, at age eleven, and his younger brothers Emil, Percy, and Sidney (who was just eight years old) left home in 1888. Ernest, Albert, Frederick, and William soon completed the Russ contingent at Shebbear, a school founded by a Low Church group and later affiliated with the Methodist Church. The brothers often remained at school even during holidays.

Boarding school was primarily a privilege of the rich, but conditions at Shebbear did not betray that fact. The boys took to eating their peach pits to stave off hunger, a habit that little Sidney would maintain the rest of his life. When at home, the brothers proved that they had absorbed their Latin lessons, calling their mother "Mater." But they were not coddled at home either. "Pater" would not tolerate idleness or airs in his boys, who were put to work during holidays learning the furrier trade.

In 1891, the Russes' oldest daughter, Emily, married Otto Müller, Carl Müller's second but most enterprising son. Russ, perhaps feeling the stress of his intense career, retired the following year, and

it was soon thereafter, during a trip to the Continent with Emily and Charles, that the first signs of his ill health appeared. On November 2, 1893, while Emily was in Germany helping with the birth of his second grandchild, Carl suffered a stroke. He had just finished celebrating his son Emil's sixteenth birthday. Two days later, at the age of fifty-one, Carl died with his son Charles and Fritz Müller by his side.

Emily received a telegram informing her of her husband's death. Charles, who at seventeen became the male head of the family, met her at Victoria station. "What terrible news," she said, with remarkable composure. They took a cab home and ate supper. Then Emily went to the mortuary to see her husband's body, remained there for an hour grieving, and returned to her home as unruffled as when she had arrived from Germany.

Despite Emily's apparent stoicism, the loss of the almighty Russ patriarch shook the family profoundly. Patrick O'Brian's grandfather was said to have been a spiky, brilliant, driven man who was intensely private. He had been proud and showy in his newfound wealth but had never forgotten where he came from. These traits would travel farther in his descendants than the small fortune he had amassed. Russ's children inherited a fair amount of money, and his sons were gratefully freed of the expectation of becoming furriers. But they also found themselves without their father's discipline and practical guidance, which would prove financially disastrous for Charles, whom Mater particularly indulged. At one point, for example, Charles was enthralled with photography and owned twenty-three cameras. Charles's extravagant ways and poor business sense would eventually color the lives of his children, particularly the younger ones, like Patrick.

One last sad event needs to be recounted before moving on to the next century and the next generation. Mater had already suffered the strange death of her youngest son. In June 1898, she lost her second daughter, Paulina, under distressing circumstances that would become a haunting fixture in the family lore.

At twenty-four, Lena, as she was called, was purportedly suffering from long-standing acute indigestion, which had led to low spirits. Her doctor recommended sea air, so she and Mater went to a boardinghouse in Cliftonville, on the coast of Kent. Soon Lena seemed to perk up, and Mater relaxed her vigilant watch over her daughter. One rainy, blustery morning, Lena slipped out of the boardinghouse to mail a letter, or so Mater later rationalized when she discovered the girl was gone. In fact, Lena had wandered out to the edge of the forty-foot cliff at Foreness Point, where she sat wide-eyed in the pouring rain.

Upon seeing Lena, a startled walker cautioned her: "It is a silly thing to sit so near the edge of the cliff, especially on such a day as this is; the cliff has been falling away lately and the cliff might go down and you might go with it." Lena made a show of moving back. The man continued on the path down and around the cliff. But when he was below, Lena called out to him, "Please pick up m

umbrella!”

The man found the umbrella lying on the rocky beach beneath the bluff and began to climb back up the path with it. But, at a bend, he looked up and saw a ghastly sight: Lena was teetering on the brink of the cliff, her arms raised in front of her, as if she were being beckoned into the precipice. As he raced up the path, he heard a dreadful scream. At another bend, he caught a glimpse of the girl. She was lying on the ground and slowly pushing herself over the ledge.

The man, Mr. Stephen Brown Balcome, a vacationing stockbroker from West Kensington, continued his frustratingly slow ascent. Jogging around a corner, he lost sight of Lena. When he finally arrived at the top, only the wind and rain greeted him. Lena had fallen to the beach below. Panicked, Balcome ran to a nearby restaurant for help. But when they reached Lena, she was barely alive. She died on the way to the hospital.

Charles, then a medical student, rushed to Cliftonville. At the inquest, Mater testified that Lena was happily engaged and that there had been nothing wrong other than the misery of her physical ailment. “The day prior ... [Lena] had been for a long walk by herself and brought home a lot of wild flowers,” she recounted. “I think she was getting wild flowers and it being such a wet morning she must have slipped over the cliff.” But Balcome told the jury he thought the fall was intentional. Charles countered with pointed questions for Balcome: “To what incident in particular do you attribute your belief that she voluntarily went over the cliff? You did not exactly witness the fall of the body to the sands? Do you think it possible she might have become giddy?”

According to the newspaper, the jury ruled that Lena had “committed suicide whilst temporarily insane.” Over the years, family lore would go one better. The story passed down that Lena had been madly in love with a Catholic priest, but she could not persuade him to renounce his priesthood for her.

No matter the reason, Mater was devastated to lose “such a dear girl.” Once again, Charles escorted his mother home after a family tragedy.



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