

team was winning all over the world. And if it did not always seem to be on the winning side, he knew he must support his troops and stand behind their commander-in-chief. No one wants to carp and criticize when soldiers take the field. It is unpatriotic. So, keep the soldiers in the field all the time.

American business is still heroically capitalistic, entrepreneurs brilliant and brave at creatively serving the needs of the people, though hogtied by the vastest government in history. On top of that, every aspect of the economy is distorted by the expansionary policies of the Federal Reserve, resulting—in just one instance—in a huge housing bubble.

Thanks to the incentives created by the welfare state and the Fed, Americans tend to consume more than they earn. Stocks today trade for about 20 times earnings, whereas the norm is 12-15 times. House prices usually increase at the rate of inflation, not 10 times as fast. A global power monopoly is also abnormal. At some point, all the myths cherished by the imperial people, say our authors, must go to “humbug heaven.”

After all, the long-term mean value of paper currency is zero. Is the dollar magic, so that it is permanently immune from the norm? For the last 100 years, it has lost value more quickly than the Roman denarius after Nero. No surprise, since it is much easier to create unlimited numbers of dollars than to mint coins with at least some silver or gold in them. On the other hand, by the time of the last emperor, the denarius—which started as pure silver—had .02 percent precious metal content. That is, the denarius had lost, over hundreds of years, 99.98 percent of its value. Since the founding of the Fed in 1913, the dollar has lost 95 percent.

Something else that will revert to the norm: wages. There is no inherent reason that a plumber with a U.S. flag pin should earn more than one with a crescent moon. In India, real incomes have doubled in the last 10 years. In the U.S. they have been stagnant or worse.

The inequitable draining of the world's resources into America, made possible by the military empire and its financial structure since Bretton Woods, is also coming to an end.

The authors call themselves conservatives, but they quote *Confessions of an Economic Hitman* approvingly and see through the Cold War humbug about the Communist Conspiracy, the terrorism of the previous scam. Nor do they fall for the mythology that surrounds the big-spender Reagan nor celebrate the murderous Vietnam War, with 57,000 dead Americans and between 2 and 3 million dead Vietnamese. Those names aren't on a wall, of course.

The book is chock-full of great monetary and financial charts, though my favorite is a list of all the known empires and their duration. Not that they believe that charts tell the future. Indeed, our authors are contrarians. When most people, they think, are convinced that stocks will never go up, chances are they will. When most people think stocks can never fall, chances are they will. If most people couldn't be brought to the view that houses will never decline in value, a rip-roaring housing bubble would be impossible.

Since the days of the Great Khan, and the barbaric clarity of his claim that the gods had given him the earth and everyone and everything in it, empires have resorted to rosier delusions, if no less fatal to victims—and sometimes citizens—than the Khan model. From the Romans to the Fourth Crusade (and their Venetian and French aggressors) to Genghis Khan to the Spaniards and Napoleon and the British, Bonner and Wiggin teach us the lessons of empire, with learning, wisdom, and irony.

“A great empire,” they note, “is to the world of geopolitics what a great bubble is to the world of economics. It's attractive at the outset but a catastrophe eventually. We know of no exceptions.” ■

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[Patrick O'Brian: *The Making of the Novelist, Nikolai Tolstoy*, W.W. Norton and Company, 512 pages]

The Reverse of the Medal

By G. Tracy Mehan III

NIKOLAI TOLSTOY'S new biography of Patrick O'Brian is a useful, if painful, contribution to our understanding of a writer who elevated the popular seafaring tale to the level of truly great literature. Transcending C.S. Forester's estimable Hornblower, O'Brian created something more akin to Jane Austen afloat.

Tolstoy, an historian and distant relative to the novelist Leo Tolstoy, is a devoted stepson of O'Brian. He offers the reader a robust portrait of a deeply flawed human being for whom the world of Captain Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin—ship's surgeon, spy, naturalist—offered a refuge from his own failings and inadequacies.

The Aubrey-Maturin series spans 20 novels, beginning with *Master and Commander* and ending with a partially completed story, *21*, which was published posthumously—“an unforgivable betrayal” by O'Brian's literary estate, in Tolstoy's opinion. They portray life within the circumscribed community of a Royal Navy fighting ship during the Napoleonic War with empathy and authentic detail, recounting not just the routines of life aboard ship and the rigors of war but also the social and cultural realities of the time, on land as well as at sea. While the relatively few combat narratives are without peer, the novels are remarkable mosaics of music, natural history, friendship, and social relations in a bygone era.

This biography, apparently the first of two volumes, includes, as it must, chapters on O'Brian's neglected childhood (his mother died when he was 3); his abusive father; an unfortunate tour in

the Royal Air Force; a failed first marriage; his abandonment of two children, one dying from spina bifida; acrimonious custody battles; his change of name (he was christened Richard Patrick Russ); a tormented relationship with his natural son; a writer's block of many years; and his misleading statements or intimations regarding his sailing experience (probably nonexistent), schooling (only four years, failing all exams), and his Irish heritage (German, actually).

Much of this became public knowledge in the late 1990s. Dean King wrote an unauthorized biography of O'Brian in 2000. Many of Tolstoy's criticisms of King and other journalistic accounts may strike the reader as minor or even pedantic. But there are areas where he brings a crucial, contextual understanding to O'Brian's behavior.

It is true, for instance, that O'Brian could not stomach small children. He also regretted, bitterly, his poverty and lack of social standing. These, no doubt, were the reasons for his leaving his first wife, son, and doomed daughter. Nevertheless, he continued to support them financially. He also paid for the education of his son at private schools and tutored the boy himself. Tolstoy is able to portray this situation accurately without justifying O'Brian's many failures.

Tolstoy, whose mother, Mary Wicksteed Tolstoy, was O'Brian's tether to sanity and creativity for over half a century, brings immense advantages to this enterprise. He knew O'Brian for decades. He acquired the author's library, journals, and letters—even the index cards upon which O'Brian recorded his observations of birds.

In *The Fortune of War*, Stephen Maturin describes a young man suspected of intrigue, whom he had known long enough "to be sure that he was no monster of any kind, except perhaps of erudition." Tolstoy, too, is a monster of erudition whose insights into, for example, the differences between English foxhunting—on horseback and quite social—and the Welsh variety—on foot over mountainous terrain—are illumi-

nating. He provides an excellent portrait of rural life in Sussex, which, in the years before World War II, still resembled the haunts of Jack and Sophie Aubrey.

Tolstoy takes great pains to explore several of O'Brian's "autobiographical" novels and short stories as a means of interpreting his early life, most notably *Three Bear Witness*, *The Catalans*, and *Richard Temple*. They reveal a man scarred by isolation and fear at an early age, not-so-genteel poverty, and an obsessive class-consciousness that account for his attraction to Mary Tolstoy, a wealthy, aristocratic beauty right out of the pages of Evelyn Waugh.

"The fact that Diane Villers and Sophie Aubrey"—the fictional wives of Maturin and Aubrey—"reflect varying perspectives of my mother is but one of several intriguing factors in an extraordinarily close and enduring love affair which lasted for over sixty years," writes Tolstoy. The reader might suspect a bit of bias here, especially in contrast to Elizabeth Jones, O'Brian's first wife, an attractive, poor, uneducated woman from Wales.

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In several places, Tolstoy sheds light on the background to the Aubrey-Maturin series. O'Brian, an avid reader since childhood, collected old and antiquarian books, especially those relating to the history and literature of the "long" 18th century extending from Queen Anne's reign to the Regency. While working for the ambulance service and then the Political Warfare Executive, a propaganda unit, in wartime London, he was drawn to the second-hand bookshops of Charing Cross Road and Cecil Court which "continued to act as an irresistible magnet," according to Tolstoy.

Patrick O'Brian's practical interests were reflected in a collection that

included a 1732 volume on clock-mending, a 1687 book on gardening, an 1838 guide to hunting, and, most fitting for an amateur naturalist, a 1792 title, *A General History of Quadrupeds*, with fine woodcuts from the period. Even his wife, Mary, produced meals from a 1776 recipe book.

O'Brian immersed himself in primary sources. "This led him to an understanding of the radical distinction between past and present and to awareness of the absolute necessity of envisaging men and women within the context of their own era," argues Tolstoy. "Empathy and vivid sense of period were everything..." Like Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, he treasured "the forgotten humdrum details and unanticipated oddities more intriguing than the deeds of great men and the fate of nations."

Tolstoy also provides an enlightening commentary on an individual deeply respected by O'Brian who embodied the fictional Captain Jack Aubrey. With the end of World War II, Patrick O'Brian was destitute except for a small income from his new wife's family trust. So he moved

their household to a small, remote cottage, Fron Wen, in the mountain valley Cwm Croesor, Snowdonia, Wales.

There the O'Brians spent countless hours outdoors gardening, hunting, fishing, biking, hiking, and birding. The local foxhunt was rooted in a vital tradition and the need to protect livestock. The Welsh name for the hunt was Ynysfor, dating back to 1765. Captain Jack Jones was the Master of the Hunt, "a Welsh squire or 'gentleman farmer' of the old school."

Captain Jones was descended from an ancient North Walian family and Welsh was his native tongue. Jones served in the Great War commanding a company

of local men during the infamous Galipoli landings. He was a respected magistrate, popular for his genial and unpretentious manner. There was little in his appearance or attire to distinguish the Master of the Ynysfor Hunt from his little band of followers, mostly farmers and youths, all of whom hunted on foot over mountainous terrain.

"Jack Jones was a plain-spoken, roughly dressed, soldierly man with no concern for social pretensions. Although approaching his sixtieth birthday and thus nearly twice Patrick's age, he possessed a constitution so tough and resilient as to place him almost invariably foremost in pursuit of the fox," says Tolstoy. He was the first to wield a pickaxe or crowbar upon arrival at the fox's den. He was blunt in speech, and he valued a man "purely by the extent of his contribution to the concerns of the Hunt." He never spared himself.

Remarkably, O'Brian, who was never deferential to authority, "accepted the most peremptory commands and roughest abuse from the Master of the Ynysfor Hunt without a tinge of resentment. "He

CAPTAIN JONES WAS THE **PROTOTYPE FOR CAPTAIN JACK AUBREY**, AN OFFICER WHO ALWAYS LIKED **"A TAUT BUT HAPPY SHIP."**

recognized Captain Jones's instinctive authority and skill as a leader, which is why, in Tolstoy's opinion, Jones "played a more fundamental part in Patrick's fiction than that of affording realism to his descriptions of fox-hunting."

Captain Jones was the prototype for Capt. Jack Aubrey, an officer who, as described in *The Far Side of the World*, always liked "a taut but happy ship" with flogging a most infrequent occurrence. Tolstoy notes, quite accurately, "One of the great strengths of Patrick's portrayal of Jack Aubrey lies in its absence of sentimentality." Like Jack Aubrey aboard the *Surprise*, "Jack Jones exercised nonsense, efficient control over the members of the Hunt."

D.H. Lawrence once insisted: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." Despite

Patrick O'Brian's serious personality disorders and human flaws, the reader is left with his remarkable stories of Jack Aubrey and his "particular friend," Stephen Maturin. The most interesting question is how this miraculous literary triumph emerged from the crooked timber of the author's humanity.

Genius is one explanation. O'Brian was essentially an autodidact who, with only the minimum of formal education supplemented by evening classes at London University, learned history, literature, mathematics, art, French, Latin, naval lore, and natural history. Thus, his literary success is a very personal one.

But it is hard to conceive of any genius producing such accomplishments, in the realm of historical fiction at least, absent an underlying culture of learning, tradition, social affection, and humanity as vibrant as that of pre-war Britain, Wales, and also Ireland, whose people and culture he genuinely treasured despite his lack of common ancestry.

This culture is rapidly becoming a mere artifact in the museum of the past. With diminishing population, cut adrift

from its unique history and traditions by multiculturalism, secularism, and political correctness, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Europe generally are experiencing the dissolution of their cohesive culture and society. In *The Abolition of Britain: From Winston Churchill to Princess Diana*, Peter Hitchens warned his countrymen, "a forest that has taken centuries to grow can be cut down in weeks, or even hours, especially if the foresters have grown indolent and slack, and take their charge for granted." ■

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[*Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy*, Bruce Bartlett, Doubleday, 320 pages]

Counterfeit Conservative

By Doug Bandow

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH took office to the sustained applause of America's conservative movement. In 2000, he defeated the liberal environmentalist Al Gore, abruptly terminated the legacy of the even more hated Bill Clinton, and gave Republicans control of both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. A few cynics were suspicious of Bush's understanding of and commitment to conservative principles, but most on the Right welcomed his inauguration.

Five years later, the traditional conservative agenda lies in ruins. Government is bigger, spending is higher, and Washington is more powerful. The national government has intruded further into state and local concerns. Federal officials have sacrificed civil liberties and constitutional rights while airily demanding that the public trust them not to abuse their power.

The U.S. has engaged in aggressive war to promote democracy and undertaken an expensive foreign-aid program. The administration and its supporters routinely denounce critics as partisans and even traitors. Indeed, the White House defenestrates anyone who acknowledges that reality sometimes conflicts with official fantasies.

In short, it is precisely the sort of government that conservatives once feared would result from liberal control in Washington.

Still, conservative criticism remains muted. Mumbled complaints are heard at right-wing gatherings. Worries are expressed on blogs and internet discussions. A few activists such as former Congressman Bob Barr challenge