



Chatwin, Bruce (1940-1989)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

British novelist, journalist, and essayist Bruce Chatwin, who blurred the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in his writing, is perhaps best known for *In Patagonia* (1977), his first book, which instantly established him as one of his generation's foremost travel writers, as well as the spare, elegantly crafted novel *Utz* (1988).

Chatwin was remarkably well-liked and admired by critics and colleagues alike. "Nearly every writer of my generation in England has wanted, at some point, to be Bruce Chatwin," the renowned scholar Andrew Harvey once wrote, "wanted to be talked about, as he [was], with raucous envy; wanted, above all, to have written his books."

In a 1988 article for *Publishers Weekly*, Chatwin was described as having "the preppie good looks of Robert Redford and the luminous blue eyes of a possum." A secretive bisexual, Chatwin had numerous sexual liaisons with both men and women while married to the same woman for 23 years. One of his lovers, Miranda Rothschild, described him as "out to seduce everyone, it doesn't matter if you are male, female, an ocelot, or a tea-cosy."

Another lover, the fashion designer Jasper Conran, said, "Probably there was no one Bruce loved more than himself."

Chatwin's elusiveness about his sexuality appears to have had an impact on his writing style as well. As *The London Sunday Times Books* noted, "his polished prose subtly distanced him; yet their blend of intellectual passion and emotional coldness, the postmodern glitter of surface and patchwork, shorn of all authorial judgment, provoked widespread curiosity about his life."

The writer Salman Rushdie, a loyal friend, described Chatwin's complex sexuality as "the creature at the perimeter prowling around. All this fantastic entertainment and language and originality and erudition and display [was] a kind of hedge against not letting out the truth."

He was born Bruce Charles Chatwin on May 13, 1940 in Sheffield, England to Charles Leslie and Margharita (Turnell) Chatwin. During World War II, his father, a lawyer in civilian life, served in the Navy, obliging Chatwin and his mother to move often, staying with friends and relatives in various places throughout Britain. This marked the beginning for him of a lifetime of travel and wanderlust.

After secondary school education at Marlborough College, Chatwin tried briefly to obtain employment as an actor, which his parents gently but firmly discouraged. In 1958, he went to work as a porter at Sotheby & Company, the London art auction house, where he quickly rose to art auctioneer and director of modern art. "I was an instant expert," Chatwin later recalled, "flying here and there to pronounce, with unbelievable arrogance, on the value or authenticity of works of art."

In 1965, and much to the surprise of many of his friends who were aware of his ambivalent sexuality,

Chatwin married the American Elizabeth Chanler, whom he had met while working at Sotheby's. She shared his passion for adventure, although after their marriage the two rarely traveled together.

The following year, Chatwin quit Sotheby's, which had just offered him a partnership, and enrolled in Edinburgh University to study archeology. While at university, Chatwin supported himself in part by reselling a private collection of antiquities he had assembled during his career as an art auctioneer. He concentrated his archaeology studies on field work in Afghanistan and the African Sahara, becoming fascinated with nomadic peoples. His theories on nomadic cultures would later influence his work as an essayist, travel writer, and novelist.

Feeling constricted in a university setting, Chatwin left school without graduating and in 1973 began work as a journalist for the *London Sunday Times Magazine*, a position that enabled him to combine his love of travel with his growing interest in narrative.

He eventually quit his job at the *Sunday Times* to concentrate on his own writing, and in 1977, after six months of traveling in the southernmost tip of South America, published his first book, *In Patagonia*. The book became an instant success, and his artful and eccentric interweaving of travel, history, anthropology, and personal anecdote established Chatwin as one of his generation's preeminent travel writers and an elegant literary craftsman.

In 1978 the book won the Hawthornden Prize, the oldest of the British literary prizes awarded annually for the best work of imaginative literature, and a year later was honored with the E.M. Forster Award.

His next book, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), was originally intended as a biography of Francisco Felix da Souza, a nineteenth-century Brazilian slave trader, but during its development was transformed into a mock-historical fantasy about a Christian slave trader and his African descendants who worship him as a demigod. The book was later made into the film *Cobra Verde* (1987), a loose adaptation by the German director Werner Herzog.

Chatwin's third book, and first novel, *On the Black Hill* (1982), is situated in the English-Welsh border country, and follows the circumspect lives of twin brothers who remain for eighty years in the remote farmhouse in which they were born, tilling the soil, sleeping together in the same bed, and remaining relatively untouched by the advances of the twentieth century.

Critics praised the novel for reviving the nearly forgotten genre of the pastoral and compared Chatwin's elegiac story with the works of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence. *On the Black Hill* won the 1982 Whitbread Award for First Novel. A faithful screen adaptation, directed by Andrew Grieve and starring the Welsh actors and brothers Mike and Robert Gwilym, was released in 1987.

In 1983, Chatwin wrote the essay "Lady: Lisa Lyon," which accompanied Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic studies of Lyon, winner of the first World Women's Bodybuilding Championship.

Chatwin's next book, *The Songlines* (1987), is a philosophical meditation on history and culture based on his travels through central Australia and his interactions with Aboriginal tribes.

The *New York Times* described the book as "part adventure-story, part novel-of-ideas, part satire on the follies of 'progress,' part spiritual autobiography, [and] part passionate plea for a return to simplicity of being and behavior." While most critics hailed the book as one of the foremost achievements in travel writing, spokespersons for Aboriginal tribes chided the work for being overly simplistic and propagating late-colonialist views of Aboriginal culture.

Chatwin's final work of fiction, the novella *Utz* (1988), recounts the life and obsessions of Kaspar Joachim Utz, an aristocratic Czech and compulsive art collector of Meissen porcelain.

As the respected critic Michiko Kakutani observed, the novel "begins as the story of an art collector, then opens out to become an examination of art--its ability to confer immortality and its ability to become a substitute for life." The novel was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize in 1988 and made into a film in 1992, with a screenplay by Hugh Whitmore and directed by George Sluizer.

Chatwin died of complications due to AIDS on January 19, 1989 in Nice, France. He had insisted on keeping the facts of his illness a secret, and instead attributed his condition to a rare bone marrow disease contracted during one of his travels through China. In an interview given shortly before his death, Chatwin dismissed his condition with the flippant comment, "Hazards of travel--rather an alarming one."

He was one of the first notable British artists to succumb to AIDS. After his cause of death was made public, Chatwin's evasion became a heated source of debate in the media, particularly within the gay press, with the principle of respect for a sick person's right to privacy weighed against the desire for candor about the disease.

Two collections of Chatwin's previously published essays, reviews, and interviews, *What Am I Doing Here?* (1989) and *Anatomy of Restlessness* (1996), were published posthumously.

Bibliography

Clapp, Susannah. *With Chatwin: Portrait of a Writer*. New York: Knopf, 1997.

Eder, Richard. "There's No Place That's Home." *New York Times Book Review* (March 19, 2000): 9.

Harvey, Andrew. "Footprints of the Ancestors." *New York Times Book Review* (August 2, 1987): 1.

Shakespeare, Nicholas. *Bruce Chatwin: A Biography*. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2000.

Thubron, Colin. "Into the Unknown." *The London Sunday Times Books* (March 28, 1999): 1-2.

Wheeler, Sara. "Was He a Genuine Article?" *The Independent: The Weekend Review* (April 3, 1999): 13.

About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.