

## Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979)

Paul Xuereb

<a href="#">Towards Learner Autonomy</a>	<a href="#">Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979)</a>	<a href="#">The Benefits of Artificial Reefs</a>	<a href="#">Poetry on Gozo</a>	<a href="#">Ethnicity &amp; Media Representation</a>	<a href="#">Chevalier dans l'ordre des Palmes Académiques</a>
<a href="#">The Aged in Gozo</a>	<a href="#">Young People In Gozo</a>	<a href="#">Ix-Xjenza u s-Socjeta</a>	<a href="#">Profile: Joseph Sagona</a>	<a href="#">Front Cover</a>	

Nicholas John Turney Monsarrat, son of a distinguished surgeon, was born in Liverpool in 1910. The family had a holiday home in Anglesey and it was there that early in his life he fell in love with the sea and with sailing. After getting a law degree from Cambridge he decided that the solicitor's career for which he was being trained did not suit him. He went to London where he tried to make a living writing novels and journalistic pieces such as a regular restaurant review that supplied him with one good meal a week. At this time he was an ardent left-winger politically and helped to sell *The Daily Worker*. As a pacifist he took part in processions in favour of pacifism.



His first three novels (1934 -37) had social topics, as did his fourth one, *This is the Schoolroom*, the first novel of his with which he was happy to be associated. It was partly autobiographical since the hero is a young writer with a Cambridge academic background and a left-winger who fights for the Spanish Republicans against Franco. Like most of his other works, it is still in print.

During this period he wrote a play, *The Visitor*, that was accepted for production in the West End. Monsarrat himself describes it as having "its roots in the redemption of man, and its head firmly clamped in the clouds." It had a brilliant cast, led by Greer Garson on the eve of her great film career, and received some kind comments from the critics, but it was a box-office failure. He never wrote anything else for the stage.

The outbreak of war soon after the publication of *This is the schoolroom* served to distract people from art and literature, and the young Nicholas himself felt at once he must do his bit, despite his pacifism. At first he joined the St John's Ambulance Brigade, but soon he was so struck by the terrible things happening in many parts of Europe that, as he wrote in his autobiography, "he decided to help win the battle first and deal with his moral principles later." Answering an advertisement in the *London Times* he joined the RNVR. He saw a great deal of very perilous service escorting convoys, service described so graphically in *The Cruel Sea* and other war books he wrote. He ended up commanding a frigate. His distinguished war service and his magnificent narratives about Britain's sailors were recognised by the nation when he died. He was buried at sea from a ship of the Royal Navy.

On leaving the RNVR in 1946, he joined Britain's diplomatic service and was sent to Johannesburg in South Africa as an information officer. It was during his stay in South Africa that he wrote *The Cruel Sea*, the book that made him immediately famous and removed all his financial cares permanently. The book was filmed in 1953, the year in which he was transferred to Ottawa in Canada as British Information Officer. His sojourn in Africa was to provide the material for two books, the bestseller *The Tribe that Lost its Head* (1956) and much later, a sequel to this book, *Richer than all his Tribe* (1968)

He wrote the first of these two books during his three years in Ottawa, another well-known book of this period being *The Story of Esther Costello* (1953) a striking novel about the manipulation of an Irish blind deaf-mute by her American guardian, and the girl's tragic end. This book, which is a strong attack on unscrupulous fund-raising for charity in the United States, was also filmed subsequently.

Monsarrat was drawn to themes then regarded as too strong or scabrous, and he was sometimes criticised in the Press on this score. He was only being ahead of his time, except that his treatment was generally less explicit than that of our contemporaries. The two novels on Africa already mentioned were also strong meat for the readers of the Fifties and Sixties. The first, *The Tribe that Lost its Head*, contained a frank discussion of how a small and ill-prepared African country was allowed by Britain to become independent, while *Richer than all his Tribe* treated the topic of corruption among Africa's new leaders. The influential Times Literary Supplement said of the former that Monsarrat "on a large scale, and with fine attention to detail, succeeds in making the problems of Pharanoul of absorbing interest" and describes it as being "brilliantly effective in its technique."

In 1959 Monsarrat decided to leave the diplomatic service so as to dedicate himself to writing full time. By the end of his life, he had published twenty-eight books, including two volumes of autobiography bearing the naughty title, *Life is a Four-Letter Word*. From now on he produced book after book, most of them topping the bestseller list and two of them, *The Kappillan of Malta* and the incomplete *The Master Mariner*, ranking with his best work.

He was living in Guernsey in the late Sixties when his good friend Professor C.N. Parkinson, the academic who thought up Parkinson's law and who was also a novelist on the Royal Navy in Napoleonic times, told him of Gozo which he liked but thought it was "much too quiet."

It was precisely this comment that attracted Monsarrat and led him and his new wife Ann to buy a charming house in this charming village of San Lawrenz where they settled happily. One realises how happy the couple was when one learns that Monsarrat's initial idea was to stay in Gozo a few years, not more than five, since he believed that a writer should be often on the move. The peacefulness of San Lawrenz together with his view of the sea and of the Gordan lighthouse from his office window attracted him so much that he was still there ten years later when he died

*The Kappillan of Malta*, which he dedicated to his beloved wife Ann, was written entirely in Gozo. It is certainly one of his most attractive books, its scale is impressive and of course it is eminently readable – a page-turner in fact. It has been read by millions and not just in English. I fondly remember the author showing me, during a visit I paid on him at his home, the many editions in translation of this novel.

It is not just another example of his great gift as a story-teller. The action-filled plot unwinds in

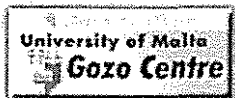
townscapes and landscapes of which Monsarrat was fond, and the Maltese and Gozitan characters are clearly people who roused great interest in the author. It is worth reading with attention the book's opening pages in which the author contrasts the Maltese and Gozitans travelling on the "Jylland", a boat most older readers will certainly remember, eating and having a good time, with a small group of British tourists looking at them and disapproving of what they saw. Surely this description hints at one of the reasons why Monsarrat was so drawn to Gozo and its inhabitants.

In this novel he emerges as a vivid descriptive writer, whether he is writing about the streets of Valletta in war-time, or of the countryside, or the tanker "Ohio" limping into Grand Harbour in August 1942. Many of these descriptions remain imprinted in the reader's memory. Above all, however, this novel is the novel of Father Salvatore, the brave and kind-hearted kappillan of the title. The priest has an English father and a Maltese mother. Perhaps he unconsciously symbolises what Monsarrat felt about this country where he kept his English identity whilst feeling himself not just accepted but liked by the people of the community where he had set up his last home.

Like *The Kappillan of Malta*, *The Master Mariner* has an epic quality and it is truly a pity he could never complete it because of his last illness. He did publish the massive and impressive first volume the year before he died, and managed to write a small part of the second volume. Fortunately his publishers decided to publish this fragment, together with his plans for the rest of the volume and a fine introduction by Ann Monsarrat. The book was inspired by the famous legend of the Wandering Jew or that of the Flying Dutchman. It is about a British sailor who is cursed after having committed a very serious act of cowardice, a curse that dooms him to sail the seas for ever. Monsarrat uses this structure in order to show how much sailors have done over the centuries to discover the world, make it more accessible and police it. Here again he shows his skill as a historical novelist and, above all, writes the last chapter of the love story between himself and the sea.

He was survived by his wife Ann (he had been married twice before marrying her), a journalist at the time he met her, and an author herself. Her biography of the novelist W.M. Thackeray is not only perceptive but also very readable. She is very well known in Malta and Gozo's social and cultural circles and since last year she has been very active as a member of the managing board of the Centre for Creativity at St James Cavalier, Valletta.

<b>Towards Learner Autonomy</b>	<b>Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979)</b>	<b>The Benefits of Artificial Reefs</b>	<b>Poetry on Gozo</b>	<b>Ethnicity &amp; Media Representation</b>	<b>Chevalier dans l'ordre des Palmes Académiques</b>
<b>The Aged in Gozo</b>	<b>Young People In Gozo</b>	<b>Ix-Xjenza u s-Socjeta</b>	<b>Profile: Joseph Sagona</b>	<b>Front Cover</b>	



Articles © University of Malta - Gozo Centre and Individual Contributors  
 Design © Gozo.COM  
 The Views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Editorial Board or the Board of the University of Malta - Gozo Centre

