



# Bruce Chatwin

(1940-1989)

## Life and works

Bruce Chatwin was **born in Sheffield in 1940**, into a middle-class family. While his father Charles, a lawyer in civilian life, was serving in the Royal Navy, Bruce and his mother Margharita **spent much of the War in a nomadic drift from one lodging to another**. Chatwin often underlined the connection between his childhood experiences and the attraction he felt to the nomads. Chatwin was a Cold War schoolboy. The terrors of nuclear war awakened in him a **passion for geography**: together with his school-mates, he made plans to settle in some remote place of the earth and the safest one appeared to be Patagonia. After preparatory school, he went to Marlborough College and also developed a passion for antiques, becoming a **precocious collector**. At the age of fifteen he acquired a copy of a classic travel book, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937) by Robert Byron, which he raised to the status of a sacred text and which he carried with him for the rest of his life.

Instead of going to university, in December 1958 **he started to work as a porter** at the London fine art auctioneers, **Sotheby & Co** of Bond Street, where he made a career, becoming the youngest ever director of the firm.

In 1965 Chatwin began to have problems with his sight and even suffered from temporary blindness. He **decided to quit Sotheby's and go to Africa**. In 1966 he enrolled as a first year **student of archeology** at Edinburgh University and, from 1968 to 1973, he **travelled all over the world**.

He was offered a job as a freelance contributor to *The Sunday Times Magazine* and he is said to have announced his departure with a sudden telegram to his previous employers announcing: 'Gone to Patagonia for six months'. This trip was to result two years later in a **travel book**, *In Patagonia* (1977), and to bring him fame as a writer.

In the same year Chatwin made a second visit to the West African kingdom of Dahomey, now transformed into The People's Republic of Benin. **His second book**, *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (1980), dealt with the story of the **Brazilian slave trader** Dom Francisco Felix de Souza.

With his third book, Bruce Chatwin sprang a surprise. Established as a chronicler of extraordinary events in extraordinary places, he published *On the Black Hill* (1982), a book about two Welsh hill farmers, which shows **affinity with the English rural novel**.

There was to be a five year gap, filled with travel and research, before the publication of *The Songlines* (1987), a **study of Australian Aboriginal creation myths** which turned out to be **Chatwin's most financially successful work**. In this book he looked East because he was fascinated by the meeting of West and East.

The publication of the short novel *Utz* (1988) presented Chatwin's readers with another surprise: the wide open spaces of Australia in *The Songlines* ceded to the cramped, monastic cell of the art collector Utz. Rather than with indulged restlessness, the book deals with contained restlessness, with the moral ambivalence of art, the indifference of beauty to history; the neglect of civic

duty or natural humanity by those obsessed with the art object.

Chatwin died in a Nice hospital in 1989. In spite of his illness – he had been diagnosed as HIV positive –, he had been working on a final collection of miscellaneous writing which was published in the spring of 1989 as *What Am I Doing Here?*. It consisted of the occasional pieces he had written for a variety of magazines, on travel, art or personalities, and of some short fictional pieces composed in 1988. *Anatomy of Restlessness: Selected writings 1969-1989* was published posthumous in 1996. It is a sourcebook because it draws together seventeen pieces from magazines and journals. The book is divided into five sections and covers the main areas of Chatwin's output. It contains some autobiographical accounts of his own motivations to travel and his interest in the nomadic life. Another important topic is the world of visual art in which Chatwin championed the primitive and the simplistic.

## A modern version of the novel of quest

At a time when English novelists mostly stayed at home, **Chatwin travelled the world in pursuit of knowledge as much as for material**. His books, which he called 'searches', mix fact, fiction, autobiography, anthropology, travel reportage and intellectual inquiry.

## Criticism of Western materialism

Chatwin was drawn to people at the margins, living solitary and eccentric lives, in remote places. He argued that they were perhaps closer to the centre of things, and that they seemed to resist the insistent contemporary pressures of conformity and materialism. As a whole, Chatwin's thought was concerned with **the recovery of certain values which he believed the modern world had neglected**. He was a constant critic of contemporary Western materialism and an advocate of a new asceticism as a strategy for survival.

## Style

Chatwin was also a highly accomplished prose stylist. In spite of the vivid, pictorial quality of his writing and in spite of his ability to see the world clearly and sharply, all his stories are filtered through a **rich screen of literary allusion and reference**. His books usually have a condensed and episodic structure, built around a series of stories of extraordinary characters. The style is witty and elliptical, the chapters of a sometimes surprising brevity. It is also a narrative from which the author himself is largely absent and where the plot is never the most instrumental element. Side by side with the usual economy there is another dimension of Chatwin's style: **the sharpness of observation and the precise description of things**. Chatwin's prose is not psychological, but intensely visual. Adjectives are precise; colours are always given, flowers are named, spatial relations stated. It is this strong prose which secures the writer's relationship to the world outside and, at the same time, gives way to his questing abstract imagination.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the text about Bruce Chatwin's life and works and explain

- how Chatwin spent his childhood;
- the interests he developed during his life;
- why he left for Patagonia;
- the reason for his death;
- how his books can be classified;
- what his main concern was;
- the structure of his books;
- the features of his style.

## In Patagonia

Bruce Chatwin  
(1977)

**SETTING**

*In Patagonia* deals with Chatwin's real experience in the area in the far-off southern tip of South America, where he had decided to travel for six months because of a commission from *The Sunday Times Magazine* but especially because he was driven by a childhood desire to see that faraway land. Chatwin chose this almost forgotten territory because in the Western imagination it is the symbol of 'the point beyond which one could not go'. Chatwin uses personal details to convince the reader of the straightforwardness of his motives. He writes that he decided to go to Patagonia **to recover something of his past**: he wanted a replacement for the piece of supposed dinosaur skin that meant so much to him as a child and he also wanted to learn more about his uncle, Charley Milward. He wanted to see the land which he had once described as 'the safest place on earth'.

**THEMES**

The book consists of 97 sections where **the author himself is largely absent**. Chatwin was mainly interested in recording what he saw rather than his own feelings and reactions. The main themes are **travelling, the fascination with prehistoric cultures and exile, nomadism and human restlessness**. Patagonia was famous for its

community of Welsh exiles who led solitary and eccentric lives at the margins of society. In the writer's imagination they became **the symbol of the freedom of man to be what he chooses to be**. These characters reveal themselves through their physical appearance and their words or actions. Chatwin was in fact interested in detailed descriptions and in anecdotes rather than in psychological insight.

**STYLE**

Chatwin strings together his stories through a **central, but frequently invisible narrator** who describes the land, its history and people. Patagonia has no clear national identity; it is defined instead by its **disparate collection of people**.

Chatwin weaves different stories of Patagonia into a patchwork, made by the individual people, and manages to do so by placing each story with **concise statements of location and time**. He usually creates a timeline in each story – two hours, the span of a rain storm – but also locates readers in his physical surroundings by **cataloguing the details of the place**. His account of the journey abounds with vivid descriptions appealing to all the senses and evoking a more personal experience on the part of the traveller.

### Key idea

#### The purpose of quotations

One way in which Chatwin creates ethos involves mentioning works by earlier authors, to lend his work an air of authority. For example, *In Patagonia* includes the works of historians, scientists, dictionaries, and a number of authors such as Coleridge, Swift, Twain and Poe. He also tells several actual stories of his uncle Charley Milward. Quotations drawn from outside the text have many aims: not only do they provide authority, but they also offer differing perspectives, and draw a connection between

what he writes and the experience that he praises. Chatwin once said that 'one day Aunt Ruth told me our own surname had once been "Chettewynde", which meant "the winding path" in Anglo-Saxon, and the suggestion took root in my head that poetry, my own name, and the road were, all three, mysteriously connected'. For Chatwin literature was a product of individual experience and a way to interpret it. It must never, however, replace that experience.

**COMPETENCE:** READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION**1 READ** the texts and answer the following questions.

- 1 Why did Chatwin go to Patagonia?
- 2 What was Chatwin's main concern in writing the book?
- 3 What does the book deal with?
- 4 What are the narrative features of the book?
- 5 Why did Chatwin use quotations?

**T123****Chilean trucks<sup>1</sup> and Chilenos**

*The following text describes one of the many adventures Chatwin had during his journey to Patagonia. Travelling also means meeting animals and people whose existence you would not even imagine.*

I now had two reasons to head back to the Cordillera: to see Charley Milward's old sheep-station<sup>2</sup> at Valle Huemeules and to find Father Palacios's unicorn<sup>3</sup>. I took a bus to Perito Moreno and got there in a dust-storm. The restaurant was owned by an Arab, who served lentils and radishes<sup>4</sup> and kept a sprig of mint<sup>5</sup> on the bar to remind him of a home he had not seen. I asked him about traffic going north. He shook his head.

'A few Chilean trucks, maybe, but very very few.'

The distance to Valle Huemeules was over a hundred miles but I decided to risk it. At the edge<sup>6</sup> of town someone had written 'Perón Gorilla' in blue paint on an abandoned police post. Nearby was a pile of gin bottles, a memorial to a dead trucker; his friends chucked on<sup>7</sup> a bottle whenever they passed. I walked two hours, five hours, ten hours, and no truck. My notebook conveys something of the mood:

Walked all day and the next day. The road straight, grey, dusty, and trafficless. The wind relentless, heading you off<sup>8</sup>. Sometimes you heard a truck, you knew for certain it was a truck, but it was the wind. Or the noise of gears changing down<sup>9</sup>, but that also was the wind. Sometimes the wind sounded like an unloaded<sup>10</sup> truck banging over a bridge. Even if a truck had come up behind you wouldn't have heard it. And if you'd been downwind, the wind would have drowned the engine<sup>11</sup>. The one noise you did hear was a guanaco. A noise like a baby trying to cry and sneeze at once<sup>12</sup>. You saw him a hundred yards off, a single male, bigger and more graceful than a llama, with his orange coat and white upstanding tail<sup>13</sup>. Guanacos are shy animals, you were told, but this one was mad for you. And when you could walk no more and laid out your sleeping bag<sup>14</sup>, he was there gurgling and snivelling<sup>15</sup> and keeping the same distance. In the morning he was right up close, but the shock of you getting out of your skin was too much for him. That was the end of a friendship and you watched him bounding away<sup>16</sup> over a thorn bush like a galleon in a following sea<sup>17</sup>.

Next day hotter and windier than before. The hot blasts knocked you back, sucked at<sup>18</sup> your legs, pressed on your shoulders. The road beginning and ending in a grey mirage. You'd see a dust-devil<sup>19</sup> behind and, though you knew now never to hope for a truck, you thought it was a truck. Or there'd be black specks<sup>20</sup> coming closer, and you stopped, sat down and waited, but the specks walked off sideways and you realized they were sheep.

A Chilean truck did come on the afternoon of the second day. The driver was a cheerful tough<sup>21</sup>, his feet smelling of cheese. He liked Pinochet and was pleased with the general situation in his country.

**Bruce Chatwin**  
***In Patagonia***  
**(1977)**

Chapter 37

- 1 trucks. Camion.
- 2 sheep-station. Allevamento di pecore.
- 3 Father Palacios's unicorn. L'unicorno di Padre Palacios, missionario salesiano e studioso di paleontologia che Chatwin ha incontrato nel capitolo precedente e che gli ha raccontato dell'unicorno della Patagonia, contemporaneo della megafauna del tardo Pleistocene.
- 4 lentils and radishes. Lenticchie e ravanelli.
- 5 a sprig of mint. Un rametto di menta.
- 6 edge. Periferia.
- 7 chucked on. Vi gettavano sopra.
- 8 relentless, heading you off. Implacabile, che ti porta via.
- 9 gears changing down. Cambio che ingrana le marce più basse.
- 10 unloaded. Scarico.
- 11 drowned the engine. Soffocato il (rumore del) motore.
- 12 cry and sneeze at once. Piangere e starnutire al tempo stesso.
- 13 upstanding tail. Coda dritta all'insù.
- 14 sleeping bag. Sacco a pelo.
- 15 gurgling and snivelling. Che gorgogliava e frignava.
- 16 bounding away. Allontanarsi saltellando.
- 17 thorn ... sea. Cespugli spinosi come un galeone sul mare con il vento in poppa.
- 18 blasts ... sucked at. Raffiche spingevano indietro, risucchiavano.
- 19 dust-devil. Polverone.
- 20 specks. Puntini.
- 21 tough. Delinquente.



35 He took me to Lago Blanco, where the lake water was a dull<sup>22</sup> creamy white, and beyond was a basin<sup>23</sup> of emerald grass blocked by a line of blue mountains. This was Valle Huemeules.

Charley Milward was last here in 1919. The bar-keeper remembered his moustaches. 'Los enormes bigotes', she said, and imitated the way he hobbled with a stick<sup>24</sup>. The policeman was having his late-afternoon gin and she ordered him to drive me to the estancia. Meekly<sup>25</sup> he agreed, but to show his mettle<sup>26</sup> went home for a revolver.

The Estancia Valle Huemeules was painted red and white and bore the mark of efficient centralization. It was run by the Menéndez-Behety family, the sheep-farming moguls<sup>27</sup> of the South, who with a French wool-buyer bought Charley out after the First World War. The manager was a German and mistrusted me on sight<sup>28</sup>. I think he suspected I had a claim<sup>29</sup> on the place, but he did allow me to sleep in the peons' quarters.

They were in the middle of shearing<sup>30</sup>. The shearing shed had twenty bays<sup>31</sup> and as many shearers; wiry Chilenos, stripped to the waist<sup>32</sup>, their pants shiny black with grease<sup>33</sup> from the wool.

A driveshaft<sup>34</sup>, powered by a steam engine, ran the length of the gallery. There were noises of whirring pistons, slapping belts, ratcheting clippers and bleating sheep<sup>35</sup>. When the boys tied the animals' legs, all the fight went out of them and they lay, dead weight, till the torture was over. Then, naked and gashed<sup>36</sup> with red cuts about their udders<sup>37</sup>, they bounded wildly into the air as if jumping over an imaginary fence<sup>38</sup>, or jumping to be free.

The day ended in a vicious<sup>39</sup> sunset of red and purple. The supper bell rang and the shearers downed clippers and ran for the kitchen. The old cook had a sweet smile. He cut me off half a leg of lamb.

'I can't eat that much.'

'Surely you can.'

He held his hands across his stomach. It was all over for him.

'I have cancer,' he said. 'This is my last summer.' After dark the gauchos reclined against their saddles and stretched out with the ease of well-fed carnivores<sup>40</sup>. The apprentices fed poplar logs into an iron stove<sup>41</sup> on which two maté kettles<sup>42</sup> were boiling.

One man presided over the ritual. He filled the hot brown gourds<sup>43</sup> and the green liquid frothed to the neck<sup>44</sup>. The men fondled<sup>45</sup> the gourds and sucked at the bitter drink, talking about maté the way other men talked about women.

They gave me a straw mattress<sup>46</sup>, and I curled up on the floor and tried to sleep. The men threw craps<sup>47</sup> and their conversation turned to knives. They unsheathed their own blades<sup>48</sup> and compared their qualities, drumming the tips on the table. The light came from a single hurricane lamp<sup>49</sup> and the shadowy blades twitched<sup>50</sup> on the white wall above my head. A Chilean shearer made comic suggestions about what his knife could do to a gringo. He was very drunk.

Another man said: 'I'd better let the gringo sleep in my room.'

22 dull. Opaco.

23 basin. Conca.

24 he hobbled with a stick. Camminava zoppicando con un bastone.

25 Meekly. In modo docile.

26 mettle. Tempra.

27 moguls. Magnati.

28 mistrusted me on sight. Diffidò di me a prima vista.

29 I had a claim. Che volessi avanzare dei diritti.

30 shearing. Tosatura.

31 shed ... bays. Capanno aveva venti postazioni.

32 stripped to waist. A torso nudo.

33 grease. Grasso, unto.

34 driveshaft. Nastro trasportatore.

35 whirring pistons ... bleating sheep. Pistoni che sbuffavano, cinghie che sbattevano, macchinette per tosare, pecore belanti.

36 gashed. Sfregiate.

37 udders. Mammelle.

38 fence. Staccionata.

39 vicious. Crudele.

40 reclined ... carnivores. Si sdraiarono contro le loro selle e si stracchiarono soddisfatti come carnivori ben nutriti.

41 fed ... stove. Alimentavano la stufa di ferro con ciocchi di pioppo.

42 maté kettles. Bollitori del maté, bevanda eccitante per il suo contenuto di caffeina, diffusa nell'America Meridionale e ottenuta dall'infuso di foglie dell'albero tropicale *Ilex paraguariensis*.

43 gourds. Recipienti.

44 frothed to the neck. Schiumava fino all'orlo.

45 fondled. Accarezzavano.

46 straw mattress. Materasso di paglia.

47 threw craps. Tiravano i dadi.

48 unsheathed their own blades. Estrassero le loro lame.

49 hurricane lamp. Lanterna controvento.

50 twitched. Guizzavano



## VISUAL ANALYSIS

### 1 READ the text and write a heading to each section.

- Part 1 (lines 1-11): .....
- Part 2 (lines 12-31): .....
- Part 3 (lines 32-77): .....

### 2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.

 .....

 .....

 .....

a guanaco .....

The apprentices .....

 .....

### 3 DISCUSS the following questions in pairs.

- 1 Why did the narrator go to the Cordillera?
- 2 How did the narrator feel on the second day of the journey?
- 3 How did the shearing take place?
- 4 What did the narrator find out about the cook?
- 5 Analyse the features of Chatwin's style. What kind of narrator is employed? Does he speak about what he feels or does he merely describe what he sees? What effect is achieved?
- 6 Focus on the characters in the text. How does the author present them?
- 7 What aspects of travelling does Chatwin focus on in this text?

## ➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

### 4 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph to comment this statement with reference to the text you have read: 'Chatwin's technique may be defined "impressionistic"; for any event or person he meets he provides a few touches of detail to let the reader imagine the whole.'