REDMOND O'HANLON

Why the author and naturalist swapped the horrors of the jungle for those of the North Sea.

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Anyone who has read the *Just So Stories* can tell you what the crocodile has for dinner. But what does Redmond O'Hanlon – author, traveller and natural historian – tuck into of a quiet evening at his Oxfordshire cottage? His hilarious, compelling books of jungle exploration (*Into the Heart of Borneo*, *In Trouble Again* and *Congo Journey*) are so full of gorge-raising, stomach-turning, bowel-disordering delicacies that it seems a shame to find him sitting down to anything less disgusting than a weevil fricassée. Yet here he is feasting on tuna steaks followed by meringue banoffee pie, to which he adds a dollop of Ben and Jerry's The Full Vermonty ice-cream. 'Oh Redmond, you know it's bad for you!' exclaims his wife Belinda in despair – for the 56-year-old O'Hanlon has recently been diagnosed with an enlarged liver. But he remains undeterred. 'The children are out tonight,' he says with a twinkle, flourishing a bottle of red wine, 'so this is our chance to behave *disgracefully*.'

What will we do – wreck the joint? There is little scope for that. The O'Hanlons live in such an inspired state of chaos that, as one visitor remarked, anyone hoping to make home improvements would have to start by razing the cottage to the ground. All around the dining-room, books and papers are piled precariously high, like mountain ranges awaiting the next tectonic shift; every square inch of wall is papered with postcards, photographs and prints. A pair of buffalo's horns jut from a bookcase, whose packed shelves are edged with shells, skulls and the skins of small animals.

There are cabinets for beetles, butterflies, birds' eggs and one very terrifying spider. A young alligator (stuffed) appears to be clambering towards the ceiling, while a large pelican in a glass case presides over the entrance to the kitchen.

Small wonder, then, that O'Hanlon copes so well in jungles, having created one of his own. But for his new book (his first in seven years) he has left bee-eaters and liana creepers behind. *Trawler* tells of a voyage through the North Sea – battling against hurricane-force winds – to within a day's sailing of the polar icecap. It was, he says, the most frightening experience of his life. 'If you're in the jungle and someone fires a foot-long arrow at you, it's sort of flattering: you think it's wonderful that they're taking the trouble. But when this bloody great ocean is out to get you and you don't know what you've done to deserve it – that's when you really get scared.'

After the enormous success of his previous books, O'Hanlon had settled on New Guinea as his next destination; but then his daughter fell dangerously ill, and such a far-flung expedition became out of the question. Instead, he decided on a book about the wild places of Britain – which, by his reckoning, lay chiefly in the offshore waters where only trawlers sailed.

'I had no idea,' he says, 'just how difficult, how insane trawlermen's lives were. It's the most dangerous profession in Britain – more than 30 fishing vessels go down each year.' What fascinated him above all was the chronic sleep deprivation exacted by non-stop fishing. 'At the most we slept three hours in 36, but never in more than one-hour blocks – so you never complete a 90-minute sleep cycle; you never finish your dreams. And the result is this extraordinary mania: you just cannot stop talking – presumably because that is the only way the brain can organise itself.'

Consequently, *Trawler* is made up largely of bizarre conversations – many of them focussing on the strange creatures dragged up by the boats' nets

(including the hagfish which, like a true recruit to the O'Hanlon bestiary, likes nothing better than to burrow its way up a drowned man's anus). There are some priceless episodes, such as the story of the jailed trawlerman who protests at having to leave his warm, dry prison to return to sea; and O'Hanlon's descriptions of birdlife are as sublime as ever. But delirium does not make easy reading, and he anticipates a squall of criticism: 'Like with my old friend Mart' – he indicates a copy of Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* – 'the young suddenly turn on the old farts.'

Amis is one of many distinguished writers in O'Hanlon's circle, which includes the poets James Fenton and Craig Raine, the novelists Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, and the critics Peter Conrad and Blake Morrison. According to Will Self, whose novel *Great Apes* includes a description of O'Hanlon's cottage ('a great simulacrum of his own mind'), 'He's a real supporter of his friends: he keeps all their books in pristine condition, and whenever you publish a new one, you have to go over there and sign a copy of it. And because of his and Belinda's rootedness in that house, it represents a kind of touchstone for a lot of literary people.'

But clique-ishness is not in his nature, and his famously wild parties attract such disparate figures as Terry Wogan and the geneticist Richard Dawkins. His popularity is easy to understand: despite the relentlessly macho nature of his expeditions, his laddish sense of humour and his imposing physique, he is a gentle, soft-spoken man, full of charm and much given to spontaneous acts of kindness. ('Are you cold?' he asks, and goes off to turn on the central heating, returning a moment later with his father's fleece-lined RAF flying jacket, which he flings over my shoulders for good measure.)

'He used to come into the office once a month as natural history editor,' recalls Ferdinand Mount, the former editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'and he was a Father Christmas figure, distributing Crunchy bars to all the

members of staff and taking all the girls out to lunch. He was so generous that his miserable fee for editing must have been completely swallowed up by it. He's an enchanting mixture of scholarship and gaiety, and he's a source of wonderful, roguish gossip. I remember one *TLS lunch* where he kept us all spellbound for two and a half hours.'

Sadly, there is flipside to this expansive bonhomie. O'Hanlon is prone to terrible depressions – 'Awful black periods of inanition and paralysis' – which have brought him to the verge of suicide. He fears that it may be partly hereditary, since his father (a retired clergyman) is similarly afflicted. 'He just sits and stares at the wall. He thinks perhaps God doesn't exist.'

How does Redmond cope? Belinda clearly has a great deal to do with it – a protective, organising force who keeps the pressures of the world at bay. ('Belinda was captain of everything at her school,' he whispers. 'She's got all these badges locked away. She's even got one for cricket.') The two have been together for 37 years, and her Oxford dress shop Annabelinda not only pays the school fees for their teenage son and daughter, but acts as a telegraph post for Redmond's editors, since he eschews faxes and e-mail and has developed the habit of writing at night and sleeping for most of the day.

An album of black-and-white snaps shows the couple as they were when they met at Oxford in the mid-Sixties. He – hirsute and hunky – looks like an albino relative of the jolly Green Giant from the sweetcorn tins; she is a beauty in the Julie Christie mould. 'Redmond was big and bumbly and very different from other undergraduates,' she says. 'He had this marvellous book called *A Paddling of Ducks*, which was the opposite of the high-powered stuff that everyone else was reading; and I liked the fact that he wore Wellington boots.'

It is often said of O'Hanlon that he should have been born in the nineteenth-century – the heyday of his twin passions, exploration and

evolutionary theory – and one can easily imagine his great head, with its white hair and side whiskers, transformed into a Victorian bust. Although he likes to refer to himself as 'an old fatso', he looks trim enough, having lost a stone preparing for his revived New Guinea expedition – and the truth is that travelling, with all its risks, seems to be good for him.

'If you're walking nine hours a day trying to keep up with pygmies,' he says, 'you become horribly fit and healthy – no matter what parasites are getting to you – and therefore happy.' According to James Fenton, his travelling companion in Borneo, 'We started laughing as we got into our boat, and it carried on throughout the journey. Sometimes we just laughed all day long.' What O'Hanlon wants to do, he adds, 'is the impossible trip, pushing himself to the comic limit.'

As for Belinda, she claims not to fret while he is away. 'I have a good shutting-out mechanism, and I know he really *enjoys* having a hard time: it's all to do with pleasing matron.'

It is not difficult to see O'Hanlon's eccentricities as the products of a hidebound (almost, indeed, Victorian) upbringing. He hated his time at Marlborough: 'I could never see the attraction of public school, apart from the suffering. We were in these houses designed by the same man who did Dartmoor Prison, with bars all the way up the central well. There were constant beatings, and you had to hide yourself away to study.'

The school's saving grace was its biology teaching. But O'Hanlon's ambition to become a scientist was dashed by his hopelessness at maths: instead, he concentrated on English, gaining an A at A-level after a single term. It was the beginning of a brilliant – if chequered – academic career. Sent down from Merton College, Oxford for writing a risqué novel, he returned to take a congratulatory M. Phil; but his stint as a don ended

prematurely when he managed to teach his students the wrong century – 'I hadn't bothered to open the letter telling me that the curriculum had changed.'

Away from school and university, his life was by turns idyllic and nightmarish. His parents lived in a rambling vicarage in Wiltshire, 'and even though it was cold and dripping, it was a wonderful place for a boy, with a vast garden and woods around it – and because I was only back from school for fifteen weeks a year, it became incredibly special.' It was here that his love of nature was born – and where he found himself thrown into the century-old battle between Darwinism and Christianity.

'The reason Darwinism was so devastating,' he explains, 'is that there were all these vicars who loved their natural theology: the idea that God made everything, and studying His works was for His greater glory. My dad absolutely thought that – so I owe him my intense interest in biology.' Such was the Revd O'Hanlon's horror of Darwin that he banned his books from the house – as well as those of novelists such as Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad who explored his ideas. When Redmond first came across *War and Peace*, he enjoyed it so much that he assumed it too must be banned, and carried it off to read behind the bushes.

Redmond's mother, a former actress, was a late-comer to Christianity ('She was walking around Guildford Cathedral, and God sent down a tickly tentacle') and had all the zeal of a convert. When Belinda – a Catholic – came on the scene, Mrs O'Hanlon brandished a copy of *Fox's Book of Martyrs* at her son. '*Look at this!*' (He mimics her voice in falsetto.) 'Not long ago we were burning each other at the stake – and I'm glad to say that *we burnt more of them than they did of us.*'

Worst of all was the day when Redmond's father appeared in Oxford to take him to lunch at the Randolph Hotel – an extravagant gesture for a country vicar. Returning to his digs afterwards, Redmond found that his

mother had slipped into his room and made a bonfire in the garden of the pictures from his walls and suspect books from his shelves. ‘My flatmate was so scared that he went off and lived in the back of his Morris van for two weeks. I was shaking with anxiety and depression. I didn’t go home for a long time after that.’

What effect did all this have on him? Although he is now ‘an evangelical atheist’, he was left with an ingrained sense that ‘every deed is judged by God. There’s something fraudulent unless you’re suffering – then it’s OK to be alive.’ The bonfire gave him ‘a Russian feeling for books: they bloody matter’ as well as a need for ‘an obsessively secure, cave-like den.’ And, says Belinda, ‘He can’t cry. He’s hopeless with any emotion.’

Thank goodness, then, for the friends who have stood by him in his darkest hours – among them James Fenton, who suggested the Borneo trip. Travel writing seems so obviously O’Hanlon’s metier that it is hard to believe that he only stumbled on it at the age of 37; but, he says, ‘It had never occurred to me that you could just take off to Borneo – and that if you went far enough into the interior, you could see the same tattoos on the thighs of the warriors that Hose and McDougall described in the late nineteenth century.’

His first three travel books follow a distinctive format. Each features a gripping, near-impossible quest – to find an elusive rhinoceros (*Into the Heart of Borneo*), to reach one of South America’s highest mountains by way of an enormous swamp (*In Trouble Again*), to track down the African equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster (*Congo Journey)*. But equally important are his travelling companions: ‘The idea,’ James Fenton explains dryly, ‘is that Redmond goes off with someone else in amazingly uncomfortable conditions, and the other person fails to hack it.’ So, half-way through *In Trouble Again*, the hapless friend lured from his job in a London casino turns back in disgust:

‘Why should I put up with this?’ he demands woefully. ‘It’s nothing but rain and mosquitoes and the same bloody awful trees and endless rivers and disgusting food and being wet all the time… There’s no wine and no women and no song and nowhere sensible to shit.’

O’Hanlon’s fellow author Sara Wheeler describes him as ‘head of the I’ve-Got-a-Big-One school of travel writing’. What redeems him, however, is his willingness to send himself up and record the many insults hurled in his direction. ‘You should wash your clothes more often,’ he is told by a Congolese guide who keeps a girl in every village. ‘Women, Redmond – they like men washed…You stink like a bushpig!’ He also shows a vulnerable and sentimental side: in *Congo Journey* he clings to a protective fetish given to him by a witch doctor, and adopts a baby gorilla (which duly defecates all over him).

His books are so crammed with detail that one cannot help wondering how he manages to record it all. ‘In the jungle I keep a notebook in a plastic zip-up SAS pouch and scrawl in it as I walk along, because at the end of the day you’re absolutely exhausted, an old fat guy like me. But the main thing is to stop everyone moving off in the morning and have an hour to write, whatever’s happening.’ He produces a little black book filled with impossibly neat, tiny handwriting.

On a constantly lurching trawler, however, writing is impossible, so he resorted to a Dictaphone. ‘It’s the strangest thing being seasick…’ says a strained metallic voice against a howling wind, as he plays back one of the tapes. (‘Please!’ says Belinda. ‘Not in the middle of dinner!’) ‘…almost as bad as being malaria sick – right up from the depths – and having to hang on to the edge of a filthy bog in the shower room with the door that doesn’t quite shut…’ This is the O’Hanlon that his readers love, rehearsing his sufferings so vividly that you are thrilled to be anywhere but beside him.

But what about the conversations: are jungle guides and fishermen really as articulate as they seem in his books? Tony Lacey, his editor at Penguin, describes his dialogue as 'a deeply artful construct – much more artful than you realise'; but this is not to say that it is all made up. 'You have to edit dialogue,' argues O'Hanlon, 'or it would be a succession of swearwords and grunts. So a conversation might be compressed from remarks made over five months – anything to do with that particular thought.'

Trawler differs from its predecessors in not focussing on a quest, or even a specific destination; it is also has O'Hanlon setting sail without an old friend for company (though there is a marine biologist who acts as his mentor). This was fine, he says; what was terrible was living alone in Shetland as an apprentice fisherman while preparing for the voyage. 'I made the mistake of taking my family up there for two weeks, and then staying on for several months by myself. I'd never experienced real loneliness before. I was absolutely devastated: I missed my children so much that I went up to their little bedrooms and sniffed their pillows.' He was saved by a kindly postmistress, who introduced him to her family. His liver trouble, he believes, is not unrelated to the Shetland tradition of passing round the whisky cup.

The object of his forthcoming trip is to sight a rare tree kangaroo. 'It's the sweetest little kangaroo that ever was. They came across to New Guinea from Oz, and all the food was way up in the canopy of this rainforest, so they learned to climb. But no one's ever found one without multiple fractures, because they try to do the monkey thing and jump between trees, but they do it very slowly and they miss: *b-doomp!*'

Half-way through dinner, he offers to show me where he works; and as I follow him upstairs, I realise with a shock that the disorder I have seen in the dining-room is nothing – *nothing* – compared to the rest of the house. In his study, the floor is literally invisible: the only way through is by stepping from

one pile of papers to another. Rolled-up maps hang from the ceiling, and a pair of boxer shorts have made their way mysteriously into the bookcase. ('The first thing I do when he goes away' says Belinda, 'is to go around cleaning up all his socks.')

But I realise, too, that he is never entirely alone. Pinned all over the walls are drawings and paintings by his friend Douglas Winchester – the mentally fragile Oxford flatmate routed by O'Hanlon's mother – who killed himself in a blaze of petrol in Holland Park at the age of 24. O'Hanlon (who retrieved the remains of a foot, and keeps it in a coffee jar) produces a photograph of Winchester lying on a bed of dry leaves, rehearsing his own death. 'I think you should only kill yourself,' he says, 'when you're desperate enough to do that – not just get out a shotgun or some pills, but lie there covered with flames.'

There is, however, a happier memory that keeps the explorer going. It is of a farm in Wiltshire which belonged to one of his father's churchwardens, and which the young Redmond was allowed to explore in the company of a beautiful Labrador. 'Even today,' he says, 'before I start work on anything, I imagine myself getting on my bike and riding up to this enchanted place on top of the hill. And then I put my bike against the wall – I can still see the marks on the bricks – and I begin to write…And I feel completely safe: nobody can get me.'