

Topic Page: [Monsarrat, Nicholas \(1910 - 1979\)](#)

Definition: **Monsarrat** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

1910--79, English writer, noted for his novel *The Cruel Sea* (1951).



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Summary Article: **Monsarrat, Nicholas [John Turney]**

From *Continuum Encyclopedia of British Literature*

Monsarrat's lasting reputation rests largely on *The Cruel Sea* (1951), the best fictional portrait of the battle of the North Atlantic during World War II and one of the finest novels about any aspect of the war. In it, he makes vivid the efforts and sufferings of the mostly amateur sailors who shepherded the convoys that sustained Britain during the worst days of the U-boat blockade. Monsarrat's association with the sea, which continued through several more novels, may have cost him a larger reputation, but it has gained him an enduring place in the salty yet romantic subgenre created by such naval writers as Frederick MARRYAT, C. S. FORESTER, and Patrick O'BRIAN.

Monsarrat was reared in Liverpool, but the highlights of his youth were summers spent in Wales, where he took up sailing at an early age. After unhappy years at Winchester School, he read law at Trinity College, Cambridge. He then spent two years working in a solicitor's office, but he soon left the law to devote himself to writing. He was a prolific author from the beginning, publishing his first novel in 1934. He later came to think that of his early work, only *This Is the Schoolroom* (1939) had any merit. During the 1930s, Monsarrat's politics were leftist and pacifist, but after the war began, he joined the Royal Navy.

Monsarrat served in the small ships known as corvettes. Even while at sea, he continued writing, producing three slightly fictionalized books about his experiences afloat: *H. Monsarrat Corvette* (1942), *East Coast Corvette* (1943), and *Corvette Command* (1944), later collected as *Three Corvettes* (1945). The books remain thoroughly readable and present an interesting snapshot of one man's war, but they also show the restraint of an officer avoiding anything that might demoralize the public. Monsarrat himself later called them the notebooks from which he would create a very different book, *The Cruel Sea*. That large work, which followed two slighter novels about the war, was written while Monsarrat served as the British government's information officer in South Africa. It received the Heinemann Foundation Prize for literature in 1951 and was a best-seller in both Britain and the U.S. Its account of the battle of the Atlantic remains powerful. Though Monsarrat never probes his characters very deeply, the account of life aboard a small ship fighting the sea as much as the enemy is gripping.

Monsarrat continued work as a civil servant for several more years, serving as British information officer in Canada. His next novel, *The Story of Esther Costello* (1953), described how what began as charity could be transformed into something thoroughly selfish. Drawing on his experiences in Africa, Monsarrat wrote two novels set in a mythical British colony, *The Tribe That Lost Its Head* (1956) and *Richer Than All His Tribe* (1968), which essentially argued that the African colonies were not ready for independence and needed the continued guidance of Britain. Now a full-time writer, Monsarrat

remained prolific, producing historical fictions (*The White Rajah*, 1961), several more books involving the sea, and a book describing the siege of Malta during the Second World War (*The Kappillan of Malta*, 1973). Monsarrat made Malta his home for the last decades of his life.

In his later years, Monsarrat worked on two very large projects. One was an AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *Life Is a Four-Letter Word*, published in two volumes in 1966 and 1970, and in a condensed version as *Breaking In, Breaking Out* in 1971. The book is thoroughly readable, but omits large portions of Monsarrat's life, including much information about his three marriages. The other was his last sea novel, which was to cover the whole sweep of England's maritime experience from the time of Sir Francis Drake to the postwar decay of Britain's empire and the shipping industry that had helped create it. *The Master Mariner* (1978) follows a single sailor, cursed to sail for centuries after an act of cowardice before the Spanish Armada, through the whole story. The first volume, taking the story up to the death of Admiral Nelson, was published in 1978 as *Running Proud*. Monsarrat died before finishing the second volume, but his notes and a completed section on the slave trade appeared in 1980 as *Darken Ship*.

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