



Obituary: Brian Jacques

By *Richard Hill*

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Article Author:

[Jake Hope](#) [1]

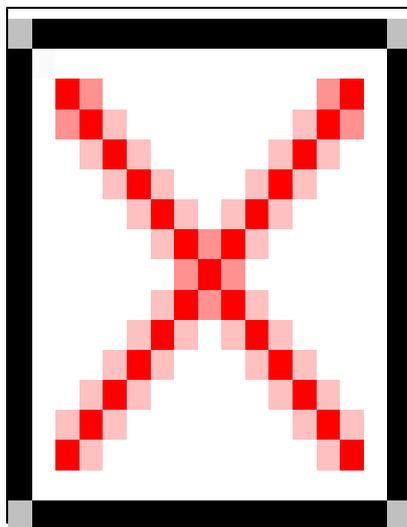
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Jake Hope remembers **Brian Jacques**.



Brian Jacques: 15 June 1939 ? 5 February 2011

Jake Hope writes?

One of the brightest stars in the firmament of children?s books, the well-loved author of the popular ?Redwall? series, Brian Jacques, died of a heart attack aged 71 on 5 February 2011.

Jacques was a consummate raconteur with a mischievous sense of humour and perfect comic timing. This belied the sensitivity, care and desire the writer had to always produce the best for children and young people. These high ideals and his interest in storytelling and imagination were to span every part of his career and his writing.

Descended from Irish stock, James Brian Jacques was born in Kirkdale, Liverpool on 15 June 1939. He grew up around the dockland areas of the city and attended St John?s School. Jacques was a great fan of the boy?s own adventures which his father, a lorry driver by trade, would read to him. Favourites included Stevenson, Haggard, Burroughs and Ballantyne, whose styles would come to influence his own writing for children.

A favourite tale with which Jacques would regale his young audiences was the story he wrote as a child about a crocodile and the bird that cleaned its teeth. His then teachers refused to believe this could be the work of a ten-year-old and he was given the cane for alleged plagiarism. Fortunately this experience was not to deter him and he would continue to draw upon the promise and future calling which showed from such an early age. Through his talks, Jacques was always a great advocate for the power of the imagination and was an inspirational role model for young people.

Leaving school at age 15, Jacques became a merchant seaman travelling to distant shores such as Valparaiso, New York and Yokohama. On returning to the UK, he had a varied career working, at times, as a railwayman, as a stand-up-comedian and later as a long-haul truck driver.

In the 1960s, Jacques joined forces with his two brothers and friends to form a folk-group, 'The Liverpool Fishermen' that entertained habitués of the Liverpool pub circuit, becoming regulars at The Spinners' Folk Club. The group went on to release an album, 'Swallow the Anchor' in 1971. Around this time, Anvil Press published the first of five collections of Jacques' poems, the last of which 'Jakestown' was named after the author's weekly radio show of the same name on BBC Radio Merseyside. The show, a firm favourite on the Sunday schedule, ran for over 20 years and gave a platform to his eclectic tastes including opera, classics and films.

During his time working as a truck driver, Jacques began delivering milk to the children at the Royal Wavertree School for the Blind. Whilst doing so, he offered to read the children stories and, frustrated by the angst-ridden stories he read, he became inspired to write a novel of his own. Jacques handwrote the ms on over 800 pages which he stored in a supermarket plastic bag. With his Wavertree audience firmly in mind, he consciously wrote the novel to be as descriptive as possible. The children at the Royal Wavertree School were to make a lasting impression upon Jacques who became a patron of the institution.

Unbeknownst to Jacques, the manuscript for his novel was discovered by his friend Alan Durband, head of the English department at Liverpool Institute. Durband, himself an author, sent the manuscript to his publisher lauding it as being the finest children's book he had ever read. Jacques was quickly offered a five-book publication deal and the founding stone of the 'Redwall' sequence was placed.

'Redwall' started a series of novels that would traverse the histories of the Mossflower Woods and their environs. The woods and their now famous abbey, Redwall, were a world inhabited by anthropomorphised mice, rats and other small creatures. The tales are hearty, swashbuckling yarns of good triumphing over evil and are replete with battles, Machiavellian sub-plots, sumptuous feasts and a varied assortment of endearing or treacherous characters.

From the outset, the books were to find a ready readership with children. 'Redwall' was one of the first books to win the Lancashire Book of the Year award, an award judged solely by young people. This accolade was conferred upon Brian Jacques on two subsequent occasions making him the author who has won the award the most times. This testifies to the uniquely special place his work occupies in the hearts and minds of young readers. Translated into 28 languages, the 'Redwall' books, totalling 21 in the series to date, have sold 20 million copies worldwide. The 22nd and final novel, **Rogue Crew**, will be published in May this year. The titles continue to play a valuable role in engaging reluctant readers.

In addition to his highly popular 'Redwall' series, Jacques wrote a themed book of recipes for his richly imagined world. Continuing a long tradition in children's literature, this cemented the role feasting and food played in his books, a fact Jacques always attributed to being an antidote to his own childhood in which he remembered rationing. In 'Castaways of the Flying Dutchman', a later series, Jacques created a Stevenson-esque, rollicking tale of adventure based around a ghost ship on the high seas.

Jacques was made Doctor of Letters at both Liverpool University and Liverpool John Moore's University. He was a much loved and instantly recognisable figure in his home city. His writing and innate ability to tell a ripping yarn will make him a greatly missed figure in the world of children's literature.

Brian Jacques leaves behind his wife Maureen, his two adult sons Marc and David, and granddaughter Hannah.

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