

Patrick Seale
1930–2014

Patrick Seale, who died in London on 11 April 2014, was a journalist, author, art dealer, and literary agent well known for his incisive and insightful writings on the contemporary Middle East and its recent history, particularly Syria, for which he felt a deep affinity. He had an exuberant and engaging personality, and was appreciated and admired by a large and far-flung circle of friends.

Patrick was born in Belfast in 1930 but spent his childhood and much of his adolescence in Damascus, where his parents ran an Irish Presbyterian mission. Between 1945 and 1948, Patrick attended Monkton Combe School near Bath, where he achieved some distinction as a rower. After national service, he went to Balliol College, Oxford, where he studied psychology, philosophy, and physiology, and graduated in 1953. He spent the next six years with Reuters in Paris and then returned to Oxford, where he studied at St Antony's College with Albert Hourani. He did not submit a doctoral thesis but wrote most of the text of what became his first book, *The Struggle for Syria: A Study of Post-War Arab Politics (1945–1958)*, published in 1965. Some fifty years later, it is still essential reading for that period in Syrian history, not least because of Patrick's profound understanding of the politics of the period and his intimate acquaintance with many leading politicians.

After St Antony's, he went to Beirut as a freelance journalist and assistant to Kim Philby, correspondent for *The Observer* and *The Economist*. When Philby defected to the Soviet Union in 1963, Patrick took over both jobs. He worked for *The Observer* in France, the Middle East, and London until 1972 and wrote occasional articles about Middle East politics for the rest of his life for *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, and the BBC and its Arabic and world services. During the 1970s, he opened a literary agency, a mail-order print business, and an art gallery in London. I first met Patrick at that time: I was finishing my doctoral thesis on Iraq under British mandate, and Patrick encouraged me to consider writing a biography of King Faisal. I could not combine this with a lectureship at Durham, which I took up in 1974, but we kept in touch, meeting in London and Oxford.

Patrick's profound convictions about Arab nationalism, his frequent visits to the Middle East, and his array of connections in Syria probably attracted him to write about President Hafez al-Asad of Syria, his junior by a few months. His controversial biography, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, was

published in 1989. I think Patrick saw Asad as a kind of last-ditch defender of the Arab nationalism he had imbibed as a youngster in Damascus. He regarded the Syrian president as standing up more or less unflinchingly to Israel, never making the undignified compromises made by his Arab contemporaries. The book came in for some criticism for what some regarded as its over-sympathetic portrayal of its subject, but the general consensus was that Patrick's privileged access enabled him to give a uniquely detailed and revealing picture of an opaque and generally impenetrable regime.

Patrick wrote several other books including *French Revolution, 1968*, about the events in France of that year; *Philby: The Long Road to Moscow* (1973), and *The Hilton Assignment* (1973), about attempts by British and French mercenaries to overthrow Colonel Qaddafi in 1971, all with Maureen McConville, a colleague at *The Observer*. He also wrote a biography of the Palestinian assassin, *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire* (1992). Oxford gave him a D.Litt. for his published work in 1995.

Patrick returned to his favorite topic, Syria-Lebanon for his last substantial work, *The Struggle for Arab Independence: Riad el-Solh and the Makers of the Modern Middle East* (2010), about the first prime minister of independent Lebanon. In the last few years of his life, Patrick was deeply affected by the Syrian civil war, which represented the collapse of so many of the hopes for the country for which he had so much affection. His despair was reflected in a line from one of his last articles: "Both sides believe they can win, but neither can win. . . . Syria will be a field of ruins."

Patrick's work on Syria will endure. And he will live on in my memory as a man of great kindness and affection, a devoted father, a most entertaining bon viveur, and an unfailingly good companion. ✂

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