

The man who's died twice



George Monbiot is a passionate, campaigning journalist who has had hair-raising adventures all over the world. Simon Hodgson caught up with him over a cup of tea in London.

I don't know if you read George Monbiot's column in *The Guardian*. If you do, you'll know his views on topics as diverse as nuclear power (getting better but still unnecessary) and Israel's invasion of Lebanon (premeditated and unnecessary). Or you might have seen his books including *Captive State* (an analysis of the undemocratic power wielded by large corporations) and *Heat – How to Stop the Planet Burning* (answer: a 90 per cent cut in carbon emissions). Equally, I don't know what you think of Monbiot. Earnest and intense? Too 'right on' for his own good? Strident? Aggressive even?

Well – on the basis of my meeting with him at least – you're wrong. He's a charming, faintly dishevelled chap with an easy grin. "In a way maybe I'm allowed to remain mild mannered," he says, "because I've got an outlet for my anger. Perhaps if I didn't have that outlet I'd be smashing things up. I feel very lucky that I can get things off my chest – and having a column is a wonderful way of doing that."

And – with apologies to all you *Guardian* readers out there – he's got a surprising sense of humour too. His

conversation is punctuated with dry asides and funny anecdotes. Like the time he was written up as dead in a Brazilian newspaper: he had a run-in with the military police and had to flee the state in question on a night bus. Walking into the headquarters of an NGO the next morning he found them on the phone to the *Guardian's* correspondent in Rio, aghast to hear that a British journalist had been garrotted. Monbiot takes up the story: "This guy turns to me and says, 'Have you heard about this British journalist who's been killed by military police?' 'No,' I said, 'where about?' 'Just close to Bacabal.' 'No – that's where I was – that's terrible. What's this guy's name?' 'George Monbiot' 'That's me!' Somewhat to my regret it didn't get into *The Guardian*. I would have framed that one." He dissolves in laughter.

There's a hint of the Boy's Own Paper in this story, but it's typical of Monbiot's career so far. He studied Zoology at Oxford and adored the great minds teaching the course. But even at that stage his latent environmentalism left him frustrated with its content. "While the zoology course was brilliant, on the environment there was almost nothing. We had one, or possibly two lectures on environmental issues, and they were staggeringly naïve and simplistic. They were the only occasions on which I felt I knew more than the lecturer did."

In his second year he set his heart on his dream job – working for the Natural History Unit at the BBC in Bristol. "I made such a nuisance of myself that I was finally given a job with the words 'since you're so f***ing persistent you can have the job'," he grins. As a radio producer, Monbiot made a number of investigative environmental programmes. He researched the fate of a huge bulk carrier sunk off the Irish coast, exploring the evidence that it had been deliberately scuppered despite carrying a variety of toxic pollutants. "And we uncovered a chimpanzee smuggling network from the Ivory Coast to Europe, where the

chimpanzees were being used by beach photographers. We managed to get the Head of Customs in Abidjan offering to sell us some. This was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life; there were many more stories like that to be told."

But then everything changed. There was a big row between the BBC and the Government, and a new management team installed. "The BBC's confidence just disappeared overnight – it turned from being a very brave, robust, independent organisation to a cowering, timorous group which just wasn't going to stand up to anyone. It was made very clear I wouldn't be able to make programmes like that."

A staff job-for-life didn't appeal, so Monbiot set off for Indonesia, funded by the advance from a book publisher. There he spent six months with a photographer documenting the Indonesian Transmigration Programme: vast numbers of people being moved from the inner islands (Java and Bali) to the outer islands with \$5bn of World Bank money. "We had an extraordinary time," he recalls. "We were very nearly killed on several occasions; it was extremely hazardous but also absolutely fascinating. The only means by which we could get to where we wanted to go was to walk across the entire island which took four weeks – we came out with severe vitamin deficiency and tropical ulcers. We came across stories of horrendous suffering. The trans migrants themselves were effectively dumped in the jungle without any facilities – no schools, no hospitals, no roads – in places where they couldn't grow their crops." He wrote the story up as a book – *Poisoned Arrows* – which sold well.

Similar adventures followed in Brazil and Kenya resulting in two more books – *Amazon Watershed* and *No Man's Land*. But a very nasty bout of malaria ("I was pronounced clinically dead," confides Monbiot – are you seeing a pattern here?) put an end to his travelling. "The effect it had was to knock my resistance to every bug that came along so I just was

perpetually ill. After about four or five months of that it wasn't any fun anymore. So I finished the research for that book as quickly as I could, got home, wrote the book and thought 'that's it!'

Back in Britain he found himself – almost by accident – involved with the fledgling roads movement at Twyford Down. "There was this sense that a small band of very committed people could change the world. It reminded me very strongly of the peasant movement that I'd come across in Brazil. I realised that there was strong continuity with what I'd seen abroad. All the issues I'd been covering there were fundamentally land issues – they were to do with the ownership and expropriation of land and that something very similar was happening with the massive Conservative Government road programme."

But behind the Government, Monbiot saw a more sinister and undemocratic force. "While looking into those issues I began to become aware of the power corporations have over our lives. There are striking examples of how corporations can exercise more power than democracy."


His book on the topic – Captive State – led in turn to some proposed solutions in The Age of Consent (anyone for a reformed World Trade Organisation? Form an orderly queue...). His most recent book Heat has just been published.

It's quite a story, and I ask him what he plans next. After the Amazon, East Africa and West Papua, where is there to go? Wales, obviously. "My wife is Welsh and can't speak it at home," he says, "and you just can't grow fruit and veg in the South East of England – it's too dry now." (Monbiot maintains five allotments.) "Besides, I want to spend a bit less time with my computer," he adds.

But I don't see it happening. He's too driven. "I feel that we have got an extraordinary set of opportunities – with extremely good global communications; if people are suffering or if environmental resources are being destroyed we can find out straight away. We have an unprecedented set of opportunities to protect human rights and the environment and the fact that we are not taking those opportunities makes me furious." He says, gently.

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