

# OSWALD BRETT Marine Artist



*Marine artist Oswald Brett aboard the Endeavour Replica, 2011.*

Oswald Brett, the Grand Old Man of marine art, has just celebrated his 91st birthday. Still hale and hearty, he continues his life-long passion for portraying ships and the sea, a genre in which he has long been recognized as one of the great masters. Bruce Stannard spoke with him at his home in New York.

Oswald Longfield Brett is that rarity in the marine art world, a painter with a profound personal understanding of ships and the sea. Having spent much of his long life voyaging across the oceans of the world he has an intimate first-hand knowledge of the power of wind and water and their subtle and sometimes savage influence upon the ways of a ship at sea. It is this deep knowledge, borne of long experience that stamps his paintings with an unmistakable aura of authenticity, so much so that his ships invariably seem poised to sail right off the canvas. Looking closely at his finely detailed portrait of the barque James Craig with her crew aloft on the fore t'gallant yard, muzzling sail in the teeth of a southerly blow, I have no difficulty at all in imagining the shrieking of the wind, in sensing the scent of the sea and in feeling the sharp sting of salt

spray on my face. It is one thing to portray a square-rigger standing ship-shape and Bristol fashion at a quiet berth, but quite another to capture the power and the glory of the vessel pitching headlong through a rising Tasman Sea. Os Brett's paintings capture the moment and give us a vivid glimpse of a way of life that has now vanished from the oceans of the world.

Oswald Longfield Brett spent an adventurous childhood on Sydney's vast Harbour, paddling about Watson's Bay in tiny cedar canoes, moseying around the towering hulk of the mid-19th century emigrant clipper Sobroan in Berry's Bay and always keenly observing and sketching the magnificent ocean liners and cargo ships that in the pre-war years made Sydney one of the busiest port cities in the world.

When Captain

Alan Villiers sailed into Sydney in his lovely little full-rigged ship Joseph Conrad in December 1935, the lanky 14-year-old Brett immediately was among the first to climb aboard. He was so smitten by the ship's beauty that he resolved on the spot to run away to sea in her. Villiers, who was to become a life-long friend, would have gladly taken the boy with him on his circumnavigation had Brett's anxious parents not balked at the idea of their only son embarking on a perilous Cape Horn passage.

Notwithstanding his parents' reservations, the sea already had a firm grip on young Brett's mind. As a child with a prodigious natural gift for drawing, he discovered early on that he could easily earn good money by painting the ships he saw every day on the Harbour. When he flunked out of high school in his early teens, his father, who was a serving army officer, World War One veteran and a strict disciplinarian, insisted that he enrol in the art course at East Sydney Tech. Young Brett never looked back. Studying art during the Great Depression he completed the five-year course in three and then went straight to work. He has been hard at it ever since.

Os Brett was still a boy when he met John Allcot, the great marine painter



*Squally afternoon Tasman Sea. The barque James Craig off Sydney shortening sail in a strong southerly breeze. The vessel is speaking Howard Smith's steamer Burwah, circa 1920.*



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who was to have a profound personal and professional influence on his life. Allcot was the first to recognise and encourage his emerging artistic talent. He also shared with him the hair-raising stories of his own life as a foremast jack "cold, wet and hungry" in the big British limejuicers that sailed out of Liverpool in the South American and Australian trades.



*Running the Easting. The full rigged ship Joseph Conrad, Captain Alan Villiers, Tasman Sea 1936.*

Undeterred by Allcot's tales of the "dog's life" that he had endured at sea, young Brett was savvy enough to understand that if he was to become an accomplished marine artist he had to have sea time. He had only just turned 18 when he signed articles aboard the Burns Philp freighter Malaita, bound for Papua New Guinea, the Solomons and the fabled islands of the South Pacific.

It was the beginning of a lifetime of voyaging. In October 1944 he joined the crew of the 83,000 ton RMS Queen Elizabeth, the mighty Cunard liner in which he would serve throughout the Second World War. He was aboard the drab-grey ocean monarch as an ordinary seaman, ferrying Anzac diggers to North Africa and later in her role as the so-called Atlantic Ferry, in which she transported hundreds of thousands of American soldiers to England and the eventual

liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe. Promoted to Lookout, he spent untold hours in the crow's nest scanning the sea. From that lofty vantage point he saw the North Atlantic in all its moods: the furious seas of winter with massive waves as white as milk and the balmy days of summer when American GIs lounged on deck, shooting craps and blowing on the bones (dice) for luck.

In England, Brett was not backward in coming forward, especially where his sea heroes were concerned. He wrote to the Poet Laureate, John Masefield, who promptly wrote back inviting him to visit his country home in Oxfordshire. Brett, who spent a memorable day with the great man, still recites reams of Masefield's immortal sea poetry. The illustrious British war artist and marine painter Charles Pears was another who invited him home, this time to Falmouth, the historic Cornish seaport where in the 19th century so many of the great windships anchored for

orders.

During the war years Brett often fetched up in New York, but instead of roistering with his shipmates in waterfront bars, he took himself off to Manhattan's antiquarian booksellers where he started collecting books on maritime history. His highly specialised personal library must now rank as one of the finest collections of its kind in the world.

It was in New York that Os Brett met and married the American fashion designer Gertrude Steacey. They settled on Long Island and raised a family, but although he has now lived in the United States for 66 years, he still speaks with a quiet, laconic and almost undiluted Australian accent. In the delightful clutter of his studio, a cramped upstairs room in his home at Levittown, Brett is surrounded by the kind of nautical treasures one

expects to find in a great maritime museum. Paintings by some of the most revered figures in marine art – Charles Robert Patterson, Anton Otto Fischer and John Allcot – jostle for space in a library that contains thousands of books, all of them dealing with ships and the sea.

Over the years Oswald Brett has always remained busy as a specialist marine painter and many highly significant commissions have come his way. His work now hangs in some of the world's major collections including the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, the White House in Washington and the Australian National War Memorial in Canberra. He has always been extremely generous in donating his paintings to help raise funds for historic ship restorations including the Wavertree in New York, Balclutha in San Francisco, Polly Woodside in Melbourne and James Craig and the Endeavour replica in Sydney.

In 1971 Columbus Lines came to him with the kind of commission that any red-blooded marine artist might kill for. He could travel the world whenever and wherever he liked as a guest in the Owner's Cabin on Columbus ships, in return for a painting of each of the vessels in which he voyaged. Os Brett made 20 such voyages over 31 years in which he logged well over 240,000 nautical miles.

His ocean voyaging came to an end in 2002, but at 91, he thinks nothing of travelling by air to Sydney where he still has a legion of friends and admirers. Oswald Brett's life shines like a beacon for all those with a dream of the sea. "Don't wait for your ship to come in," he says sagely, "swim out after it."

Oswald Brett's beautifully illustrated autobiography **OSWALD BRETT Marine Artist** is published by Maritime Heritage Press. Further information regarding the book may be obtained on line at [www.maritimeheritagepress.com](http://www.maritimeheritagepress.com)

