

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry – a remarkable man

Written by Andy Owen



"It's madness to hate all roses, because you got scratched with one thorn, to give up all dreams because one of them didn't come true - to give up all attempts, because one of them failed.

It's folly to condemn all your friends, because one has betrayed you, to no longer believe in love, just because someone was unfaithful or didn't love you back - to throw away all your chances to be happy, because something went wrong.

There will always be another opportunity, another friend, another love, a new strength. For every end, there is always a new beginning...

"And now here is my secret - a very simple secret:

It is only with the heart, that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

The Little Prince, 1943.

That beautiful novella was written by a truly fascinating Frenchman, called Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

I first came across it in the Sixties. Its message is profound - and had quite an effect on me at the time. But, a lot of things did in those halcyon days.

I was reminded of it again recently, together with his other wonderful books, which I have just finished reading. I thought it would be good to delve a bit deeper into the person who wrote them.

And, I'm glad I did. He was one hell of a man - one of the great pioneers of aviation - a writer, poet, aristocrat and a true hero of France.

I am very taken with him.

He was his own man. That sits well with me...

Have a read and make your own mind up.

Saint-Exupéry is the most widely translated author in the French language - and became a laureate of several of France's highest literary awards. He also won the United States National Book Award.

His birthplace - Lyon - named its main airport after him.

Antoine was a fascinating character and a modern-day Peter Pan - a free-spirited and mischievous man, who loved to fly and never wanted to grow up.

Childhood was a lost golden age for him. He longed for it constantly and was dogged by nostalgia for his early years.

He was an adult when he wrote: *"This world of childhood memories will always seem to me, to be hopelessly more real than the other."*

He was born in Lyon in 1900, into a family of minor nobility.



He was one of five children - and he enjoyed a happy and blissful childhood, growing up in two beautiful châteaux - one, at Saint-Maurice-de-Rémens, belonging to a great-aunt - and the other, near Saint-Tropez, to their maternal grandparents.

It was in the former, with its mysterious attics and inviting woodland park, that Antoine created what he described as *"the secret kingdom of his childhood", his "interior world of roses and fairies."*

His father died when Saint-Exupéry was only three.

His mother, Marie, was very caring and unceasingly attentive - and the children grew up in a safe and loving environment.

As he grew older, Saint-Exupéry became fascinated by early experiments in flight and was an avid reader - especially Jules Verne and Hans Christian Andersen.

He had started to write poetry at an early age and this continued all his life.

He disliked school and was an uninterested scholar. He also failed as a naval candidate at the École Bossuet in Paris. He decided to train as an Architect, but had little or no aptitude for that, either.

He was drifting - borrowing money from his mother to support himself.

He continued his writing and then got noticed. People loved his work and he was soon invited into literary circles in Paris, which, after a few meetings, he started to intensely dislike.

He couldn't stand intellectuals and was completely uneasy with the claustrophobic and 'cliquey' group that invited him in and frequented the meetings.

He liked his own space...

He always had, right from his childhood. It was very important to him - and he started to increasingly spend a lot of his working and social life, in the corners of cafés.

He felt at home there and the people he met on a daily basis, he mostly found to be 'real' and without pretention.

At the end of most evenings, he was usually found alone with "a drink at his elbow, a cigarette in his hand, doing silent battle with a sheet of paper."



In 1921, Saint-Ex received his call-up papers for the French Air Force and went for training in Strasbourg. While there, he wrote to his mother, "*Maman, if you only knew the irresistible thirst I have to fly.*"

He didn't have to wait too long.

He was awarded his pilot's licence in 1922 - and after he was demobbed, he landed his first flying job with a commercial company, taking tourists up for twenty-minute rides.



This soon bored the pants off him and, after a short time, he joined the Compagnie Latécoère, who were the most ambitious of the country's mail-carrying airlines, later to become Aéropostale.

France was then the second-largest colonial power - and Latécoère, with a fleet of Breguet 14's - was opening up a network of mail routes to French Morocco, Dakar and then to Buenos Aires, Rio, and Patagonia.



He had fallen on his feet.

Nothing could have been better suited to the courageous, intransigent Saint-Ex, than the life of a pilot with Aéropostale.

The work was dangerous and demanding, the discipline rigorous and the solitude unbroken. But he loved every minute of it.

In his marvellous books, his descriptions of the hours he spent alone in the cockpit are intensely evocative. He recalls piloting his craft from Toulouse to Casablanca and Dakar, at the mercy of sandstorms, snow, and freak winds.

He tells of scary journeys, flying low through mountain passes and over mile after mile of desert, where Moorish tribesmen shot at the tiny planes as though they were birds.

The Breguet 14 was the most reliable aircraft of that time, but it was pitifully frail by current standards, with a wooden propeller, an open cockpit, and an average range of under four hundred miles.



It also had no radio, no suspension, no sophisticated instruments, and no brakes.

Planes regularly broke down or crash-landed and airmen were taken captive and held hostage for weeks at a time by tribesmen.

Maps were crude, and pilots mainly navigated by key landmarks – a river, a field or perhaps a row of trees, or a farmhouse. It was easy to get lost in heavy rain or fog, or just in the dark, and weather predictions were often fatally unreliable.

But, despite all of this, Saint-Exupéry absolutely adored his life.

After a year, he was made chief of the airfield of Cape Juby, in the Western Sahara - probably the most desolate airstrip in the world.



Never had he been happier.

"I have a great need for solitude," he wrote. "I suffocate if I live for fifteen days among the same twenty people."

He loved the wide-open spaces of the Sahara. He loved the isolation, the independence and the silence.

And he loved the long, lonely flights, which are brilliantly depicted in his first novel, "Southern Mail" (1929).

While in the Sahara, he made friends with the nomad children and he came to depend on the fierce esprit-de-corps that existed between members of the company.

He was committed to the mail service and because of this, he was bound inextricably to his comrades.

It was during this period that his reputation as a writer was established, and he became known to the world.



After Cape Juby, Saint-Ex was assigned to South America, to take part in the opening of mail routes linking Buenos Aires with Brazil, Patagonia, and Paraguay.

He was appointed as a Director of the Argentine Air Mail service.

It was another perfect situation for him, as here, in the majestic silence of the Andes, he found a romance every bit as potent as that of the African desert.

It had a *massive* effect on him.

In later life, he talked about his memories of Patagonia, of glaciers and Indians and of the sheep on Tierra del Fuego, *"who, when asleep, disappeared in the snow, but whose frozen breath looked from the air like hundreds of tiny chimneys."*

He often flew at night and it was this nocturnal "battle with the stars" that he explores so emotionally in *Night Flight* - his second novel.



The book was a great success.

The public loved it and a film was made of it.

Guerlain produced a scent - Vol de Nuit - which was dedicated to Saint-Exupéry and sold in a bottle emblazoned with propellers.

For all his courage and his instinct for adventure, there remained in Saint-Ex, a tendency for childishness. In life, as in his writing, he harked back constantly to childhood.

He apparently had fits of temper. He thought it funny to drop water bombs from upstairs windows - and liked rolling oranges down the keys of a piano, which he maintained made it sound like Debussy.

When it came to women, Saint-Ex fell for those with whom he could sustain his world of make-believe.

His first serious love was Louise de Vilmorin.

She was a writer too and was deeply nostalgic for an "enchanted garden childhood." In her mother's imposing house in the Rue de la Chaise, she told her stories, he recited his sonnets, and together they played at being a fairy prince and princess.

In the end, he wasn't rich enough for her and the relationship ended.

It was not until 1931 that Saint-Ex finally found a wife, Consuelo Gómez Carillo, who, at first sight, must have seemed like perfection.



She was tiny and lovely and capricious. Seeing them together, a friend described the couple as *"a little bird perched on a huge stuffed bear"*.

Once, when asked where she came from, the young woman winsomely replied, *"I have come down from the sky, the stars are my sisters."*

Saint-Ex of course, found this enormously attractive - which was fortunate, as apparently, Consuelo was rather heavy duty. She lied and exaggerated pretty much to order - and was wildly extravagant.

And, she was also ferociously jealous of her husband's success as both writer and airman.

They had explosive rows and arguments and were always separating, but Antoine returned to her time and again. He seemed to need her.

Soon after the publication of *"Night Flight,"* in 1931, Saint-Ex's career as a commercial pilot came to an end. In spite of Latécoère's pioneering expansion, it had been forced into liquidation.

By the middle of 1933, there were no independent airlines left. They had all been subsumed by Air France.

But by now, Saint-Exupéry was a big star, loved by the people and his artistic peers.



Even though he was hopelessly irresponsible with money and was nearly always hard up, he still made an adequate income from journalism and from propaganda work for the newly formed national airline.

However, he always was on the lookout for more...

In December 1935, Saint-Exupéry attempted to win a race from Paris to Saigon and take home a substantial prize.

The race was sponsored by the *Aéro-Club de France*, which had offered a prize of approximately £16,000 or \$70,000, to the winner, providing the finishing time was less than 90 hours.

The distance was estimated at 13,800 miles.

Any airplane type could be entered in the race as long as it had an official airworthiness certificate and a flight crew of two, or a single pilot with an autopilot.

Antoine was flying with his navigator-mechanic André Prévot in his recently acquired Caudron C.630 Simoun.



After his experience in Africa, Antoine was confident he could win the prize. His planned route was Paris – Tunis – Benghazi – Cairo – Saigon.

After 19 hours and 38 minutes of flight, while cruising by night over the Egyptian desert, they encountered poor weather conditions with heavy rain.

They decided first to climb to 2,500 meters but couldn't climb above the clouds, so they reduced their altitude to 1,000 meters then 400 meters and even lower.

It was a big mistake.

The aircraft struck a sand dune and crashed near Wadi el Natrûn in Beheira Governorate, Egypt. They both stepped out of the plane, shook up but uninjured.



They knew they were in trouble, as they had very few rations to sustain them.

After four days of walking, they became seriously dehydrated and started hallucinating, often walking in search of water or safety, only to find themselves back with their wrecked plane.

They were close to giving up, when they were luckily spotted by some locals and rescued.

But a few years later, he was at it again...

In 1938, he went to the United States to attempt another record-breaking flight from New York to Nicaragua. He not only failed, but this time nearly killed himself in the process, crash landing in Guatemala City.

He emerged alive from the wreckage, but had significant injuries.

Saint-Exupéry spent the next 28 months in America recovering and deciding on his future. He continually refused to learn English. He wrote three books while he was in the U.S – *Pilote de guerre*, *Lettre à un otage* and *Le Petit Prince*.

It turned out to be the most miserable period of his life. He was isolated and not in the best of health - suffering from the results of his accident, on top of years of physical injury and neglect.

A friend visited him and found him lying in a darkened room, silent and depressed, with a copy of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales beside his bed.

Saint-Ex consoled himself with a number of low-key affairs, but he sought a cosy intimacy rather than sex – almost certainly as a result of his physical condition.

During the last year of his stay in America, Saint-Ex became desperate to return to Europe and have an active participation in the Second World War.

He finally left America in April of 1943, and joined up with a French squadron in Algeria - although he was far past the maximum age for such pilots, overweight and in rapidly declining health.



Despite his condition, he insisted on being allowed to fly.

He was drinking heavily to dull the pain of his old injuries - and his colleagues had to lace his boots because he couldn't bend over.

They also had to lift him in and out of the cockpit.

His fellow-pilots were proud of him, but his superiors regarded him as the most difficult command in North Africa.

One pilot observed, "*Saint-Ex was done for and he knew it.*"

In May of 1944, he was posted to Sardinia and he started flying reconnaissance missions for the Americans.

On July 31st, 1944, in preparation for the impending allied invasion of Southern France, Saint-Exupéry took off from an airfield on the island of Corsica to take reconnaissance photographs in the area of Grenoble.



He never returned.

Exactly what happened remains a mystery to this day.

After eight days, he was officially declared missing in action, presumed shot down by the enemy.

He was 44 years of age.

54 years later - in 1998 - a French fisherman found Saint-Exupéry's identity bracelet tangled in his nets in the ocean off Marseille.



Two years after that, some divers found the remains of his aircraft in the same area.

But, perhaps significantly, they found no evidence of damage from enemy action on the remains of the aircraft.

However, in July 2006, a former Luftwaffe pilot, Horst Rippert, claimed he had shot down a P-38 with French colours near Marseille on that day.

But, because of the state of the aircraft found by divers, this was considered dubious, so the ultimate cause of his death still remains unknown and continues to be the subject of abundant conjecture.

When the war was over, he was proclaimed a hero, accorded in records "*une mort glorieuse.*"

His mysterious death assured the growth of his posthumous fame, in particular that of his final work of fiction, *The Little Prince*, written in the United States and published in 1943.

There is no doubt that Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was an extraordinary character.

He was enormously talented, focused and driven – but at the same time, immensely fragile and flawed.

When you think about it, that description fits a lot of great people.

He was probably a pain in the ass a lot of the time.

But he was a *big* man.

A man's man.

A charmer he was not.

After researching his life and achievements, I found myself drawn to him.

I would have liked to have visited one of his café haunts and had a chat with him for a few hours, over a bottle or two.

That, I'm sure, would have been truly fascinating.

Mind you, he'd have probably told me to clear off.

RIP Antoine. You deserve it.

