

## NOTES, QUERIES AND SHORTS

Peter Hulme

### “William Rees Williams in Dominica: An Addendum”

Sue Thomas’s recent article in the *Jean Rhys Review* (1996) greatly added to what we know about Jean Rhys’s father, and did much to illuminate his Dominican context. I simply add two archival pieces. The first is a copy of a notice announcing the sale of Rees Williams’s plantations, which appeared in one of the local papers, *The Dominican*, on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1900. The second consists of two passages from early versions, now held in The British Library, of what was eventually published as Rhys’s story, “My Dear Darling Mr Ramage” in 1969 and with further slight alterations as “Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers” in the collection *Sleep It Off, Lady* in 1976. These early versions exist with a number of different titles, such as “Mr Rawlings”, “The New Road”, “The Price of Peace”, and “A Candle in the Sun”, with Ramage often called Rawlings. It has always been recognised that the relationship in that story between Rosalie and her father, Dr Cox, is based on Rhys’s relationship with her father. The two passages give more detail about her sense of her father, possibly repeating stories which he had told her. The passages occasionally overlap with the chapter, “My Father”, in *Smile Please* (1982: 67-73). They suggest more friction between her father and her mother’s family than is apparent in published material, but this could of course be Rhys’s imaginative projection of her father’s hostility, perhaps suggested in the mythic quality of the passages, where the island itself is the real seductress and any actual woman likely to prove a disappointment.

The second part of the first passage refers to the “little estate up in the hills” which Rees Williams bought soon after his arrival on the island in 1881. As Sue Thomas notes, local criticism of Rees Williams began shortly afterwards, with the *Dominica Dial* writing as early as 1885: “... it is somewhat remarkable that this officer can find time to devote no inconsiderable amount of attention to agricultural pursuits at Bona Vista. Dr Rees Williams is constantly absent from town, and there have been cases within our own knowledge where his services have been urgently required by patients who were cheerfully told that they would find him at Bona Vista, two hours

good riding distance away" (5.ix.1885; quoted in Thomas 1996: 7). As Rhys remembered it in *Smile Please*, soon after her father's arrival in Dominica, "he was optimistic enough to buy two estates in the hills... Optimistic because, being a doctor, he spent his life working in the town and the districts near it, and neither of his purchases was a paying proposition. The larger of the two, Bona Vista, was very beautiful, wild, lonely, remote" (1981: 21). She describes her sixth birthday party at Bona Vista, which would have been in 1896. "It was very shortly after that we left for Roseau. Bona Vista had to be sold and we never went back" (21). The estates were obviously put up for auction in 1900, although it's unclear whether Bona Vista was sold at that time. Amelia was left in Dr Rees Williams's will, and so clearly wasn't (Angier 1990: 668, n20).

An interesting aspect of the auction notice is that it gives the dimensions of the Bona Vista house, which Rhys had in mind as the honeymoon house to which Antoinette takes her husband in the second part of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, although the best description she gives is probably the opening paragraph in the story, "Mixing Cocktails":

The house in the hills was very new and very ugly, long and narrow, of unpainted wood, perched oddly on high posts, I think as a protection from wood ants. There were six rooms with a veranda that ran the whole length of the house.... But when you went up there, there was always the same sensation of relief and coolness – in the ugly house with the beginning of a rose garden, after an hour's journey by boat and another hour and a half on horse-back, climbing slowly up. (1987: 36)

In earlier numbers of *Jean Rhys Review* Pierrette Frickey and Elaine Savory describe visiting the site of the house (1988: 7; 1998: 31-2).

Dr Rees Williams's attempt to sell his plantations could register in a number of ways. Rhys herself always suggested that her family was not well off and that her father had extravagant tastes, so that Bona Vista "had to be sold". Sue Thomas's evidence casts some doubt on this picture, with Rees Williams apparently a wealthy man at the time of his death; but the family may have needed money at the time of the auction to pay for schooling for their two sons, who were 17 and 15 in 1900. The

attempted sale might also have been a response to local criticism, but would have been rather delayed since that criticism had clearly begun fifteen years previously. When Rees Williams arrived on the island, his boss, Dr Henry Nicholls, had been seemingly making a success of a plantation – and was praised for doing so by the semi-official English visitor, James Anthony Froude, in his *The English in the West Indies* (1887): it might have seemed to Rees Williams that buying a small plantation was the appropriate thing for him to do to establish himself on the island, especially in the eyes of his wife's family, owners of the old and genteel, but fading plantation of Geneva. The auction could also therefore have indicated – against the background sketched by Lisa Paravisini-Gebert (1999) – a recommitment of Rees Williams's energies towards local politics, involving time to be spent in Roseau, at a moment, shortly after the arrival of Hesketh Bell as Administrator (and the establishment of Crown Colony government), when the relatively few Englishmen on Dominica began to feel that they were again in political ascendancy.

#### References

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*Note on transcription: In both cases pencil additions and alterations to these typed pages have been omitted.*

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He had been all around the world before he was 25, he had seen everything. The women that got him most were Frenchwomen, the prettiest women were American. He hated Frenchmen, he hated American men. And then he got to this damned island and had taken a job -- he thought as a stopgap. Right up on the wild windward coast, his job was. And then he came on these two girls -- the sort of thing you read about in a book. Twins, they were, and so alike you couldn't tell them apart. He could, though.

They were managing this old estate which went back to the Year Dot -- seventeen hundred and something, anyway. Now the glory had gone, but they didn't know it. Dumb, you'd think them. Until you went into their house, and then something met you -- by God!

Silent.... Was there ever a place in the world as lovely as this? he thought. What got him most was the stephanotis that climbed up along the verandah, the scent of it. What got him was that, when there was an old obeah-man to be smoked out, how fearless she went, how she told him that she had driven out the last obeah-man. "There were hands," she said, "cut off dead people, hanging all over his room. It's hands are obeah." And he had roared with laughter, and in his heart hated them.

But later on, when he had gone down with fever, they had taken him into their old house, nursed him, been kind to him. And gradually, right down his spine, it had got him, the bloody place. And he knew he would never leave it again.

Gradually she had got him -- the curious girl, with her long plaits, her slanting eyes and her twin. Eena, deena, dina, doh -- he had chosen the shorter one.

Ah, but it had got him, the place. If you had eyes in your head, he thought, a place like that would get you.

So he went no more a-roving by the light of the moon....

“And here,” he thought, “I will set up my rest.”

The struggle had started there, as it starts everywhere else, but he had won out, had the house built according to his own plan, bought a little estate up in the hills to go to in the hot weather. What he could not make out was why all his wife’s relatives hated him so much. Aunt Cora, Aunt Julia, Aunt Sase -- they had all left everything away from him. He had butted in, and they didn’t like it.

But he could laugh at that. He could always make friends of his own. Lots of friends he had, lots of friends, and a nice life too, though a small one. There was the Club, where you could have a damned good game of bridge at two shillings a hundred; there was the Golf Club; there were the pretty women who used to come to dinner and to sing afterwards. “By God,” he would say, “these islands are going to hatch the prettiest women in the world or I’m no doctor. Wait a bit and you’ll see I’m right. Yes, you wait a bit.”

Above all, there was his place in the hills. He went there every weekend, alone. That was when it got you -- too big to talk about. “Before beauty,” he said, “you can only fall down and worship.”

At first there was the worry about trying to make the place pay. And that was good too, that put an edge to it. When you plant a thing yourself and watch it grow -- that’s the life, that’s the only life.

When, on top of that, you had dark-skinned people to do the dirty work, then it was heaven. Not that he minded doing the dirty work, oh no.

Sometimes he would think “There’s never been anybody who loved lovely things as I do -- the orchids, the sky, the way these girls walk, the sweet songs. *Sweet River*..... It’s got me, anyhow.”

But even in a place like this you had enemies. And this man Ramage..... Many complaints there had been, many complaints.

British Library, Additional ms. 57859 Jean Rhys papers vol. IV (pp.2-4)

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On the table by his side lay *The Times Weekly Edition*, the *Lancet*, *Longmans Magazine* and the *Leeward Islands and West Indies Gazette*. At the end of the gallery

the orchid bloomed. He thought "Why did I ever come to this bloody place? What got me? The flowers, the scents, the shadows, the royal palms like all the kings and emperors that were ever born? No," he thought, "it was the sea got me. And there's nowhere a sea more beautiful than this -- this is the loveliest sea in the world."

He thought about being on the *Worcester* in 1870, thought about his first voyage in a sailing-ship when the captain had said to him "You're Welsh, are you? I'll teach you to think that a Welshman can be a gentleman." And after that voyage he had fallen into line and, egged on by his mother, had qualified as a doctor. But no sooner had he taken his degree than he was off again as a ship's doctor. He had been all round the world before he was twenty-seven; he had seen everything. And then he had taken this job in this damned island. He thought of it as a stopgap. But then he came on these two girls -- the sort of thing you read about in a book -- they were twins and so alike you couldn't tell them apart. He could, though. They were managing their old estate, which went back to the year dot -- seventeen hundred and something anyway. Now the glory had gone, but they did not know it. Uncouth they were, compared with some of the women he had known, except for their lovely hands and sometimes just a flash in the slanting eyes. But later on, when he went down with fever, they had taken him into their old house, nursed him, been kind to him and then, living in their house, something had met him, by God! "Was there ever a place in the world as lovely as this?" he would think when he was well enough to lie outside on the long stone glacis. He would lie there with his eyes shut, smelling the stephanotis that climbed up the wrought-iron railings. Yes, gradually it had got him, the place..... And they had got him, with their long plaits and their slanting eyes. Eena, deena, dina, do -- he had chosen the shorter one. So he went no more a-roving, by the light of the moon..... Instead, there was this blasted house, the rocking chairs, the huge joints of tough meat, the ever-increasing family, the hatred of his wife's relatives.

British Library, Additional ms. 57859 Jean Rhys papers vol. IV (pp. 41-42)

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Sue Thomas

On *Bitin' Back*

This recent novel depicts Nevil Dooley, a twenty-one year old Aboriginal man who informs his mother that he is really Jean Rhys. He masquerades as Rhys to get in touch with his feminine side as a writer in a community in which young men are expected to be hyper-masculine. Several motifs from *Wide Sargasso Sea*—the red dress, the madwoman, the ghost, and the power of gossip—are revisited in Cleven's novel. The novel won the David Unaipon Award in 2000.