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## From Dominica to Devonshire A Memento of Jean Rhys

### Abstract

Better-Looking', is exhorted to write 'a swell article' for his weekly feature in an Australian paper. But Mr Severn is upset over the goodbye letter he has just received from his very dear friend Hans and he can't get the swing of it. 'The swing's the thing, as everybody knows - otherwise the cadence of the sentence'. If he can once get into it, 'he could go ahead like an old horse trotting'. The loss of a very dear friend can make writing difficult, especially if the article is about the friend and the loss is permanent. Hans and Mr Severn were not old friends; Mr Severn had extended the hospitality of his flat after Hans had shown up in London with a broken leg. The friendship had evidently mushroomed quickly and ended abruptly. Hans had had enough: 'Good-bye. I'll write you again when times are better'.

ELAINE CAMPBELL

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## From Dominica to Devonshire A Memento of Jean Rhys

What I'm working on now is an autobiography of my childhood in Dominica. But it's a long slow job and I do get so tired. I only hope I can finish it. I'm very old now.

Jean Rhys, *London Sunday Times*, 25 February 1973.

Mr Severn, the journalist in Jean Rhys' title story 'Tigers Are

Better-Looking', is exhorted to write 'a swell article' for his weekly feature in an Australian paper. But Mr Severn is upset over the goodbye letter he has just received from his very dear friend Hans and he can't get the swing of it. 'The swing's the thing, as everybody knows – otherwise the cadence of the sentence'. If he can once get into it, 'he could go ahead like an old horse trotting'. The loss of a very dear friend can make writing difficult, especially if the article is about the friend and the loss is permanent. Hans and Mr Severn were not old friends; Mr Severn had extended the hospitality of his flat after Hans had shown up in London with a broken leg. The friendship had evidently mushroomed quickly and ended abruptly. Hans had had enough: 'Good-bye. I'll write you again when times are better'.

The last letter I have from Jean Rhys is dated March third and it reads, 'Unfortunately I have been ill — cracked up a bit, to tell you the truth — and have just-got back from a nursing home. I hope to be well enough to get to London in two or three weeks and it goes without saying will do all I can for the book'. I don't know yet whether Jean Rhys managed to get to London sometime in April, but she died in the hospital in Exeter, the city near her village in Devonshire, on May fourteenth. Her reference to the book and the letter itself grew out of a relationship which started by mail last summer and which eventuated in my visiting Miss Rhys in Cheriton Fitzpaine.

An accumulation of coincidence lies behind the visit: a doctoral dissertation on British West Indian fiction is one feature. More important to Miss Rhys was the fact that I'd visited her home island in the summer of 1977 and while there had been introduced to Miss Rhys' friend, Phyllis Shand Allfrey. When a colleague in London invited me for a visit, I wrote to Jean Rhys to say that while in England I would like to bring her news of Dominica but her *Harpers* essay 'Making Bricks without Straw' had convinced me that she was quite fed up with interviewers and visitors. In what was the beginning of an epistolary friendship, she wrote back: 'I didn't mean to be intimidating when I wrote "Bricks

without Straw". I'm the intimidated one, I think!' And as she was 'very busy trying to finish my autobiography' she said that she'd like to see me, preferably in late September. By that time she hoped to have finished the Dominican memoirs and would be at leisure to indulge in a lengthy chat about places and things cherished since childhood. After negotiations with the literary agent in London and arrangements with the friend in Holland Park, the visit was settled. But I failed to get to the Boston airport in time for my scheduled flight and the visit had to be set up again, this time for October. The additional weeks allowed Miss Rhys to complete the memoirs so that it was my privilege to spend the afternoon with her at her bungalow in Devon the day following the typist's final visit. Miss Rhys, her nurse and I quietly celebrated by exchanging views on Dominica, the Windward Island home where Jean Rhys was born.

Our conversation centered somewhat unsatisfactorily upon an effort to make comparisons between the turn-of-the-century West Indian island that Miss Rhys has endeavoured to reconstruct in her first section of the autobiography and my own perceptions of Dominican and British West Indian life derived from thirteen years in the British Virgin Islands and a summer's visit to Dominica. The awkward aspect of the conversation quickly emerged. Our differing perceptions were not truly comparable. The discrepancy was not so much the result of recent changes as of changes wrought upon the island economy between the time of Miss Rhys' childhood there and the time of her return visit with her brother in 1938. The commercial developments that occurred between 1910 and 1938 (wide-spread banana cultivation, the introduction of the lime growing industry under the aegis of L. Rose Co., Ltd., as examples) were great enough to convince Miss Rhys that the island had changed irrevocably. My impression, however, is that the island has altered little relative to the rate-of-change discernible in neighbouring Leeward and Windward Islands, and that the Dominica of 1938, which Miss Rhys last saw (she never returned afterwards), and the pre-independence island

of my own experience are very similar. We concluded that the greatest physical difference effected in the forty years between our two visits is the completion of a road system that both transverses and almost circumscribes the island. Roads and road-building are subjects of eternal fascination for Dominicans, and Miss Rhys had just completed a piece entitled 'The Imperial Road' in which she describes an early attempt to build a modern, hard-surfaced highway across the island's interior. The piece will be included in the Dominican memoirs which are scheduled for publication in the fall of 1979.

Miss Bridger, a young woman who joined Miss Rhys about five years ago after a half-decade of nursing service among the Eskimos, hastened to caution my enthusiastic response to the completion of the memoir: 'You realize, of course, that this is only the first volume of the memoirs, the section dealing with Jean's early years in Dominica'. Janet continued with the information that Miss Rhys had completed large segments of the second volume of the memoirs – the section dealing with Miss Rhys' years as an expatriate in Paris. Miss Rhys feared that not many people will be interested in the first section of her memoirs, but that the second, the 'racy' section, would attract wide interest. It was to cover the twenties and thirties when Rhys published her short story collection, *The Left Bank*, and her novels *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight* and *Quartet*, the fictionalization of Jean Rhys' liaison with Ford Madox Ford in a ménage à trois. *Quartet* includes a sketch of Ernest Hemingway's attempt to advise her about her relationship with Ford and a critique of the posturings of the bohemian set in Montparnasse. The second volume would have been especially useful for women's studies as it would reflect a female writer's view of the expatriate colony in Paris during a period that has been documented widely for the exploits of Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and Ford Madox Ford.

The 'underground years' – the years between the publication of *Good Morning*, *Midnight* in 1939 and the appearance of *Wide Sar-*

*gasso Sea* in 1966 – logically comprise the matter of a third volume of biography. These include the years of the second world war – the event that has been blamed for thrusting Rhys' writing out of public consciousness. It is during this period that Miss Rhys' daughter from her first marriage disappeared in Nazi Europe. (Maryvonne now lives in Holland and she visited her mother two or three times a year, according to Miss Bridger.) Curiously little attention has been awarded Jean Rhys as a wife, a daughter, a mother, or, for that matter, as a grandmother. But motherhood is certainly a significant element in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and in *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, and both these novels need a second reading for their picture of the Rhysian heroine as daughter. There exists an almost stereotypic interpretation of the Rhysian heroine as the bruised demimondaine whose emotional life never extends beyond a self-absorbed contemplation of the requirements for survival in an alien environment. If the third volume of the memoirs had been completed, we would have been enriched by a very different angle of vision regarding both the writer and her autobiographical heroine.

Since Tillie Olsen has opened up the realities of long-term silences on the part of preoccupied women writers, it is easier to understand the day-by-day distractions to creativity involved in nurturing a marital relationship, especially during a period of national distress. The difficulty of creativity for a perfectionist writer like Miss Rhys is illustrated by the painstaking manner in which *Wide Sargasso Sea* was written. Diana Athill, the director of the British publishing firm André Deutsch, explains what happened in the seven years between the time she received news of *Wide Sargasso Sea's* inception and Miss Rhys' announcement that it was almost finished.

She is a slow and perfectionist writer, anyway, who produces lucidity out of an almost incredible mass of tangled notes and drafts, all written on assorted scraps of paper in a hand suggesting that spiders have danced in ink, which only she can interpret; machines conspire against her, so that she can't use one for dictating; and in addition her circumstances were very difficult, her

husband was ill, her own health was not strong, and there was no secretarial help available in her neighbourhood. Sometimes it seemed that the book would never reach us, but always, just as we despaired, she would report that she was struggling on. And in 1964, seven years after our first news of the book, she announced that only a few sentences needed typing and that she would bring it to London, do the finishing touches there, and hand it over.

(*Bookseller*, 20 August 1966)

The champagne luncheon that Diana Athill planned for celebrating the completion of *Wide Sargasso Sea* was not to be. When she telephoned Miss Rhys' hotel on the morning of the luncheon she was told, 'please come at once, the lady is ill'. Instead of taking Jean Rhys to luncheon, Diana Athill took her to the hospital where Rhys remained for months. 'The book was so nearly finished – only a matter of a few sentences – and was so very good that I suggested we should publish it as it was. This Miss Rhys would not have, and I had to promise that it would not appear until she was satisfied with it.' It was two more years before those few sentences would be finished and the novel was to meet Jean Rhys' satisfaction.

This account of how Jean Rhys' masterpiece was written makes it easier to understand why the memoirs have taken so long to complete. If they exhibit the same prose clarity and unimpeachable integrity as *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the early novels, and the Rhysian short stories collected in *Tigers Are Better-Looking* and *Sleep It Off, Lady*, they will be worth the wait. Miss Rhys explained to me that the Dominican section had given her particular difficulty because she had to go so far back into her memory to reconstruct the events of her childhood. She volunteered that she had reached the phase of life when one returns naturally to memories of childhood, but she immediately isolated the necessity of avoiding sentimentality. In her most emphatic statement of the afternoon she said, 'It is so important not to be sentimental'.

The writing conditions that Miss Athill cites for *Wide Sargasso*



*Sea* apply with minor modifications to the memoirs. Rhys continued to work without machinery. Not only did she not use a dictating machine, she never learnt to typewrite her material for publication. And when her hand began to shake so seriously, the handwriting to which Miss Athill refers was no longer available as a means for communicating thought to paper. Instead, Miss Rhys spoke her sentences to Janet Bridger who typed them, in a somewhat unpolished manner as she is not a typist by profession, and returned them to Miss Rhys for correction and revision. The revisions were numerous and Janet offers the example of a poem by Miss Rhys that had to be typed and re-typed countless times. In the case of the memoirs, after the corrections and revisions were finalized, a professional typist came to Miss Rhys' bungalow two or three afternoons a week in order to type the final copy to be sent on to the publisher. As Miss Rhys did finish the final copy of the text for the Dominican memoir, it will not be many months before we learn the details of a childhood spent so long ago on the most beautiful of all Caribbean islands.

Dominica never claimed the attention of the Western world to the same extent as the larger and more densely-populated British West Indian islands of Trinidad, Jamaica, Antigua and Barbados. Neither has it commanded the interest of the purveyors of tourism – perhaps because it does not feature long, white sand beaches or an English-speaking population. The natural reticence of Dominicans as well as their French patois speech are factors that help to preserve the densely-forested island from invasion by sight-seers just as the Carib Indians once preserved it from exploitation by the sugar planters who so efficiently deforested other West Indian islands. The island's isolation has attracted writers seeking peacefulness and it has encouraged native-born writers; as a result, several fine novelists have emerged from Dominica in the twentieth century.

My conversation with Miss Rhys next centred about her friendship with a creole writer who lives near Roseau, the town where Jean Rhys was born and the capital of the island. Phyllis Shand

Allfrey, whose Dominican ancestry dates from the earliest days of West Indian colonisation, wrote a first-rate novel entitled *The Orchid House*. It was published in British, American and French editions in the nineteen-fifties. All these editions have gone out of print, and although Mrs Allfrey's novel is always cited in bibliographies of West Indian literature, there are few literary commentators who have actually read it – primarily because it is unavailable. Phyllis Allfrey has also published two volumes of poetry, but her greatest contribution to Dominican life has been through her political activities. She organized the island's first labour union and she was Dominica's elected representative during the West Indian Federation. For many years she and her husband have written and printed Dominica's opposition newspaper, *The Star*, and she has mailed this newspaper faithfully to Jean Rhys in England. Sometimes she tucked into the pages of the newspaper a personal note that might not otherwise have reached its intended destination in Devonshire.

*The Star*, with its bits of island news, its recapitulation of local sport events, its commentary (often fiercely critical) on island politics, and its birth, death and marriage records helped to keep fresh in Miss Rhys' mind the singular ambiance of Dominican life. Janet brought out a copy of *The Star* for the three of us to refer to, and looking at the newspaper, Jean Rhys said she felt that she 'owes Phyllis something' since Mrs Allfrey had sent her the newspaper for such a long time. Miss Rhys asked me what I thought she might do in appreciation and whether I thought it wise to send money through the postal service to Dominica. Recalling that Mrs Allfrey had requested me to assist her in bringing *The Orchid House* back into print, I suggested that Miss Rhys might consider writing a preface or an introduction for a possible new edition of Mrs Allfrey's novel. Miss Rhys was enthusiastic about helping with the project and agreed to take a copy of *The Orchid House* to London for a reading by Miss Athill. For my part, I felt that if Jean Rhys did write a laudatory essay that resulted in the reintroduction of Phyllis Allfrey's fine West Indian novel, my visit

to the bungalow down the hedgerows of Devon would be rewarded.

Our conversation passed easily from one Dominican topic to another, although my attempts to extract biographical information were in vain. Miss Rhys always skilfully brought the conversation back to Dominica. When I enquired how many years she had lived in Devon, she responded vaguely, 'Many, many years'. When I asked her how long she had lived in Cornwall before moving to Devon, she answered, 'For a long, long time'. The only concrete answers I received to biographical questions were that Miss Rhys had no relatives left in Dominica and that her mother had followed Jean Rhys to England and had died there. Miss Rhys' sister died a year or so ago in England and Miss Rhys commented, 'There is no one left'. This, of course, excludes her daughter and her daughter's family. With respect to her personal life, Miss Rhys was truly as Marcelle Bernstein described her in 1969 – 'inscrutable'. She may have been saving the details of her personal life for revelation in her memoirs or she may have been planning to remain enigmatic. Doubtlessly, much detail has been lost because of her reserve. Her desire to control information about her private life is exemplified by her recent sweeping destruction of old love letters. And although such destruction of primary biographical material may sear the souls of literary biographers, it is the privilege of an artist to make every effort to preserve his or her privacy.

There are obvious privileges and benefits that result from the adulation of a world-wide readership. Miss Rhys, who lived for a long time in penurious circumstances, was only in recent years able to take an occasional trip abroad as she did to Venice during a chill English winter. Her bungalow, that has been described frequently as lacking both a telephone and television, now possesses a television aerial and set as well as the telephone upon which I spoke to her from Cerne Abbas. Her sitting room contains tributes from friends and literati and upon its wall hangs the large and beautiful painting executed for the dustjacket of *Wide Sargasso*

*Sea's* hardcover edition. A new, rather elegant piece of furniture had been introduced. Although Janet refers to it as 'a disaster', the plush chaise longue upon which Miss Rhys reclined during an interview eliminated the problem referred to in 'Making Bricks without Straw'. In that essay she explains some of the problems associated with interviews: how frequently her remarks are misinterpreted; how rudely the interviewer pounces into the chair that Miss Rhys has reserved for herself because it faces the light that most flatters her. After reading 'Making Bricks without Straw', one of my daughters expressed concern for Miss Rhys' discomfiture and asked that I write to reassure her that when I came to visit, I would permit Miss Rhys to sit down first. Miss Rhys graciously wrote back, 'I'll be very pleased if you can come and please tell your Becky that I didn't mean to be taken quite so seriously. I've got a chaise longue now and I recline on it, uncomfortable but regal'.

While the perquisites of literary success are readily apparent, the disadvantages are more subtly hidden. They are, however, no less affective upon an artist's life. This is especially so in the case of an artist with a temperament like Miss Rhys'. If the cliché of the 'private person' had not already been so lavishly applied to entertainment celebrities whose 'privateness' is nothing more than an elaborate pose, it would be tempting to assign that epithet to Gwen Williams, known to the world as Jean Rhys. In the first letter of our correspondence, she defined herself as both shy and intimidated. Although her purpose in so doing was to assist me out of my reservations about visiting her, the self-description is sound. Her interviewers, photographers and would-be biographers have not often avoided offending a sensitive temperament and she and Janet regaled me with stories of arrogance and inconsideration during visits to which Miss Rhys had acquiesced. I was told about the internationally-known photographer who enterprisingly brought a tape recorder with him. The tale of the interviewer who cornered Miss Rhys having her hair shampooed in Crediton is well-known. One American interviewer was permitted

to take several photographs at the time of her visit and subsequently selected for publication the one that most distressed Miss Rhys. And the commercial photographs taken for the latest dust-jacket resulted in the selection, apparently over the wishes of Miss Rhys, of the now widely-published picture of Miss Rhys wearing what she called 'that awful hat'.

Prior to my visit, an international telephone call from a reporter for *Paris Match* interrupted the tranquillity of Miss Rhys' plan for the day. The caller demanded to know when Miss Rhys would be able to see her! Some of these importunate approaches could be deferred to the literary agent in London, but so many visitors were received that Miss Rhys' sitting room 'had become like the waiting room of a train station', according to Janet. Some of the visitors arrived late for their interviews and Miss Rhys was kept waiting for their arrival. Janet explained, 'Jean gets herself into a terrible state over these visits'. Marvelling that Miss Rhys continued to tolerate such unpleasant experiences, I asked if the visits ever turned out to be enjoyable. 'Oh no', was the firm rejoinder. It appears that the same passivity that colours the lives of Rhys' heroines caused her to be overwhelmed by bumptious callers, and the consequence of frequent and bold intrusions was her retreat from communicativeness.

The effect of these intrusions is dramatically illustrated by the change in Jean Rhys' attitude since Bernstein's fruitful interview was published in the *London Observer* in 1969. Still excited over her newly recovered literary importance, Rhys awarded Bernstein the most successful interview ever published about her. But Bernstein nevertheless entitled the essay, 'The Inscrutable Miss Jean Rhys'. During the reported conversation in which Jean Rhys provided glimpses of her writing method and personal lifestyle – material she later artistically transmuted into 'My Day' – she expressed the delight she entertained in being sought by the outside world. Complaining about the loneliness of her situation in Devonshire she elaborated, 'I think loneliness is a part of writing', and continued, 'But when week goes after week and you never see anyone

it's really rather trying'. A knock at the front door elicited a different response then. Hurrying to answer the door herself she remarked, 'I expect someone marvellous. I still expect some wonderful stranger. I fly to the door, longing.' Instead of the anticipatory delight in the encounter represented by the stranger on the other side of the door, Jean Rhys learned to evade and hedge. Her companion served as a guardian to the novelist or as a guide to the interviewer, in accordance with how the conversation progressed. For example, upon first meeting me, Janet, unsure of my intentions, inquired, 'What do you want? If you just tell her what you want, it will be much easier'. Startled by the belligerence, I lamely responded, 'I'm not sure that I want anything'. 'Well, tell her that, and you will be alright' were my instructions. I had come to England primarily to pay homage to a literary figure, but I also would have liked answers to some of the four pages of questions that had arisen out of my close readings of Miss Rhys' novels. The strained nature of the greeting led me to leave the typed pages unopened in the copy of *Sleep It Off, Lady* I'd brought to be autographed.

Miss Rhys' desperation over the tactics of her public caused her to adopt a pose that could be mistakenly judged as senility. The pose was easily assumed by the woman who left Dominica at the age of sixteen to study acting in England. It replaced the excuse of illness after that line of defense had been overcome. But any hint of senility was disconcertingly at variance with the precision of both her fiction and her correspondence. Her letters were brief, gently humorous and to the point. For example, she wrote to me in July, 'What you tell me about Dominica interests me very much, of course. Yes, I have considered going back but I'm very much afraid of cockroaches and still keep putting it off!' In another note to me she supplied specific directions for locating her village and identifying her cottage. My recollection of those clear directions which included an unmistakable means of finding her unmarked bungalow stood me in good stead after my arrival in Devonshire.

Miss Rhys' literary agent had written two letters confirming Miss Rhys' desire to see me. The second letter requested that I telephone Miss Rhys at her home after my arrival in England and a day or two in advance of the interview. Complying with this reasonable request, I telephoned the day before I planned to be in Devon. Miss Rhys answered the telephone, failed to recognize my name, pleaded illness, and suggested that I contact her literary agent in London if I wished to arrange an interview. I spent that night in a country hotel in Tiverton upon whose stationery I wrote an appeal. I decided I would deliver to the cottage my letter in conjunction with the present I'd brought from Dominica. The next day I drove to Miss Rhys' village and knocked on the door of the cottage. A sweet voice called through the open window, 'What is it?' I answered, 'I wish to leave a letter and a present', and Miss Rhys' voice replied, 'I don't wish any, thank you'. In distress I called back through the open window that I wasn't selling anything and simply wished to leave two packages on the doorstep. After a short silence the front door opened and Janet Bridger came out. I asked Janet to give my letter to Miss Rhys and to deliver my present. Then I offered to telephone the next morning to see if Miss Rhys felt well enough to see me later in the week. Thereupon Janet counselled against telephoning in the morning and offered to present my credentials to Miss Rhys while I waited in the car. After ten minutes Janet came out to the garden gate to say that Miss Rhys would see me the next day at two o'clock.

When I left my rented car the next afternoon, I was asked to leave my camera in the car and shortly after I was seated (*after* Miss Rhys) I was quizzed whether I had brought a tape recorder. Since my own aversion to tape recorders equalled Miss Rhys', I passed muster. These protective strategies were only a prologue to the avoidances that clouded the first half hour of my visit. Only after docilely abandoning efforts to obtain answers to specific questions such as the ones regarding the number of years spent in Devon and in Cornwall did the conversation take a more congenial direction. Acting as hostess, Janet served tall goblets of chilled

martinis. We all lighted cigarettes and I ventured one last investigatory topic.

Trying to date a letter that Jean Rhys had written to Alec Waugh sometime in the fifties, I asked Miss Rhys if she recalled that Waugh had cited her in *The Sugar Islands*. The citation was significant because Waugh explained in it some of Rhys' novelistic tendencies in terms of her Dominican birth, and he recognized her importance as a novelist before the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea* had rescued her from oblivion. I attempted to explain briefly my need to date the London letter but Miss Rhys appeared unable to place Waugh or his books that I mentioned. The question was followed by an awkward silence that Miss Rhys relieved by proceeding to interview me! She asked me questions about Dominica that initiated the discussion of island changes. I then showed her snapshots of the island, and in the pictures she recognized from her 1938 visit the Andrew Carnegie library in Roseau; she remarked upon the long, airy verandas and the rocking chairs placed outside. She said she did not recall seeing the enormous *ficus altissimus* growing in the library garden and we discussed whether or not such an enormous tree could have grown since her visit, deciding that perhaps in the tropics it could.

Trees led us to fruit and fruit led us to an item of great interest to Miss Rhys. Could I describe for her the taste of a sapodilla? Unfortunately, I've never knowingly eaten a sapodilla and could not describe its' flavour. I wondered if she were referring to a mammee apple with which I was familiar, and Janet speculated about custard apples with which she was familiar from Australia. After we discussed the colour, texture and size of the three fruits, we decided that the latter two were not sapodillas. We searched for a means of locating a sapodilla, perhaps in London. Would Fortnum and Mason be able to provide one? If so, how would they deliver it to the back of beyond? I offered to locate sapodillas on my own Caribbean island of Tortola, but then how would I ship them in order to have them arrive in edible condition? We concluded that the only satisfactory way of solving the sapodilla



problem was to have Miss Rhys revisit the West Indies. She asked me if I planned to return to Dominica and I rejoined I would if she and Janet would accompany me.

Abandoning sapodillas we turned to roads. I provided a colourful account of driving at break-neck speed across the Imperial Road and the Transinsular Highway, round mountain curves, and up and down the grades of the Dominican mountains followed closely by a Geest lorry filled with bananas and men anxious to arrive at the weighing station on their last trip of the day. No pull-offs, no passing lane ensured a hair-raising race. After my account, we traced on a map of Dominica where roads used to be, where roads now are, and where roads might be built in the future.

The remainder of the afternoon went quickly and pleasantly. In retrospect, we conversed about sapodillas, roads, Phyllis Allfrey, the idiosyncrasies of island mail, creole dresses and madras head squares, cockroaches and the absence thereof, the value of letters, the loss of privacy, Miss Rhys' fear of wasps, and whether or not Dominica had changed substantially. We never got to feminism or the interpretation of Miss Rhys' novels. We did, however, establish the foundation of a relationship that was afterwards sustained by letters. The primary subject of our subsequent correspondence was the strategy necessary to bring Phyllis Allfrey's *The Orchid House* back into print. Miss Rhys searched for her copy of the novel but could not find it. She asked her agent to locate a copy for her; he could not, and I finally mailed a copy to her. In the meantime, I wrote to Dominica telling Mrs Allfrey that Jean Rhys wished me to send her love and to say that we would see what could be done about the novel's reappearance. Phyllis emerged from the shock of her daughter's death in Botswana to undertake a new novel about Phina and Dominica while asking me to represent her in negotiating for a papercover edition of the first novel. (With typical concern she believes that West Indians can't afford a hardcover edition.)

The correspondence triangle closed when Jean Rhys wrote to

Phyllis Allfrey concerning my visit and her promise of a preface. Phyllis replied to Jean with the hope that in the preface Jean Rhys would write something to the effect that Mrs Allfrey was a West Indian who had finally come home. And then Senator Lennox Honychurch in Dominica heard the B.B.C. announcement of Jean's death. Finally, I have a note from Phyllis in Dominica: 'Elaine – So Jean is gone – I don't think she ever finished the promised foreword. I have felt so sad this week.' Mrs Allfrey's sadness is, of course, not that the foreword may not have been written. It is over the loss of a friendship sustained for many decades across the Sargasso Sea. Underneath is sorrow that Jean Rhys could not return to Dominica to die. Among our letters was an elaborate discussion of the feasibility of a return trip – the flight to Antigua – would Miss Rhys' health sustain the rigours of the transfers. It was a prospect that answered Miss Rhys' cry: 'I hav'ent [sic] been at all well and am longing for some sort of holiday.'

The return of Jean Rhys to Dominica was a possibility that could not fail to engage the imagination of her admirers. In *The West Indies Chronicle* last year, Graham Norton described a story by Miss Rhys 'about Dominica . . . to which Miss Rhys' spirit will surely return, one day, when it is released. In so many ways, she, like so many emigrants, has never altogether left'. Miss Rhys herself approached the possibility with infinite delicacy in 'I Used to Live Here Once'. And there is the poem in *Palm and Oak* written by Phyllis Allfrey for her friend Jean Rhys: 'The Child's Return'.

I remember a far tall island  
floating in cobalt paint  
The thought of it is a childhood dream  
torn by a midnight plaint

There are painted ships and rusty ships  
that pass the island by,  
and one dark day I'll board a boat  
when I am ready to die

The timbers will creak and my heart will break  
and the sailors will lay my bones  
on the stiff rich grass, as sharp as spikes,  
by the volcanic stones.



Dominican landscape – Photograph by Anna Rutherford