

‘THE SPELL OF SARNIA’¹

Fictional Representations of the Island of Guernsey

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Abstract

Although there is nothing that resembles a comprehensive literary history of Guernsey, or of any of the islands of the English Channel, Guernsey has been the subject of many interesting representations in fiction. Two great novels dominate this tradition: Victor Hugo’s *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (*Toilers of the Sea*) (1866) and G. B. Edwards’s *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (1981), and these novels have a powerful intertextual relationship. One or two novels written in between are major works of literary art, for example Mervyn Peake’s *Mr. Pye* (1953), but most of the other eighty or so novels are works of popular fiction in a variety of genres and modes, especially the historical romance and the adventure story. On the whole, these novels rehearse a limited number of common themes: a romantic conception of Guernsey’s history, the physical beauty of the island coupled with a sense of the dangers of its dramatic coastline and the sea that surrounds it, and the prominence of religion in island society, in terms of both Christian sectarianism and the underground presence into modern times of paganism and witchcraft.

Keywords

Guernsey, Channel Islands, Hugo, Edwards, Peake, religion

Introduction

Guernsey is one of the islands of the English Channel—the others main ones being Alderney, Sark, and Jersey—that together with some smaller islands and islets make up the group referred to in Britain as “the Channel Islands”. Constitutionally, the islands have been dependencies of the English Crown since the early Middle Ages, but, nestled within the Gulf of St. Malo between Brittany and Normandy, they lie geographically and culturally much more within the influence of France: Alderney, for example, is only a few kilometres from the French mainland, but Guernsey is 121 kilometres from Weymouth, the nearest point on the mainland of England.

Although the islands are often referred to as a group, there are in fact few legal and constitutional links between them, especially between Guernsey and Jersey, the two main ones. What they do share is a common cultural heritage, including the everyday spoken use of a variant of French rather than English until the Second World War, a similar constitutional status, (which they share to a lesser degree with the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea), and a common economic history, which has led the islanders from farming (both arable and dairy), through the growing of fruit and vegetables in greenhouses, to tourism, and finally in our own time to a prosperity brought about through tax-haven status and offshore finance.

Originally, the islands were part of the Duchy of Normandy, and they were merged with the English Crown at the time of the Norman Conquest. In 1204, when the Duchy was subsumed into the Kingdom of France, the islanders chose to remain loyal to King John of England. None of the islands has ever been part of the United Kingdom, however: they are not administered from Westminster,

islanders are not represented in the House of Commons, and they do not vote in parliamentary elections. Instead, the islands enjoy a direct relationship with the Crown via the Privy Council, and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is still received in the islands as the Duke (not the Duchess!) of Normandy. On a daily basis, she is represented in Guernsey and Jersey by Lieutenant Governors. Guernsey and Jersey have their own separate, independent governmental, legal, financial, and educational systems, although they long ago ceded to the United Kingdom the right to make foreign policy on their behalf. The head of the legal system, based on Norman-French law overlaid with English law, is the Bailiff. Although the “Bailiwick” of Jersey is coterminous with the island of Jersey, the Bailiwick of Guernsey includes, besides the island of Guernsey itself, the smaller islands of Alderney and Sark. None of the islands is large, however, either in area or in population. The total area of the Bailiwick of Guernsey is seventy-eight square kilometres, of which the island of Guernsey itself makes up sixty-five, and the present day population numbers about 65,000.

There have been an impressive number of fictional representations of Guernsey during the last one hundred and fifty years, many of them by natives of the island. Few of the eighty or so fictional works in English are major works of literature, but the tradition is dominated at either end by fine novels - Victor Hugo’s *Toilers of the Sea* (1866) and G. B Edwards’s *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (1981) - and there are books here and there that are worthy of note, for example Mervyn Peake’s visionary allegory, *Mr. Pye* (1953). Most of the other novels are popular works of genre fiction: historical romance, adventure stories, especially adventure stories for children. Everywhere, the physical beauty and danger of the island’s natural setting and the centrality of religion to its cultural life provide dominant motifs. This article offers an overview of some of the main themes in fictional writing about Guernsey and a step in the process of constructing a literary history of one of the Channel Islands.²



Figure 1: Map of Guernsey, adjacent Channel Islands and Bass Normandie (reproduced from http://www.rothar.com/images/channel_islands/map.jpg)

II

Although I am concerned in this article with fiction about Guernsey written in English, a study of Guernsey fiction has to begin with Victor Hugo's great novel, originally published in French as *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866). Starting with Hugo is unavoidable but it immediately raises issues that go to the heart of the cultural and literary history of the island. We would not normally think of Hugo as a "Guernsey writer", but he lived on the island in exile for fifteen of his most productive years; indeed, a large part of his masterpiece, *Les Misérables* (1862) was written there. His fine Georgian house in St Peter Port, the island's capital, topped by an airy study with views across the Channel to France, lovingly maintained by the French government to this day, was the only house that he ever owned anywhere.

Hugo never learned to speak more than a couple of words of English. He wrote in French, of course, but at the time he lived on Guernsey the majority of the population would have spoken French as well, even the social leaders of the island's establishment, while at the same time vehemently rejecting the suggestion that they were anything other than loyal English people. To be precise, most of the islanders spoke Guernsey French, (also known as Guernsey Norman French), which enabled them to speak with ease to people of the Cotentin on the neighbouring French mainland. There were, however, notable dialectal differences within the islands: for example, between Jèrriais,³ the language of the island of Jersey, and Dgèrnésiais, the language of Guernsey; or between Guernsey and Sark, an island close to Guernsey and part of its "Bailiwick", which also had its own language, Sercquiais or Sarkese. There were also quite pronounced dialectal differences within the island of Guernsey itself. The language of the courts and of the Guernsey parliament was a legal version of French; the newspapers published in standard French; and the fiercely Calvinist island churches were ministered to by French-speaking clergy imported from France who taught from a French Bible. During the centuries of its everyday use, Dgèrnésiais was not a dominant *literary* language on the island, although there were attempts during the 19th Century to create a literary language out of the *patois* of Guernsey. The major poet in this form was George Métivier (1791–1881), whom Hugo flattered as having performed a role for Guernsey comparable to that which Burns provided for Scotland⁴. There were other writers in this variant of French as well, and the stream has continued to the present day despite there being only a handful of "native" speakers in any meaningful sense left on the island, but most of this work was either folk poetry, short stories or character sketches, and occasional pieces for the newspapers.

Hugo's great novel is in an entirely different league in terms of depth and literary quality. Although written in standard French, it nevertheless captured many of the important characteristics of the island and its society, and it established themes and motifs in writing about the island that have lasted a long time. In the preface to the novel, Hugo speaks of the struggles of human beings against three great forces: religion, society and nature. The plot concerns the reclusive and solitary Gilliatt, a fisherman who single-handedly undertakes the salvage of the engine and funnel of a steamship that has been wrecked on the Roches Douvres, a notoriously dangerous reef in mid-sea. The central scenes of the book that deal with the salvage are quite remarkable and feature an epic struggle against the notorious tides and gales of the channel. Gilliatt has undertaken the task because he has been promised the hand in marriage of Déruchette Le Thierry, the beautiful daughter of the steamship's owner, but when he returns to the island to claim his prize he finds that she has fallen in love with another man. Gilliatt magnanimously releases Déruchette from her obligation to him, but later commits suicide, surrendering himself to the tides of the sea that he had so recently conquered.

III

Hugo's understanding of the world about him was visionary, symbolist and allegorical in mode rather than naturalistic, and although few of the other Guernsey writers who followed him could match him in this way of writing, he nevertheless established a view of island life and a series of motifs and images about Guernsey itself that were remarkably persistent. The most famous scene in the novel, the fight to the death with the *pieuvre* or giant octopus, for example, was rewritten in a number of Guernsey novels, sometimes with acknowledgement, but more often not. D. A. Barker's *The Great*

Leviathan (1920), for example, opens with a child listening to his mother reading from Hugo's novel. There is a near-fatal encounter with an octopus for one of the heroines of George Motley's *Legend and Romance* (1892). In John Dunord's *A Labouring Gentleman: Being a Story of the Channel Islands* (1930), the hero, Arthur Bonamy, is trapped by a "cuttle-fish". In John Oxenham's *A Maid of the Silver Sea* (1910), set on Sark (where Hugo claimed to have witnessed a *pieuvre* pursuing a swimmer), Nance Hamon, who is a strong swimmer herself like Gilliatt in Hugo's novel, has a terrifying encounter with a "devil fish" and another encounter with a great storm at sea that recalls a different part of Hugo's novel.

The plot of Hugo's novel is set back in time to the 1820s, and historical setting has been a major aspect of a large part of Guernsey fiction. The novelists who followed in Hugo's wake in the latter part of the 19th Century and the early part of the 20th Century writing in English more often than not set their novels in the past. M. A. M. Hoppus's *The Locket* (1889), subtitled "a tale of old Guernsey", is set in the time of George II, for example. The title of Harold Carey's novel, *De Beauvoir the Masterful, or the Adventures of Cartaret Sausmarez de Beauvoir in the Days of Elizabeth* (1906), needs no extra gloss. Austen Clare's *The Little Gate of Tears* (1906) is set in 1800. John Oxenham's novels that deal with Sark—*Carette of Sark* (1907), *Pearl of Pearl Island* (1908) and *A Maid of the Silver Sea* (1910)—are all set in the Napoleonic period. Historical settings continued to be used in Guernsey fiction after the First World War, for example Elizabeth Goudge's *Island Magic* (1934) set in the 1880s or Northcote Parkinson's series of Delancey naval novels written in the 1970s and set in the revolutionary times of the 1790s, but the use of a remote historical past is a particular feature of the early period of Guernsey novel writing in English in the late 19th Century.

The historical setting has usually been part of a romantic conception of Guernsey's history. Hoppus's *The Locket* (1889) is a Jane Austenish tale of two sisters, Françoise and Clementina Grandméau, falling in love, and of the rivalry between their two lovers that eventually leads to the murder of one of them. (Rather typically, it turns out that the murderer is of French extraction.) The adventures of Cartaret Sausmarez de Beauvoir in Carey's novel of 1906 are as colourful and swashbuckling as his name. Clare's *The Little Gate of Tears* (1906) tells the story of Denise Tourtel, the beautiful daughter of an old Guernsey family, who is pursued by both Gaston le Patourel, a handsome Jersey sailor, and Jérémie le Clerc, a wealthy man who is sixteen years older than she is. When Gaston is killed, Denise goes mad, and wanders alone by the sea. Eventually, Jérémie reveals himself as the murderer and commits suicide. Oxenham's *A Maid of the Silver Sea* (1910), one of the novels that the girls are reading in Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *Heather Leaves School* (1939), concerns the love between Nance Hamon, the daughter of an old Sark family, and Stephen Gard, the manager of the silver mine who has recently arrived from Cornwall. There is much mild eroticism of the kind that Oxenham specialised in, for example Nance being observed bathing in her shift.

The strong presence of natural disasters in the plot and the evocation of the exotic beauty of Guernsey's otherness in 'English' culture are further aspects of this romanticism; the two are often part of the same way of picturing the island and its culture. These themes are not confined to the period before the First World War, but can be found throughout the literary history of the island. The stark beauty of the sea and the cliffs of the headland is the other side of the treacherousness of tides, the prevailing winds and the danger of shipwreck or drowning. Trips to Sark especially have a tendency to result in emergency rescue. In Darley Dale's *The Black Donkey; or, the Guernsey Boys* (1881), two boys are stranded in a cave during a rising tide. When Vincent Sydney, the wealthy but socially unworthy "grower" who is the hero of E. Sausmarez Brock's *A Tomato Boy* (1900), is surprised by Chenée d'Eperons, the daughter of the Sieur d'Eperons, the head of an ancient Guernsey family, he stumbles from the cliff where he is walking and falls into the sea, and a rescue is played out against the rising tide. A second near disaster at sea, with Chenée stranded on a rock again with a rising tide, is narrowly averted when she is rescued by Vincent. Strandings that require dramatic rescues from incoming tides are especially common: another example can be found in Grace Durand's aptly entitled *High Tide Island* (1939). Shipwrecks, heavy crossings between the islands or between the island and the mainland, and mysterious deaths at sea are encountered frequently as well. Much of this faithfully reproduces the living conditions of the island. No one who has crossed the English Channel by boat in a gale, whether on a large ferry or a small boat, will dismiss the experience lightly. On the other hand, these motifs are all part of Hugo's literary legacy

as well. In *The Toilers of the Sea*, Gilliatt endures a spectacular hurricane while camped on a tiny rock in the middle of the sea; at the novel's end he consigns himself willingly to a rising tide on a notorious part of the Guernsey coast.

Although the major part of Guernsey's history as a tourist destination was after World War Two, the islands had begun to attract tourists, from England principally, earlier in the 19th Century. Between May and September 1879, for example, 12,588 passengers traveled to Jersey from Southampton and a further 4,413 traveled from Weymouth.⁵ These figures had increased to 50,759 from England and France during the same period in 1901. By 1936, 30,000 passengers were visiting Jersey *by air* alone. Some of the visitors were staying for longer periods as well. The islands had been discovered by retired and half-pay naval officers as a cheap and comfortable place to live during the earlier part of the 19th Century. Immigration from both England and France during the latter part of the century caused the islands' population to grow continuously. Jersey's population increased from 47,544 in 1841 to 56,078 in 1861. Guernsey's population increased from 26,698 to 29,846 during the same period. By 1861, one quarter of Jersey's population had been born outside of the island, and the rapid pace of immigration created a shortage of work and a corresponding emigration of native born in search of work elsewhere.

Many of the novels have plots that turn around holidays, for example D. A Barker's *The Great Leviathan* (1920) or Elinor M. Brent-Dyer's *Heather Leaves School* (1939). Others, while not strictly speaking about holidays, are what might be termed "visitor" narratives, with an acute sense of the differences of history and temperament between native born and outsider, especially when the latter is only on the island temporarily. Darley Dale's *The Black Donkey; or, the Guernsey Boys* (1881) deals with the adventures of a family posted to Guernsey. Mrs Fred Maturin's *Petronel of Paradise* (1907) is a first-person narrative of Miss Pilgrim, appointed as governess to the two daughters of Colonel Patrick of Paradise, Guernsey.

The broader consequence of these social changes for Guernsey literature was an increasing focus on the physical beauty of the island and its distinctiveness within British culture. Sometimes, novels about the island written during this period read a little like guidebooks or promotional tourist literature. In one of the first novels written about Guernsey in English, *André's Trial* (1868), Austen Clare refers to the Channel Islands as the "fortunate isles", and much is made of its most distinctive features of natural beauty: bays, shady lanes, and the thatched cottages of the workers on the farms. There is a persistent "folksy" feel about all the characterization, with dialogue rendered in 'thees' and 'thous', presumably to mimic the *patois* that was actually spoken in rural Guernsey at the time. George Motley's *Legend and Romance* (1892) also makes great use of local colour, with country lanes and the spire of Torteval church. There is even a visit to a granddame, reputed to be one hundred years old, in her farmhouse, where she is depicted sitting on her green bed and knitting a guernsey.⁶ John Ferguson's *Death Comes to Perigord* (1934) even contains a *Clameur de Haro*.⁷ The novels written by Elinor M. Brent-Dyer in the 1930s constantly pick up on the holiday atmosphere of exploring local beauty spots and remarking on unexpected quaintnesses. In *Heather Leaves School* (1939), the Raphael family travels to Guernsey for its holiday and is entranced by the prettiness and quaint otherness of St Peter Port, the narrow lanes in the countryside, and "the rapid flow of Norman French which many of the islanders still use" (54). They picnic at Pleinmont, fully ten miles from town, getting there by charabanc⁸, the only form of transport available on the island. There are lots of other jolly picnics and a gorgeous day on Sark. Predictably, the boat crossing back to England is a horror.

Sometimes the local colour is more than natural beauty. Hugo had drawn attention constantly to the pagan side of the island's culture that was the obverse of its dominant Calvinism. Gilliatt lives in a house that is reputed to be haunted and his mother was suspected of being a witch. The owner of the wrecked steamship is certain that Gilliatt will be thought a sorcerer for having so brilliantly salvaged his ship. In another novel by Austen Clare, *The Little Gate of Tears* (1906), folkore is used extensively to contextualise the island's otherness within the contemporary British Isles. He depicts the celebration of the midsummer festival on the island with all its pagan overtones. There is much bodice-ripping eroticism associated with the wild dancing on St John's Eve in a chapter entitled "Midsummer Madness". The climax is the figure of "La Môme", the maiden who has to sit on the green bed in order to receive her suitors with flowers, "the mute queen of the Guernsey household

festival, the tutelary goddess of the green-bed” (73). Elizabeth Goudge’s aptly named *Island Magic* (1934) makes much of the same line of characterization. In addition to the vivid evocation of the world of the Guernsey farmhouse in the 1880s, there is a strong sense of the magical in Guernsey life. Rachell Du Frocq has second sight and “sees” one of the men who survive what everyone had thought to be a wreck with all hands lost.

In later periods, the island often became the setting for stories of mystery and adventure. E. E. Cowper’s *Hill of Broom* (1917) is sub-titled “a Guernsey Mystery”. Many of these novels are adventure stories about children written for children. Cowper’s later novel, *White Wings to the Rescue* (1934) is an adventure story about girls and about sailing. Not all the action stories are for children, however. John Ferguson’s novel, *Death Comes to Perigord* (1934), is a detective story built around the first-person narrative of a locum doctor who comes to work on the island. To him, the island seems quite unreal, “almost oriental” (9), and it leaves him with a feeling that “I had stepped into another century” (15). Mary Richmond’s *Garden of Memories* (1947) is set during the German Occupation in World War Two. It begins as another holiday or visitor narrative. Margaret Charlton is on holiday in Guernsey recovering from a love affair when war breaks out. She decides to stay with the Carey family of L’Anvide during the Occupation rather than return to England. The boys of the family join the Resistance but Françoise, the Careys’ daughter, falls in love with a German soldier. Margaret is taken prisoner after trying to shelter an escaped prisoner. Perhaps the best recent example of the use of the island for a mystery story is Elizabeth George’s *A Place of Hiding* (2003), a murder mystery in which much is made of the continued reputation of the island for witchcraft.

IV

The two most important Guernsey novels since World War Two are undoubtedly Mervyn Peake’s *Mr. Pye* (1953) and G. B. Edwards’s *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (1981) and both have an interesting relationship with Hugo’s novel.

Peake was not a native islander, and his novel is not set on the island of Guernsey itself but on the nearby island of Sark, which is, however, part of the Bailiwick of Guernsey. More than any other novel about Guernsey, *Mr. Pye* is written in the symbolist and allegorical mode that is Hugo’s métier. Harold Pye is an unprepossessing short, fat man who arrives on Sark with a one-way ticket. Almost immediately, he begins to rally the islanders to his pantheist vision of a world devoted to love and the “Great Pal”, a God who is encountered everywhere, from the sublime to the ridiculous: “I hear His voice in the tempest, yes, but I hear it also here at breakfast. He is, in fact, within this piece of toast. He was alive in the porridge” (58). Eventually, Mr. Pye is transfigured; his back is marked with inflamed skin that begins to turn into white feathers, and rudimentary angel wings begin to grow. After an unsuccessful consultation in Harley St to find some physical cure, Mr. Pye decides to try to reverse the process by doing evil. He returns to the island and plans a satanic celebration in Dixcart Valley, complete with tethered goat. To Mr. Pye’s surprise, sin is not hard and easily becomes natural to him. His wings gradually disappear to be replaced by horns on his forehead. After Mr. Pye reveals himself to some of the islanders again, his wings begin to grow once more and grow to the size of a swan. The islanders persecute Mr. Pye, and for a while he shelters in the island’s famous two-person gaol. He steals a horse and carriage and heads for the Coupée, the precipitous isthmus that separates Big Sark from Little Sark, but the horse stumbles and falls over while Mr. Pye flies off into the night and ascends to heaven.

Peake’s novel is hard to compare with anything else produced on the island or about it: its mixture of farce and grand religious allegory is unique. The only thing to compare with it in quality is Edwards’s *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (1981), a fictional autobiography written in the first person. Unlike Peake or Hugo, Edwards was a native Guernseyman, born on the island in 1899. On his father’s side, his ancestors had migrated to Guernsey from the south-west of England to join in the “stone rush” at the end of the 18th Century, when the island’s reserves of high quality blue granite began to be quarried on a large scale. On his mother’s side, Edwards was a “Mauger” (pronounced “Major”), one of the oldest island names. After training as a pupil teacher, Edwards left the island as a young man to study at Bristol University and, apart from a couple of brief visits, never returned to Guernsey to

live. He moved in London literary circles in the 1920s and 1930s, where he was much admired, but he disappointed the hopes of his friends and published very little during his lifetime. He seems to have begun his novel in his sixties. A few unsuccessful attempts were made by friends to find a publisher when Edwards was in his early seventies, but the novel was eventually published posthumously in 1981, five years after Edwards's death. Although it was well received on its publication and highly praised by such eminent contemporaries as William Golding and John Fowles, the novel has never received its critical due, perhaps because it is difficult to contextualise in the absence of wider knowledge about Guernsey and its literature.⁹

Peake's Sark could be anywhere, any community or any island, but Edwards's Guernsey is experienced and conceived from the inside by someone who, although an expatriate, had thought searchingly about all aspects of the history and culture of the island where he had been born. Although Ebenezer's narrative voice at times overlaps with Edwards's own, Ebenezer is not simply a mouthpiece for the author but is a kind of Guernsey everyman, embodying in his own long life the major shifts in island life in the 20th Century and stubbornly holding out for a kind of essential identity against the depressing cultural realignments of the period. Ebenezer was born in the 1890s, into a family of quarrymen, reflecting the great economic shift in island life in the 19th Century away from farming, but as a young man he becomes a "grower" of tomatoes, forced in the greenhouses that dominated the rural landscape of the island for much of the 20th Century. He achieves some prosperity in this, but when he begins to write his "book" in old age he finds himself unmarried, lonely, and alienated from almost all aspects of modern Guernsey life. He is contemptuous of its reliance on tourism, which he sees as a whorish activity that saps the island of its energy and distorts its values, and although he is a wealthy man himself he would have no place in the society of tax havens and offshore finance that has brought a new class of the super-rich to the island in the last thirty years.

Ebenezer is not a religious man in any conventional sense, but he embodies some of the religious history of the island that is so significant. His home was divided between the "church" into which his father had been born and the "chapel" that had dominated his mother's life. His mother's Calvinism is strict to the point of absurdity: she has deserted one sect of the brethren who had sung hymns to musical accompaniment for another that sings them unaccompanied. She is saddened by the end of the Second World War and the Liberation of Guernsey because she had believed that the Occupation had marked the beginning of "the End". Ebenezer never finds his mother's uncompromising religion attractive although he lives with her and looks after her in her old age in an unselfish way and the text of the "book" is littered with scraps of the Bible. On the other hand, Ebenezer comes eventually to find peace in the idiosyncratic religious views of one of his legion of cousins, Raymond Martel, who has deserted the Wesleyan ministry, which is another important strand in the rich textile of island religious life, and come to believe in a kind of pantheism which has many similarities to Mr. Pye's. The final vision of the beauty of the island on Ebenezer's last day alive is a sustained religious rapture that echoes Peake's vision in all sorts of ways.

Although Ebenezer has only read one novel in his life, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), it is a powerful intertext in the literature of islands. Ebenezer's story is not a latter-day Guernsey version of that novel, however. Although he becomes a solitary in all sorts of ways, Ebenezer is not alone. As he says, half the island are his cousins and the cousins of his cousins. Nor is Guernsey an uninhabited desert island; in fact it is densely inhabited with traces of its waves of settlers from Neolithic times to the present tourist hordes. Other books are mentioned, especially the ones that Raymond has read, and some of them have already been referred to here, such as the novels of John Oxenham. Hugo too is mentioned, both in person and as a writer with associations to the island. Raymond has read all four volumes of *Les Misérables* in French while escaping the flu epidemic after the First World War, but it is the novel that is not mentioned that is the really important one. *The Toilers of the Sea* is never referred to by name, but it is everywhere in the text.¹⁰

It is everywhere in the text, but its presence is often invoked ironically, suggesting a view or direction of ideas about Guernsey that is not followed. For example, while Ebenezer is a solitary who lives with his mother like Gilliatt, he is in almost all ways an anti-hero. His repeated re-reading of *Robinson Crusoe* has convinced him that the moral of the story is that it is a waste of time to gallivant round

the world when you could stay comfortably at home. He has in fact only left the island once in his long life, a day-trip to the neighbouring island of Jersey to watch a football match. During the First World War, he unostentatiously avoided service in the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry and was thereby spared a part in its heroic but tragic misfortunes on the battlefield. During the Second World War, he struggled, as did everyone else left on the island, to avoid starvation. The one heroic act of his life is to have murdered a German soldier who was sexually abusing one of the slave workers accommodated on the island. As a child, Ebenezer had considered becoming a fisherman like Gilliatt but eventually he prospered instead in the unromantic career of a grower of greenhouse tomatoes. Compared to Gilliatt's prodigious feats of seamanship and swimming, Ebenezer is content to potter around the coast in a rowing boat doing a little light fishing and, like most real seamen of the time, cannot swim and is amazed at the sight of his cousins, Raymond and Horace Martel, bathing in the sea. Perhaps the ultimate piece of ironic anti-heroism is the rewriting of the most famous episode of all in *The Toilers of the Sea*. Gilliatt's life and death struggle with the giant octopus which seizes his arm as he unwisely reaches through a crack in a rock is transformed by Edwards when Ebenezer discovers a conger eel by accident when he is looking for shellfish under rocks one day towards the end of the Occupation. The long results of undernourishment precipitate a life and death struggle of another kind. Ebenezer is desperate to land the fish so that he and his sister can eat it and have a chance of survival.

The most interesting revision that Edwards makes to Hugo's narrative is his transformation of its religious themes. *The Toilers of the Sea* begins on Christmas Day as church and chapel prepare to gather in their respective places. Hugo makes much of the sectarianism of the island's culture, divided between church and chapel. The Anglican Church of the island stubbornly held on to its Presbyterian form of church government until the late seventeenth century. At a later stage, Wesley visited the island to preach and it became a bastion of Methodism. There were many other smaller religious groups, such as the Brethren to which Ebenezer's mother belongs, and Ebenezer comments of his childhood in the early part of the 20th Century that it is hard to imagine now just how much religion there had once been on the island. The other side of this coin is the long association of the island with witchcraft.

Edwards takes over many of these themes, but characteristically inflects them with great subtlety. Like Gilliatt, Ebenezer is torn in a Lawrentian¹¹ way between two powerful women: his mother and the love of his life, Liza Quéripel. But the two women also represent opposite religious poles as well. Liza's grandmother was reputed to have been a witch and her cottage is at Pleinmont as well, the area that Hugo says was notorious for witches. Although Liza returns Ebenezer's love in her own sort of way, she refuses to marry him, and hence condemns him to a life of loneliness, despite his many successful casual sexual encounters with a string of women. Liza is neither a religious person nor an irreligious one, but there is a kind of antinomianism in her life and morality: she bears at least two illegitimate children to different fathers, and then makes things worse by willingly giving both away, and she takes a German lover during the Occupation when it suits her.

But, ultimately, Liza is human through and through, and her greatest opposition in terms of character is not to Ebenezer's mother, but rather to Christine, who becomes the wife of Ebenezer's cousin, Raymond Martel. After service in the First World War, Raymond trains for the Wesleyan ministry. At first, it looks as if he might make a suitable match with the daughter of the head of his theological college, but as he nears ordination and prepares for his first sermon, it becomes clear that he is in love with Christine Mahy, the daughter of a disreputable family looked down upon by Raymond's own. The turning point of the story in almost every sense is Raymond's first sermon, which occurs almost exactly half-way through the novel. The occasion is marked by Christine's singing of the hymn *O love that will not let me go*, a rendition that Ebenezer remembers all his life, not just for the beauty of Christine's singing but for the daring ambiguity of her performance, delivered in a scandalous way in bare arms. Raymond's relationship with Christine is intolerable to his family, and his parents cut him off in the most ruthless of ways. To add to Raymond's problems, his sermon on the text "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20), explicated in a pantheist way, causes trouble with his superiors. Instead of dealing with their criticism diplomatically, Raymond defies them, denying the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection for good measure, and he leaves the Church never to return. His relationship with Christine falls to pieces when she is denied the social status of the minister's

wife and has to live on his meagre salary as a minor functionary in the *Greffe*, the Guernsey public service. Christine's name is patently a piece of irony; there is nothing Christ-like about her and everything of the Antichrist. Ebenezer thinks that she is the vainest and most callous woman he has ever known, but Raymond's beloved cousin, who has a brief affair with her later, hits it on the head when he calls her "the bottomless pit". Raymond's descent into ruin is a tragic experience, including a time practicing the homosexuality that one feels is always just beneath the surface of his characterisation. Eventually, he takes his own life in what looks like a joint suicide pact with Horace.

What survives is Raymond's religion, and the climax of the novel can only be recorded in his pantheist language. On what looks like the last day of Ebenezer's life and the day on which he records his last entry in the "book", he visits Liza and is reconciled to her. On the return trip to his own home he sees the beauty of the island transfigured: "the rocks was not rocks, nor the sea sea, yet they was as real as real; and the clouds was gates of glory, and every way I turned my eyes the view was waves of joy and light" (480). The words that Raymond had used to describe the island of Sark on his honeymoon with Christine come back to Ebenezer: "It is a glimpse of the world as God made it ... on the first evening of the first day" (480). Although Ebenezer is on his own, like Gilliatt or like Robinson Crusoe, he knows that "there is SOMEBODY HERE" (481), and he thinks back to his childhood, visiting his father in the quarry and climbing the ladder with his father close and securely behind him. As he writes the last entry in his book, long after midnight, he thinks much about what comes after death, but he knows that "there is no after: it will only be now" (482). He no longer believes in judgement, only in forgiveness, and he longs to be able to live his life again, if only this time to bless and to forgive.

V

The Book of Ebenezer Le Page is a fine novel by any standards, certainly one of the best novels published in Britain in the second half of the 20th Century, but its richness of meaning can only be fully appreciated within the context of Guernsey literature and Guernsey history and culture generally. Edwards's book is like Guernsey itself: little known to outsiders, off the beaten track, densely inhabited, contradictory and multi-layered. If Guernsey itself were better known, it is hard to imagine that Edwards's novel would not be more widely read and studied.

Fundamental to Edwards's achievement is that he understood the history of writing about Guernsey as well as the history of Guernsey itself; he knew this both as a native of the island and as an outsider. He left the island as a young man, returned only once or twice during the rest of his life, and died in Weymouth, as I mentioned above the closest point on the mainland of England to the island. Edwards was not the first writer to appreciate the importance of Hugo's novel, *The Toilers of the Sea*, but Edwards uses its influence and importance in subtler ways than other novelists, and this use is full of an irony that other Guernsey writers fail to exploit. Hugo's life was in many ways the reverse of Edwards's own: a French-speaker who lived in exile on the island rather than away from it, the author of a vast *oeuvre* who became the most famous writer in Europe, a national hero. Nevertheless, Hugo established most of the themes of Guernsey fiction, which Edwards and other writers work from: the close-knit and densely-related community that yet produces solitaries and alienated individuals; the treacherous presence of a hostile natural environment that creates heroes out of ordinary men and women; the divisive presence of Christian sectarianism, the melancholy Calvinism that underlies it and the abiding undercurrent of witchcraft and paganism that constantly threatens to destabilise it.

In the period after Hugo, these themes and narratives are taken up again and again by writers about Guernsey, although few other than Peake can aspire to Hugo's visionary and symbolist narrative mode. These novels tend to feed off the surface of Hugo's book and at the same time ignore the rich body of ideas that animates his novel. There is much history and romance, but little of the tragic vision that underpins Hugo's representation; there is plenty of adventure, especially adventure for children, but without the sense of ironic futility that puts it into perspective. In this period, Guernsey literature foregrounds the otherness and prettiness of the island, the holiday place away from the real world, an easy taste of the "exotic" for English readers, which is the literary counterpart to the

booming tourism of the inter-war years. Edwards, like Ebenezer, detested tourism, which he saw as an activity that had destroyed the island's individuality in a mad rush for to identify the quaintness and eccentricity that would bring in the money. His lasting contribution to Guernsey culture and literature is to have found a way of depicting the reality of island life in the 20th Century, but he did it by rediscovering and reinvigorating the depth and imaginative power of Hugo's analysis.

Endnotes:

¹ I have borrowed the title of Reynolds's novel (1925) for the title of this article. "Sarnia" is the Latin name for the island of Guernsey, known especially from the national anthem *Sarnia Chérie*, but it now seems likely that the Romans meant the nearby island of Sark by the name.

² The article by Duncan King is indispensable to any study, but it is bibliographical in nature and offers little in the way of literary analysis.

³ For a study of Jèrriais, see Johnson (2005).

⁴ See Stapfer (1905).

⁵ These details and figures are from Raoul Lemprière's *History of the Channel Islands* (1990).

⁶ The green bed was a large day-bed, piled high with ferns, and it was a feature of farmhouses in rural Guernsey up to the end of the Second World War. A guernsey is a hand-knitted jumper renowned for its wind-proofing and waterproofing qualities.

⁷ An ancient, though still perfectly legal, means of obtaining an injunction against possible wrong or injury. The complainant must drop to his knees, call on the assistance of the "prince" and recite the Lord's Prayer in French.

⁸ An English – rather than Guernsey term – adopted from French, referring to a large bus used for sightseeing.

⁹ There is a little critical literature. See the series of articles by Edward Chaney, who as a young man met Edwards and encouraged him to finish the novel, and my two articles that place the novel in a social context on the one hand and a literary context on the other.

¹⁰ I have explored this at length in a forthcoming article in *Modern Language Review* (Goodall, forthcoming 2008).

¹¹ Edwards admitted that Lawrence was the single most important influence on his life. He was commissioned by Jonathan Cape in the late 1920s to write a biography of him, but the work was never finished.

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