One

The elusive hare

Rhys Davies was among the most dedicated, prolific, and accomplished of Welsh prose-writers in English. With unswerving devotion and scant regard for commercial success, he practised the writer's craft for some fifty years, in both the short story and the novel form, publishing in his lifetime a substantial body of work on which his literary reputation now firmly rests. He wrote, in all, more than a hundred stories, twenty novels, three novellas, two topographical books about Wales, two plays, and an autobiography in which he set down, obliquely and in code, the little he wanted the world to know about him.

So prodigious an output was made possible largely because he shared his life with no other person, giving it up entirely to his writing. By temperament a loner, and suspicious of the gregarious instinct in writers – a stance he assiduously cultivated in defiance of prevailing fashions and ideologies – he chose to keep himself apart, especially from other expatriate Welsh writers living in England

between the two world wars. Except for a few years as a draper's assistant on first going to London and a short stint of compulsory war-work, he managed to live almost wholly by his pen, his meagre income unsupplemented by any teaching, journalism, broadcasting, or hack-work of any kind. He sat on no committees, signed no manifestos, believed no political nostrums or religious dogma, never read his work in public, attended no foreign conferences, never edited a magazine, engaged in no literary squabbles, spurned all cliques, shunned the company of academics, had no taste or talent for self-promotion, joined no literary societies, never competed for a prize, never sat in judgement on his fellow writers as an adjudicator of literary competitions, and only very rarely as a reviewer of their books. He believed the proper business of a writer was to be writing.

Living in rented or borrowed accommodation from which he invariably soon moved on, he maintained a rigorous work-schedule, writing, eating and sleeping in one small room, and seldom seeking the opinion of other writers. He cultivated detachment as if by not fully belonging to any one place, or by not wholly identifying with any one coterie, he could preserve something of himself, something secret, his inviolable self, which he prized above all else. When immersed in a story, as he often was, he wrote a thousand words a day until it was finished. Domestic comforts, such as a home, a regular partner and some security of income, which make life tolerable for most writers, were not for him. He did not even turn to the anodyne of drink, which has sustained and destroyed so many: it just didn't work for him, he once said, though he was not averse to the occasional

glass in one of his favourite pubs. As for drugs, he had seen what they had done to the only woman he cared for, the heroin addict Anna Kavan.

There was a parsimonious, some said a mean streak to his nature. The virtues he extolled were the puritanical ones he had learned in his youth, namely thrift, a horror of debt, and minding one's own business, the last of which he also took, rather surprisingly, to be a specifically Welsh characteristic. Although, after his move to London in 1921, he was sometimes to be seen at the Fitzroy Tavern or the Wheatsheaf, or one of Fitzrovia's other famous pubs, he disliked excessive drinking and always gave the bibulous Dylan Thomas a wide berth. He was, in short, an urbane, mild-mannered, secretive, shy man whose only extravagance was sartorial: he had a taste for fine clothes, almost to the point of dandyism. He owned no furniture and was able to keep all his worldly possessions in a small trunk that went with him with every change of address. Nothing and nobody was allowed to interfere with his writing. This professional single-mindedness, deliberately cultivated, assiduously guarded and reinforced by his equanimity, love of solitude and modest material needs, enabled him to pursue a literary career uninterrupted by any of the emotional or domestic upheavals such as are to be found aplenty in his stories and novels.

There was, moreover, another important fact that needs to be noted at the outset, for it was central both to Davies's life and to his work. Although he maintained complete discretion and 'acted straight', his sexual orientation was expressed as an attraction to other men. Yet most of those who knew him, like his younger brother Lewis, were at a

loss to say who his sexual partners were because he never spoke or wrote about them in personal terms. Until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, homosexuality in Britain was illegal and those who practised it were liable to prosecution and imprisonment. Nonetheless, Davies regularly sought fleeting encounters with strangers, often penurious Guardsmen, about whom he had a homoerotic fixation. He also had romantic crushes on younger, heterosexual men that were not reciprocated and so made him unhappy. But he enjoyed no lasting sexual relationship with another person, and with the women who found him kind, gentle, charming and excellent company, like Anna Kavan, the very type of difficult woman to whom he was drawn, he maintained strictly platonic friendships. Above all, he protected his privacy and independence, fearing intrusion into his inner life by anyone who came too close, man or woman.

Nevertheless, the reader will find many clues in Davies's books that reveal him as a writer concerned with proclivities he dared not describe directly. Writing about growing up in Glasgow in the 1920s and 1930s, the distinguished poet and critic Edwin Morgan put his predicament as a homosexual like this:

> To anyone of my generation, the inhibitions were enormous, and habits of disguise and secrecy, inculcated at an early age, are hard to break… I wanted both to conceal, and not to conceal.[1]

Every stage of Davies's life and every aspect of his work was deeply implicated in his sexual identity, so that it is not difficult to read his books from this perspective alone.

But reader, beware. The enigmatic title of his 'autobiographical beginning', *Print of a Hare's Foot*, a most unreliable book from start to finish in that it often fails to tally with the known facts and disguises people and events with adroit use of smoke and mirrors, is in fact a reference to its author's own ambiguous sexual nature. It conceals much more than it reveals.[2]

The book's title was well chosen: the image of the hare, a lunar, richly secretive creature in folklore, said to change its shape while always remaining resolutely itself, sexually active, living by its wits and giving out misleading signals, a symbol of paradox, contradiction and transitoriness, both lucky and unlucky, damned in Deuteronomy and Leviticus as unclean and forbidden, an endangered species, lying low and leaving only the lightest of prints before disappearing into its form in its own mysterious way – this image was central to both Davies's writing and his life. As M. Wynn Thomas puts it in his chapter in *Rhys Davies: Decoding the Hare*, the fullest study of the writer so far published:

> What better image could be found of Davies's own situation relative to a homophobic culture? He could not just run free; he had to accommodate his movements, as man and writer, to the temper and tempo of his times. As a homosexual – however discreet, and however inactive – he found his identity was inexorably defined, and negatively constructed, by the dominant heterosexual culture.[3]

This need, and instinct, to dissemble, also explains to some extent the detached, almost clinical way in which

Davies observed other people without becoming emotionally involved with them, except in so far as he was fascinated by the play of human emotion and made it the mainstay of his fiction. 'A creative writer can't afford to wave a flag', he wrote in a BBC script in 1950. 'He mustn't write social propaganda or political speeches, his task is to look into the secrets of the eternal private heart.' His detachment also accounted for the evasiveness with which he habitually responded to enquiries about himself. Asked by a publisher in 1954 whether he would write an autobiography, he told friends, 'It would be too gloomy and the truth (what use is a book without truth?) wouldn't bear telling.'[4] A brief autobiographical note he wrote in 1958 made it clear how reluctant he was to say anything that would reveal his true self:

> The blankness of a page waiting for notes about myself is much more dismaying than page 1 of a projected new book. Temptations for Exhibitionism! So much to conceal, evade, touch-up![5]

Such a man, such a writer, the quintessential misfit and outsider, again in Wynn Thomas's phrase, 'a lifelong cryptographer', presents challenges for the biographer who has to know when the false trails deliberately laid down by Davies are leading nowhere and how to decipher the code in which he habitually wrote about the things that mattered to him. It is, of course, possible to read his work solely for the literary pleasure it affords, but for a fuller appreciation we have to know something about the writer's personality and career that, thirty-five years after his death, are still recognisably contemporary and

relevant. Although Davies was a man very much of his place and time, his achievement as a writer was that, by the mysterious process we call art, he left work that is timeless and universal, and that still speaks to the human condition.

At a time when so much English literary criticism seems to be the fruit of academic theoretical discourse, this book is a biography first and foremost, free of the methodology of fashionable exegesis. But for every biographer a writer's life is soon inseparable from his or her art, the two going hand in hand, and so an attempt has to be made to throw light on the places, people and events that went to the making of Rhys Davies the man and writer, and to show how his life was indeed writ large in his books. It is left to others to examine his books from critical perspectives that shed more light on his literary achievement.

Notes

1 Edwin Morgan, introduction to the anthology *And Thus Will I Freely Sing* (ed. Toni Davidson, Polygon, 1989)

2 *Print of a Hare's Foot: An Autobiographical Beginning* (Heinemann, 1969; Seren, 1998); all subsequent quotations from the work of RD are from this book, unless otherwise noted.

3 M. Wynn Thomas, *'"Never Seek to Tell thy Love": Rhys Davies's Fiction',* in *Rhys Davies:Decoding the Hare: critical essays to mark the centenary of the writer's birth* (ed. Meic Stephens, University of Wales Press, 2001); from now on this symposium will be noted as *Decoding the Hare*.

4 Letter to Redvers and Louise Taylor (22 May 1954)

5 *Wales* (ed. Keidrych Rhys, September 1958)