

WRITING THE LITERARY HISTORY OF THE CHANNEL ISLANDS

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Abstract

This paper offers an introductory outline of the literary history of the Channel Islands. Little has been written on this topic before, even on the one or two major authors who are well known, and nothing resembling a general literary history exists, into which individual works might be contextualised. The main topics of the paper are the struggle between English and French as literary languages; poetry in *patois* in the nineteenth century; genre fiction in English in the twentieth century; the fine novels of Guernsey life of Victor Hugo and G. B. Edwards; and the spate of novels written in the last ten years about the wartime occupation of the islands.

Keywords

Channel Islands, Literature, Patois, Victor Hugo, G. B. Edwards, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*.

Little has been written on the literature produced in or about the Channel Islands, and although there is a very useful bibliographical survey of fiction written about the islands by D. King (1987), there is no general literary history of them. This paper attempts a beginning of the writing of such a literary history. For reasons of space, it focuses on the following topics: the struggle between English and French for dominance as the literary medium and the special status of the island *patois*; *patois* poetry in the nineteenth century; the growth of fiction in English during the twentieth century; the prominent place of Victor Hugo and Gerald Edwards in writing about Guernsey; and the popularity of recent fiction about the islands' experiences during the Second World War.

French or English?

Until 1900, the spoken language of the islands was, more or less universally, a group of Norman French dialects. These *patois* remained in common use up to the time of the Second World War. The struggle between French and English is well caught in Gerald Edwards's novel about Guernsey in the twentieth century, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (1981): Ebenezer's mother, born we may infer about 1860, speaks *patois* but reads the Bible in English; Ebenezer's grandmother, born perhaps in the 1830s, cannot speak English at all and reads the Bible in French. It is important to appreciate that *patois* and standard French are not the same thing. *Patois* was always primarily a spoken language, a collection of Norman dialects differing significantly from island to island and sometimes within each island. Newspapers were printed in standard French, and the language of the courts and of parliament was a legal version of standard French. The clergy, who ministered to the islands' largely Protestant congregations, were mostly trained in France as well. Fluent speakers of *patois* now number probably less than 1000 on Guernsey and less than 2000 on Jersey. However, according to the 2001 census, between 12% and 15% of the islands' population

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claim to be able to understand some (see also Johnson, 2005). There are many local activities and organisations designed to raise the profile of the languages.

There is little 'writing' of any kind extant, either in French or English, before the introduction of printing to Jersey in the 1780s. The one notable exception is Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155), although he is perhaps the exception that proves the rule. Wace's *Brut* is a long Anglo-Norman verse translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's popular Latin work *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain), the most important source-book of stories of King Arthur for writers of the Middle Ages. Wace says that he was born in Jersey but left for Caen in Normandy as a child, eventually becoming a canon of Bayeux. The close connection with the Duchy of Normandy is the most striking element here. After the introduction of printing on the islands, the most commonly printed works, both in French and in English, were religious books, then legal and historical works. In the early nineteenth century, there begins to emerge a significant genre of travel books (Hemery, 2007).

Dialect Poetry of the Nineteenth Century

The first 'literature' to be produced in any volume on the islands is the flowering of poems in the various *patois*, which appears first in the early nineteenth century. The poems were mostly published in a large number of competing newspapers and journals and subsequently anthologised. The best known of these collections is Georges Métivier's *Rimes Guernesaises*, published in Guernsey in 1831. The earliest poem to be printed in Jèrriais was written by Matthew Le Geyt (Matchi L'Gé) in 1795. The first printed anthology of Jèrriais poetry was *Poesies Jersiaises*, edited by Abraham Mourant and published in 1865. Although John Linwood Pitts's *Patois Poems of the Channel Islands* was written on Guernsey, it consists in the main of Jèrriais poems, with – significantly – parallel translations in English. There were several interesting poets active in *patois* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On Guernsey, Denys Corbet was a close friend of Métivier. On Jersey, there were a number of active authors: Laelius, the pen-name of the prominent lawyer and politician Sir Robert Pison Marett (1820–1884); Ester Le Hardy; Henri Luce Manuel; Philippe Asplet; Augustus Asplet Le Gros; and Philippe Langlois. Many, like Marett, wrote under pseudonyms, and most were antiquarians and enthusiasts rather than professional writers or men of the people. Le Gros of Jersey is a typical example. He was educated at the island's independent school, Victoria College. He trained for the Law, moved into politics, was one of the founders of the *Société Jersiaise*, and wrote poetry in English as well, editing the literary anthology *La Nouvelle Année* from 1868–1875. Philippe Langlois, likewise, studied medicine in Paris, served as a Deputy in the States, and was elected Jurat in 1876. The speaking personae of many of the poems, simple country people, can therefore make the poems seem quaint and artificial. The most potent literary inspiration is Robert Burns, who had performed a similar task for the Lowland Scots language of his own country, although Burns's literary language was a variant of English. Victor Hugo famously praised Métivier as the 'Guernsey Burns' (Hugo, 1866b).

Genre Novels in English in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

Although *patois* provided a suitable vehicle for short poems of a particular type, finding a literary language for extended works in prose was a different issue. If Channel Island writers wished to address audiences of any size, the choice was inevitably between English or standard French. Despite the powerful example of Hugo's novel of Guernsey life written in French, *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866a), which I discuss below, there were no island writers that I have found who were willing to follow his lead. If any had done so, the literary

history of the islands in the twentieth century – and for that matter, the fate of the spoken *patois* of the islands – could well have been very different. Instead, the novels of the nineteenth century about island life, written by non-islanders and islanders alike, were written in English. Even when they developed a powerful sense of the ‘otherness’ of island life in nineteenth-century Britain, their literary medium firmly associated them with English traditions.

There are no undiscovered geniuses here, at least none that I have yet found, but the most interesting and the best quality productions are good ‘genre’ fiction. The dominant genres are historical romance, adventure stories, perhaps with a sub-genre of adventure stories for children, and ‘visitor’ narratives of one sort or another.

The earliest of the historical romances are set back in time to a considerable extent: the Elizabethan period is one of the favourites. The title of Harold Carey’s swashbuckling *De Beauvoir the Masterful, or the Adventures of Cartaret de Sausmarez in the Days of Elizabeth* (1906) needs little gloss. A parallel work produced at much the same time on Jersey is Gilbert Parker’s *A Ladder of Swords: a Tale of Love, Laughter and Tears* (1904), which is set on Jersey in the 1570s and thereafter at the court of Elizabeth I in England. John Oxenham’s novels about Sark, for example *Carette of Sark* (1907), written also in the early part of the twentieth century, are usually set in the Napoleonic era, although there is the same whiff of romance about them. Some other notable examples are M. A. M. Hoppus’s *The Locket* (1889), subtitled “a tale of old Guernsey”, which is set in the time of George II, and Austen Clare’s *The Little Gate of Tears* (1906), which is set in 1800. The use of historical settings for Channel Island plots continued after the First World War: Northcote Parkinson’s series of Delancey naval novels, written in the 1970s, were set in the revolutionary period of the 1790s. Even when writers were not writing *romance* exactly, it would be fair to say that the setting has usually been in the past: there is almost always a sense in Channel Island literature that the culture of the islands has to be approached through their history, particularly through their historical relationship with England. Elizabeth Goudge’s popular successes, for example *Island Magic* (1934) and *Green Dolphin Country* (1944), are both set in the mid-nineteenth century.

As a genre, romance implies adventure, and many of the stories about the islands have plots that turn upon adventure in one form or another. The difficult sea conditions of the islands – the huge tides of the Channel, the presence of reefs close to shore, the sea cliffs of Guernsey, the narrow isthmus of the Coupée, a hundred metres above a sheer drop to the waves on either side, which connects the two parts of Sark – provide ample opportunities for such plots. Trips to Sark especially seem to result in an 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. E. Sausmarez Brock’s *A Tomato Boy* (1900) has two dramatic rescues performed: Vincent, the hero of the novel, is both rescued and, later, rescuer.

The local colour of the islands had begun to attract the interest of visitors in real life as well as in fiction. Tourism grew in importance as a local industry throughout the nineteenth century, reaching its heights in the period after World War II, when people had more money in their pockets and were tempted by destinations outside of the borders of England and Wales but had not yet been seduced by cheap package holidays on the Costa Brava. Many novels revolve around “holidays”, and there is a particularly strong sub-genre of the school holiday. Examples include D. A. Barker’s *The Great Leviathan* (1920) and Elinor M. Brent-Dyer’s *Heather Leaves School* (1939). Some of the novels read almost like guide-books or promotional literature. The islands are generally seen as a kind of seductive other to the ordinariness of life in Britain for most people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While in the rest of Britain, there was a dramatic increase in the proportion of the

population living in suburbs and working in white-collar business – the age of clerks, but also of clerks with ambitions and aspirations, is epitomised in such characters as Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers* by D. H. Lawrence (1912) or Leonard Bast in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910) – the Channel Islands seemed to visitors to have preserved their old ways and folk heritage. Austen Clare's *André's Trial* (1868), one of the first novels about Guernsey written in English, depicts the island in stunning unspoiled natural beauty, with thatched cottages, water lanes, and the use of "thou" and "thee" to represent the patois of the island. Folk customs are widely used as a motif. Another novel of Clare's, *The Little Gate of Tears*, culminates in a celebration of a midsummer festival with powerful overtones of paganism and its accompanying mild eroticism. The climax is the figure of "La Môme", the maiden who sits on the rustic green bed, receiving her suitors who bring flowers to her.

Two Great Novels of Guernsey Life

There can be little argument that the two greatest literary works produced in the Channel Islands are the novels of Guernsey life by Victor Hugo and G. B. Edwards, although the strange allegorical novel of Sark, *Mr Pye*, written by Mervyn Peake, who lived on the island between 1946 and 1950, makes a very significant third. To many, Hugo must seem an odd inclusion here, but he lived in the Channel Islands for eighteen years during a political exile from France, fifteen of them on Guernsey. His fine house in Hauteville, St Peter Port, was the only house he ever owned anywhere. During his time on Guernsey, he finished *Les Misérables*. His novel of Guernsey life, *Les Travaillieurs de la mer* (usually translated as *The Toilers of the Sea*), was published in 1866. The novel tells the tragic story of Gilliatt, a solitary who falls in love with the beautiful Déruchette Lethierry and who undertakes single-handed the seemingly impossible salvage of a steamship that has been wrecked on the treacherous reef of Roches-Douvres. Gilliatt is promised Déruchette in marriage if he accomplishes the salvage, but when he goes to claim his prize, he finds that she is in love with another man. He abandons his claim to Déruchette, and in the closing pages of the novel commits suicide, surrendering himself to the treacherous tides of the Channel that he had so recently conquered.

There is much in Hugo's novel that points both backwards and forwards in Channel Island literature: he understood the history and culture of the islands surprisingly well for an outsider, and he embedded many of the themes and plot motifs that later became the staple of Channel Island literature. Examples of this include the historical setting of fiction, the dominance of romance and adventure as genres, the omnipresence of the sea and its treacheries for setting and ambience, and the significance of religious sectarianism in island consciousness. At the heart of Hugo's novel is the salvage itself, complete with extraordinary feats of swimming. One of the high points of this part of the novel, the fight to the death with the giant octopus, *la pieuvre*, became such a significant part of Channel Island fiction that it was repeated and adapted many times, sometimes with acknowledgement to Hugo, more often not (for example, Motley, 1892; Oxenham, 1910; and Dunord, 1930).

G. B. Edwards's novel in English of Guernsey life, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, published in 1981, is well enough known by now not to need much by way of introduction or plot summary. It was a considerable success in the market when first published and, after a period out of print, has been reissued in recent years. This novel was Edwards's only publication, and even this was published posthumously, five years after his death in 1976. Details of his life are very sketchy, although it is clear that he lived almost all his adult life away from the island. It is known that Edwards's principal literary models were the great modernist novelists of English fiction, D. H. Lawrence especially, whose biography Edwards had at one time been commissioned to write. There are certainly plenty of Lawrentian

thematic echoes in the plot, for example the intense relationship between Ebenezer and his mother, which in some ways, although not all, makes it impossible for him to engage in a complete relationship with Liza Quéripel, who is the love of his life. There are also plenty of literary allusions on the surface of the novel as well, although of a different type. Ebenezer himself has only read one novel in his life, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this novel in the culture of Britain in the nineteenth century, especially in the literature of islands and of colonial interaction, but, ultimately, Ebenezer is not Robinson, nor is Guernsey a desert island. One of Ebenezer's many cousins, Raymond Martel, who has been educated for the Wesleyan ministry but who is forced to abandon this and become a clerk in the *greffe*, has an interest in literature. Most of his reading is late Victorian middle-brow literature, such as the work of John Oxenham and Hall Caine, both writers about island life incidentally, but Raymond has also read all four volumes of *Les Misérables* in French.

Curiously, it is Hugo's great novel of Guernsey life that is not mentioned. Ebenezer himself, like many islanders, dislikes the French. In a letter to Edward Chaney, who as a young man befriended the aging Edwards and encouraged him to complete the novel, later becoming unwittingly the model of Neville Falla in it, Edwards had commented that "whatever merits ... [Hugo's] stories may have, they are completely unconvincing to a born and bred Guernseyman" (Chaney 1995). This is deliberately misleading on Edwards's part, however, and, as I have argued elsewhere (Goodall 2008), the influences of Hugo's novel can be found everywhere in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, often as direct echoes of themes and motifs, sometimes as directions manifestly *not* taken, sometimes rewritten in an ironic way. One of the most striking instances of this is Edwards's version of the fight with the giant octopus. In his novel, in the latter days of the Second World War, when Ebenezer, near to starvation like everyone else on the island, goes looking for shellfish along the beach one day, he puts his hand under a rock, just like Gilliatt, and is amazed to find himself grasping a massive conger eel, which somehow has managed to avoid being caught. The fight to the death is of a different kind from Gilliatt's, altogether more mundane and less adventurous, by a man desperate to find something to eat and an animal desperate to escape. There are many more echoes: both Gilliatt and Ebenezer are solitaires, close to their mothers; both are doomed by their failure in love; both are fishermen, who live close to the sea; Christian sectarianism and its opposite, paganism and witchcraft, dominate the themes of both novels. Edwards's novel ends not with the suicide of its protagonist, however, but with a mystical view of the transcendent beauty of the islands on the day that Ebenezer dies of old age: "a glimpse of the world as God made it [...] on the first evening of the first day" (Edwards, 1981: 480).

Recent Novels about the Wartime Occupation of the Islands

During Ebenezer's lifetime (roughly 1890 to 1970), tourism had established itself as a major part of the Channel Islands' economies. Its heyday was during the immediate post-war period, although tourists had been coming in significant numbers to the islands since the mid-nineteenth century. Like much else in modern life, Ebenezer is totally alienated from the tourists as people and from the islands' financial and cultural dependence on tourism. He is especially antipathetic to the use of the islands' experiences during the German Occupation as colour for tourist enjoyment. Ebenezer regards the wartime experience as part of Guernsey's "shame", when islanders had averted their eyes from the slave workers and their concentration camps.

Ebenezer's attitudes need careful contextualisation; the more so as this is still a sensitive topic in the Channel Islands, especially on Guernsey. The use of slave labour by the

Germans in the Channel Islands was never a secret: the islands are small, the camps were very visible, and the ragged and starving prisoners – mainly Slavs from Eastern Europe or political prisoners rather than Jews – could be seen on a daily basis as they were marched from the camps to their places of work. This is plainly what Ebenezer sees on Guernsey, even though Edwards was not himself present on the island during the War. Estimates of the number of deaths of inmates vary, but a figure somewhere between 200 and 2000 seems to be generally accepted. Although some islanders risked their lives by providing food for the slave workers, in general there was little resistance to the Germans, either in this or any other matter. The situation was very different in other parts of occupied Europe where organised resistance movements fought desperately against the Germans. The Channel Islands were the only part of occupied Europe where German soldiers did not routinely carry firearms, and the testimony of many soldiers of the occupying army was that this was a holiday compared with their experiences on the eastern front.

After the war was over, the official explanations for this lack of resistance ranged from the smallness of the islands, which rendered organised resistance groups too visible for safe operation, to the absence of men of fighting age. There is some truth in both arguments: many island men of military age joined the forces; those who were left faced deportation to camps on the continent. The island populations were seriously depleted: Alderney was almost completely abandoned, Guernsey's population was reduced by half, and only on Jersey was there something less than a mass evacuation.

Nevertheless, rumours of extensive collaboration, especially at the top level of administration on Guernsey, persisted after the war, although no islander was ever prosecuted, and none of the German command was prosecuted for war crimes, despite abundant evidence of their commission. Few histories of the occupation paid serious attention to the darker side of the history such as the slave camps or the evidence of collaboration until the publication of Madeleine Bunting's *The Model Occupation* in 1995 (revised in 2004), on the fiftieth anniversary of the Liberation of the Islands. She is scathingly critical of many aspects of the behaviour of the island populations that remained but especially of the wartime administration on Guernsey of Victor Carey, the Bailiff of the time and a member of one of the oldest and most respected island families. She is less critical of the administration on Jersey, especially the role played by its Bailiff, Alexander Coutanche.

Bunting's history accords very well with Ebenezer's own view of Guernsey's shame, even though Edwards's novel was completed almost twenty years before her history was published. This is all the more remarkable as there has been a steady stream of novels recreating the wartime history of the islands in the years since Bunting's book was written. The first was Tim Binding's *Island Madness*, published in 1998. Peter Lihou's novel, *Rachel's Shoe*, the story of a Jewish camp inmate who is helped to escape and befriended by a Guernsey family, and Libby Cone's *War on the Margins*, set this time on Jersey and a semi-fictional account of two women who organise a support system for Jews and escaping soldiers, were both published in 2008. None of these books ignores the actual behaviour of the wartime populations, although none offers powerful criticism. The really strange case, however, is the book about wartime Guernsey that was one of the bestsellers of 2008, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows.

In one sense, the plot does contain some tragic elements within its overall comedy. At its heart is the fate of a child who is the offspring of one of the many (real-life) liaisons between an island woman and a handsome and kind German officer. But the island woman is deported to a camp in Europe where she dies, and her child is eventually adopted and raised on the island by her friends. What is disconcerting about the novel, more than a decade after Bunting's history and nearly thirty years after Edwards's novel, is the benign view of island

life during the occupation. Guernsey has once again become the place of picturesque farms and thatched cottages. There is little sense of the hardship of life beyond the eccentric dish of the title, a reference to the depleted wartime diet of the inhabitants. The characters are, for the most part, loveable eccentrics, and the German soldiers are kind and understanding educated aristocrats.

Conclusion

Despite the success of Shaffer and Barrows's book and its positive effect on the tourist trade, few Guernsey people who I have met think that it offers a realistic picture of island life, especially of the islanders' experiences during the Second World War. On the other hand, there is a near-universal respect for the authenticity and realism of Edwards's *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. It is very unfortunate that Edwards's book is not better known generally, as it has much to tell us, not just of the Channel Islands during the twentieth century but also of small island life and culture in general. It connects in the most interesting ways with Hugo's great novel of Guernsey life, written in French. But little will be understood of Channel Island literature, both the great and the humble, until a broad literary history is written into which individual works can be contextualised.

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