

REES, MORGAN GORONWY (1909 - 1979), writer and university administrator

Name: Morgan Goronwy Rees
Date of birth: 1909
Date of death: 1979
Spouse: Margaret Ewing Rees (née Morris)
Partner: Rosamond Nina Runciman (née Lehmann)
Partner: Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Cameron (née Bowen)
Child: Matthew Rees
Child: Daniel Rees
Child: Thomas Rees
Child: Lucy Rees
Child: Margaret Jane Rees
Parent: Apphia Mary Rees (née James)
Parent: Richard Jenkin Rees
Gender: Male
Occupation: writer and university administrator
Area of activity: Literature and Writing; Education
Author: John Harris

Goronwy Rees was born at Rhos (now Pen-y-Geulan), North Road, Aberystwyth, on 29 November 1909, the fourth and last of the surviving children of **Richard Jenkin Rees** (1868-1963), Calvinistic Methodist minister, and his wife Apphia Mary (née James, 1870-1931).

In 1903 the **Reverend R. J. Rees**, a local man by birth, became minister of Tabernacle, the landmark Calvinist Methodist chapel at Aberystwyth. Two daughters, Muriel and Enid, born in Cardiff, were followed by two Aberystwyth-born sons, (Richard) Geraint, the Cambridge-educated lawyer, and two-and-a-half years later (Morgan) Goronwy Rees. 'Gony' within the family, 'Rees' to his own wife and children, the future author and journalist owed his first name to his uncle Morgan (R. J.'s younger brother), a medical doctor killed in the Somme offensive. 'Goronwy' derived from **Goronwy Owen**, the eighteenth-century poet.

Rees might well be seen as the rebellious son of the manse but the positive gifts of his childhood should not be overlooked: an early self-confidence, a love of books and learning, an enjoyment of exposition and debate, a belief in education and all sacrifices made on its behalf, and a natural spirit of radicalism in the face of society's ills. That Rees abandoned the chapel hardly seemed to matter: 'I was brought up a Calvinist,' he reflected near the end, 'and taught that if one was born of the elect, one never ceased to belong - a doctrine which had strange effects on me...'

The family's return to Cardiff in 1922 distressed the twelve-year-old boy ('I felt as if I had been cast out of paradise'), but he acclimatized to suburban Roath and to Cardiff High School for Boys, an academic forcing-ground for some four hundred pupils. Thought the one 'truly brilliant' student at Cardiff by the headmaster's son, Goronwy naturally picked up prizes, culminating in a coveted state scholarship and, in October 1928, an open scholarship to New College, Oxford. There he read Modern Greats - 'in the mistaken belief that philosophy, politics and economics provided the key to the secrets of real life'.

To a Welsh grammar-school boy with little experience of England, and none of its public-school elite, New College seemed impenetrable alien. Yet Richard Crossman remembered 'an extremely brilliant and handsome scholar who took Oxford society by storm'; and other of Rees's contemporaries were agreed on his enviable assets: his intellectual prowess, his wit and charm, his magical conversation and Byronic good looks. He represented the College in both rugby and football. Academically he had little to fear, but he realized that Oxford success depended on something apart from brain power. Term-time highlife alternated with vacation study at Roath, a pattern that paid off with the award of a First in 1931 followed by an All Souls prize fellowship. A year later came *The Summer Flood*, an unashamedly autobiographical first novel, the outcome of an undergraduate passion for a north Wales cousin by marriage. Faber published it to some acclaim. But amidst the success was tragedy: the sudden death of Apphia Rees soon after her son's graduation. He had lost a mother who worshipped him; 'nothing as remotely bad could ever happen again.'

In September 1931 Rees was appointed leader writer on the *Manchester Guardian*, a post taken up after spells in Vienna and Berlin, and then for a short while only. January 1934 found him back in Berlin, pursuing research on Ferdinand Lassalle (1825-1864), founder of the Social Democratic Party. The Party's demise was all around and, at some risk to himself, Rees rallied to its cause, supplying copy for clandestine broadsheets, the left's pathetic response to torrents of Nazi propaganda.

On returning to London, he next joined *The Times* where again his stay was short. The paper's policy of appeasement distressed him; otherwise the parting was amicable. Then came the job that better matched his talents: at just twenty-six he was appointed assistant editor of the *Spectator* on £500 a year. Between February 1936 and August 1939 Rees contributed 150 or so lead articles, his powerfully articulated response to unfolding events at home and abroad. He knew Nazi Germany, had heard Adolf Hitler in the flesh and read *Mein Kampf* before it appeared in English. The Nazis were criminally insane and had to be stopped at all cost.

A positive belief in socialism led Rees to make the case for Welsh home rule. He had no difficulty with the idea of self-government; it was the Welsh nationalists he despaired of - and they had wandered into political fantasy in their admiration for Hitler. He took more satisfaction in literary developments in Wales, in the writers emerging through Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*, the controversial little magazine founded in 1937. Rees own novel of that year, the disappointing *A Bridge to Divide Them*, was dedicated 'To E.B.', a gesture famously met by its recipient Elizabeth Bowen with her slashing portrait of Rees in *The Death of the Heart* (1938). The two had begun an affair that ended abruptly when Rees met Rosamond Lehmann.

By the close of 1940 all had changed: on 20 December Rees married the young Margaret ('Margie') Ewing Morris (1920-1976), daughter of a Liverpool underwriter. Rees was now a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (commissioned on 23 March), having amazed his friends the year before by volunteering for military service. Rees took to soldiering, becoming a liaison officer under General Montgomery and a lieutenant-colonel with the occupying forces in Germany. As senior intelligence officer, his journalistic acumen and German expertise proved substantial assets in preparing reports on developments in Berlin and the British Zone.

Demobilization produced yet another startling turn. Rees joined his friend Henry Yorke (the novelist Henry Green, 1905-1973) as co-director of Henry Pontifex Ltd, the Yorke family firm of brass founders and coppersmiths with offices in London. He flourished in the business, one that permitted him afternoon stints at M16 on the Russian and German desks. A third novel was completed, drawing on Rees's wartime experience of interrogating one particular prisoner. In *Where No Wounds Were* (1950) a captured Luftwaffe pilot comes to request enlistment in the RAF. Rees builds a vivid picture of the making of a National Socialist and his mental battle with an interrogator who is in part his alter ego. Towards the end of 1950 the Rees family left London for Sonning-on-Thames, a perfect location when in April 1951 Rees was appointed estates bursar of All Souls, a non-resident post that allowed him to continue with Pontifex.

Then came his greatest mistake. In 1953 he took up the post of principal of the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, a decision that delighted his father but alarmed his friends. Wouldn't he be a total misfit removed from the London-Oxford axis, his true social and intellectual province? Yet Rees had moved in academic circles, had views on university teaching and research, and genuinely identified with Wales. The salary also enticed - the Reeses' lavish lifestyle always left them stretched - and the house that went with the job seemed big enough for the four young children born to the couple between 1942 and 1948: Margaret Jane ('Jenny'), Rees's biographer (1942), Lucy (1943), the twins Thomas and Daniel (1948); to be followed by Matthew (1954-2016).

The students took to the new principal, to his 'versatility of achievement and cosmopolitan range' - something he quickly demonstrated in *Conversations with Kafka* (his translation of Gustav Janouch, 1953) and *The Answers of Ernst von Salomon* (1954), with its masterly foreword by Rees (Salomon's Freikorps writings were honoured documents in the eyes of the Third Reich). In summer 1954 Rees travelled through Germany, gathering material for four BBC talks afterwards printed in the *Listener*. He also joined the Wolfenden committee, there proving an effective spokesman for change in the laws relating to homosexuality and prostitution. All the while he was compiling a narrative revolving around Guy Burgess, a companion of the Thirties and Forties who, together with Donald Maclean, had mysteriously disappeared in 1951. His Burgess story would be published, but in a form he could scarcely have imagined and under circumstances he must have dreaded.

Regarding the Cambridge spy ring, we now know that for a little over a year (1938-9), and entirely in the anti-fascist cause, he co-operated in Burgess's Comintern activities

by supplying political hearsay gathered from weekends at All Souls - he was thus a 'witting source'. With the Soviet-German non-aggression pact of August 1939 a disillusioned Rees gave up on this activity. At the same time he promised not to reveal that Burgess (and Anthony Blunt) had been recruited as agents, on the understanding that they too had broken at this point. But why he permitted his Burgess material to appear in the form it did, butchered and sensationalised for a Sunday tabloid, remains a mystery. Five flimsily anonymous articles published in the *People* (March-April 1956) became his death warrant. The students might have adored him, but to some influential senior professors Rees had always been the metropolitan playboy, an unconformable intruder beyond assimilation. He found the nationalists his sternest opponents; their assumption of a superior patriotism dismayed him, and he clashed with them philosophically on the university's role in nation-building. Rees could not hope to survive. As Noel Annan memorably put it, 'The explosion detonated by these [People] articles was atomic; but the blast-walls of the Establishment are so cunningly constructed that the person who was most hideously wounded was Mr Rees himself.'

Rees's departure from Aberystwyth in April 1957 signalled the start of a downward spiral, exacerbated by the freakish motor accident that left him permanently a little lame. He explored new avenues of income: '*Brains Trust*' TV appearances; book-reviewing for the *Listener*; translations from the German for radio (of Brecht and Büchner; he and Stephen Spender had translated Büchner for Faber in 1939); and six studies of the super-rich for the *Sunday Times* (they appeared in book form as *The Multi-Millionaires: Six Studies in Wealth*, 1961).

A Chatto & Windus contract produced Rees's finest book, the autobiographical volume *A Bundle of Sensations* (1960). Refreshingly modest in tone, it offers little of a personal nature and in its construction of an imagined self sometimes presses against the facts. Rees sought the representative status that would align him with his contemporaries; by blending fictionalized reminiscence and acute social commentary, he better captures the essence of his times. Three central chapters on his army experiences are framed by two prior ones (including a peerless evocation of a chapel childhood) and, by way of an epilogue, a meditative account of convalescence following his motor accident. The whole is beautifully written, Rees's crystalline elegance flecked with humour and sadness.

Rees's final phase might be said to have begun in February 1966 when he joined the board of *Encounter*, a distinguished journal anti-communist in thrust, for which he wrote a regular column on subjects of his choosing. He completed three lucrative commissions, beginning with *The Rhine* (1967), a highbrow historical guide strongest on politics and literature. *St Michael: A History of Marks and Spencer* (1969) veered towards hagiology but was better researched, and if the Rees of *The Great Slump: Capitalism in Crisis 1929-33* (1970) was 'a somewhat slapdash historian', he had an expert's grasp of financial systems and evoked the real feel of the period. The Heron edition of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* (1970) should also not be ignored: Rees's commentary is outstanding.

Described as 'both a chapter of autobiography and a reflection of English (and also Welsh) life between 1930 and 1955', *A Chapter of Accidents* (1972) is a narrative of Rees's relations with Guy Burgess and the Aberystwyth consequences. Fascinating psychologically, Burgess was a social animal as well, and in two initial chapters - one on his boyhood in Wales, the other on his undergraduate Oxford - Rees explored two kinds of life and society which he believed he and Burgess in large part embodied and reflected. English reviewers hailed its brilliant social analysis; **Harri Webb** saw only the 'obsessive chronicles of snobbery, sodomy and treachery'.

In 1974 came *Brief Encounters*, a selection of Rees's *Encounter* writings. His monthly column (simply signed 'R') was highly popular, 'a never ending source of pleasure, learning and wisdom', wrote one reader, and it was an *Encounter* piece that gave rise to *McVicar by Himself* (1974), the prison writings of John McVicar edited and introduced by Rees. A privately printed company history would follow, that of the multinational corporation Dalgety, a last commission undertaken by an ailing Rees under the shadow of his wife's terminal illness.

Margie succumbed to cancer in June 1976, the disease that brought Goronwy to Charing Cross hospital in November 1979. There friends and *Encounter* colleagues held a party for his seventieth birthday. On 12 December Rees died. He was cremated at Mortlake cemetery and his ashes scattered on the bank of the Thames at Strand-on-the-Green (near Kew Bridge) in front of the Reeses' last home. Margie's ashes had been scattered there too.

A common judgement on Rees as author is that he promised more than he achieved. True in part: as a novelist he disappointed himself, and outside the province of fiction he never did deliver the major book on the 1930s that surely was within him. But his achievements in autobiography, his finely wrought fusion of memoir and social commentary, show how gifted a writer he was - one perhaps more akin to the literary intellectuals of Europe, passionately immersed in the life of the times. Rees was truly a man of his age, alive to all its hopes and tragedies.

Author

John Harris

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NLW Archives: [Goronwy Rees Papers](#)

Further reading

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Sound and Film

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Additional Links

NLW Archives: [UCW Aberystwyth, Goronwy Rees Enquiry Papers](#)

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