CHAPTER I

Living on both sides, living to write

> With this eye I see & no other . . . I had two longings & one was fighting the other.
> I wanted to be loved & I wanted to be always alone.
>
> (GEB)

It is crucially important to explore the contexts of Rhys's work, especially her placement of the role of writing in her life and of race, class, nationality, gender and religion. She was interestingly contradictory on these subjects, and inclined therefore to tell a story which was Janus-faced, capable of capturing opposing readings of the world which usually failed to communicate well with one another.

Rhys had a well-developed instinct for the submerged pattern within the raw material of life, she also, as a writer, created her own history, not only in her autobiography, but less guardedly in letters and fragments of unfinished autobiographical manuscript. Emotional honesty was her touchstone, selectivity and clarity her writing mantras. Honesty does not mean disclosure has to be complete: selectivity does not mean anything important has to be left out. Rhys chose to tell a very edited version of her life in *Smile Please* (1979) and left, in her will, an injunction against anyone writing her biography: she wanted to insist that attention be paid only to the work. There were clearly episodes in her life which she preferred not to discuss and which she argued were irrelevant to her literary achievement. Naturally such an attempt at censorship has not been entirely successful, given the fact that Rhys had a particularly interesting career as a writer which clearly drew closely on an unusual life experience, though it is important to

acknowledge Rhys's profound feeling 'all of a writer that matters is in the book or books' (*SP*: 136). She thought it 'is idiotic to be curious about the person' (*SP*: 136).

Rhys has successfully thwarted the biographical scholar to some extent: given the many moves and the intense poverty which she suffered for long periods of her life, it is remarkable that we have any manuscripts at all before the period of high public and literary interest in Rhys which followed the appearance of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.[1] By the time Carole Angier did research for her 1990 biography, many of the people who might have provided crucial information were also dead or very old. In the end, Angier sometimes tried, to her detriment, to utilise Rhys's fiction to fill gaps in the life. Because Rhys preferred to erase her private life, it is not surprising that so many of the unpublished essays, fragments of fiction and exercise books filled with early rough drafts and sometimes autobiographical entries are concerned with the writing, with the story of the artist as working professional woman. This is the story she left, though even here we have highly contradictory and fragmentary and often self-censored comments by Rhys on how the work came about. The issue of how women write is a topic which many feminists still find compelling: the means of production of women's texts is often a critical issue in understanding their cultural identity and placement.

The narrative of Jean Rhys's life is, since Angier's biography, fairly well understood, though further work clearly remains to be done. My purpose in reinterpreting the story is to point out the centrality and specificity of her Caribbean experience, particularly for those readers unfamiliar with the region, and/or unaware of the developing scholarly map of her life and work. Given the fact that many critics have effectively marginalised Rhys's Caribbean origins (this even to an extent in Angier's work, since she did not visit Dominica), it is important to make quite sure Rhys's Caribbean childhood and her views on race, class and nationality which began to be formed there are understood as the doorway into my readings of Rhys texts. Her conceptions of gender and her religious affiliations, both of which mark her fiction powerfully and both of which also owe a good deal to Rhys's Dominican years, are included in subsequent chapters.

I have another important reason for interest in Rhys's life, especially, in this chapter, the importance of the formative years, and that is to explain the complex cultural identity which so informs her textuality, not just in theme but in the multi-voiced narrative she gradually developed in her long fiction. As Veronica Gregg has noted (1995), citing Jean D'Costa (1986), Rhys was self-contradictory and ambiguous about many issues of identity. She had an intense ambivalence towards both the Caribbean and England and was, in her culturally complex identity as she grew older, unable to entirely belong anywhere. To the writer David Plante she was unable or unwilling to answer when asked if she was a West Indian or a French writer and responded quite vehemently when asked about her English literary affiliation:, 'No! I'm not! I'm not! I'm not even English' (1984: 44).

Whilst Gregg acknowledges Rhys's capacity to change position on a given topic, she also constructs her as 'the white Creole', following the tendency of post-colonial theory to address general cultural identities.[2] But as Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert points out, in her biography of Dominican politician and novelist Phyllis Allfrey (1996), not all white Creoles feel alienated in Dominica.[3] Nor do they all have the degree of Rhys's ties to and alienation from England. Her father was Welsh, but that was complicated by his sense of rejection by his father.[4] Rhys lived in England most of her life and married two English men. Her immediate white family migrated successfully to England during her adult life,[5] but she never felt at home there.

Her childhood was in the small white community of Dominica, but nevertheless gave her experience of different races (black, white, mixed, Carib), languages and cultures. It evidently taught her that meaning and truth can be multi-layered. But if she had stayed in the region, in my view she would not have been able to fit in any better than she did anywhere else: her country was essentially the page and her most important personal connections often other writers or her characters, including her fictional versions of herself. Though her adult life in Europe contributed much profoundly influential experience, her personal narratives of writing and cultural identity begin with her Caribbean childhood: Dominica is of central importance in reading Rhys's life and work.

Rhys was born in Dominica in 1890 (though she encouraged confusion about her birthdate and much early scholarship accepted 1894).[6] She was named Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, though the spelling of Gwendoline during her lifetime and in critical studies is diverse.[7] Her mother was white Creole of Scottish ancestry, a Lockhart, and her father was Welsh and had come to Dominica in 1881, shortly before his marriage, to practise medicine.[8] Gwen Williams grew up in the enclave of white Anglican Roseau, still now a small town sitting between the dramatic forested escarpments which characterise Dominica's interior and the huge horizon of the almost always deserted Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. Much of the island was impenetrable in her childhood as it is now. Governor Hesketh Bell tried to open up a road to facilitate colonial settlement: it was never completed.[9] Rhys used the idea of this Imperial Road in a piece of unpublished creative non-fiction.[10]

Most of Dominica's people are of African descent and had in 1890, the year of Rhys's birth, still vivid memories of the slavery which had ended in 1834. In 1890 many were also Catholic (as is true today) and spoke a distinct French patois. The Anglican hierarchy attempted to be dominant as a representation of the religious wing of British possession and white hegemony. Rhys's response to Catholicism is, as I shall argue later, very important.

The context of Rhys's childhood can be pieced together by studying Dominica's history, reading the surviving newspapers of Rhys's childhood years, and then interpreting Rhys's heavily self-edited published account of her young life (*Smile Please*), along with surviving drafts, letters and notebooks. Indeed Rhys cannot be seriously read without the context of Dominican life in the late nineteenth century, from which we can extrapolate the class, race, religious and gender formations which were laid on Rhys at birth and which she both contested and accepted at different times.

Dominicans of colour resisted colonial injustice when they could. The Report of the Royal Commission (1894) on the condition of Dominica is important. Lennox Honychurch (1984) describes a heavily taxed peasantry, more burdened by a tax increase in 1888. In 1893, the village of La Plaine, in one of the poorest and least accessible areas of Dominica for produce markets, strongly

resisted when one of their community was evicted from his house so the Government could sell it for non-payment of taxes. The resistance turned violent and police and naval forces opened fire: several were killed or injured. The incident became known as the La Plaine Riots. The Commission's report includes notes on the views of Rhys's father, Dr W. R. Williams and her uncle, Acton Don Lockhart.

Gwen Williams's maternal family, the Lockharts, were in a very powerful position in Dominica in the late nineteenth century: Rhys was 'that Lockhart girl' in her youth to members of her family's circle, signifying the relative unimportance of her father's name on the island.[11] Her mother had grown up on the lovely and important estate in the south of Dominica called Geneva, which had been owned by the family since 1824. Acton Lockhart, Rhys's mother's youngest brother, took over the running of the Geneva Estate from his widowed mother sometime in the 1880s, by Carole Angier's estimate (1990: 8). Both men had been Government-appointed, 'nominated' members of the Assembly, part of the machinery of white colonial control of island affairs. In 1894, Williams expressly did not want to see elective seats increased in the Assembly, i.e. he appears to have been on the colonial, white side of Dominican politics.[12]

When Williams arrived in Dominica from Britain and married Minna Lockhart a year later, in 1882, he entered an intensely political, competitive, small world in which the white, colonial and so-called mulatto or coloured intelligentsia debated the issues of the day in both the legislature and the local press. Dominica, as Lennox Honychurch points out (1984), was the only island in the West Indies where white power was successfully challenged. Dominica's elite of mixed-race landowners, ancestrally from French territories, uneasily co-existed with white political appointees and professionals from Britain.[13] In 1831, the so-called 'Brown Privilege' Bill made discrimination in political and cultural life on the basis of race illegal. Three members of colour were elected to the House of Assembly in 1832 and by 1838, there was a majority of colour.

One of the most controversial figures in Roseau life when Williams arrived was Dr Henry Nicholls, originally English and

married into a prominent Dominican white family.[14] In the 1880s, he was at the height of his influence as doctor, horticulturist and literary and political personality. Rees Williams was not the ambitious, political and social star that Nicholls was, although he made his own social connections, such as his bridge playing (*SP*: 57). He was first nominated to the Assembly for a period in the mid-1880s.

In my reading of the Dominican newspapers, I concur with Sue Thomas (1996c) that Williams's colonial affiliations seriously and justifiably irritated the coloured intellectual elite of Roseau. However I think Lennox Honychurch's view of him as complex is convincing.[15] If he was both liberal (in relative terms) and critical of the mulatto elite, then he was both at one with his wife's family interests (Thomas 1996c) and also at times a mildly dissident Celt on the subject of race or religion, just as his daughter was capable of holding both liberal and racist views. Williams certainly understood, in his testimony to the Royal Commission in 1894, that taxation was the root cause of general unrest and that elective members of the Assembly 'know they can be outvoted' and 'discount the value' of votes of Government nominees (Report of Royal Commission, 1894: 21). Nevertheless, he seems to have thought that more Government projects and control of the Assembly would be the solution.

Williams was often attacked in the feisty local press, including the *Dominica Dial*. On Saturday, 31 May 1884, it was implied that his fondness for alcohol got in the way of his professional duty, the editor calling him 'a convivial practitioner'. On Saturday, 30 August 1884, the *Dial* editorial was a little sharp about Dr Williams's sweet potato farm at Bona Vista, in the hills above Roseau, since it was outside the district under Williams's medical jurisdiction: enjoyment of his farm might therefore prevent the doctor's prompt attendance to his patients. Williams had negotiated, early in his time in Dominica, and with the help of Dr Nicholls, to shift his medical responsibilities closer to Roseau so as to become part of town society and enjoy a larger income (see also Thomas 1996c).[16] The *Dial* went on to comment sardonically that in a crop of sweet potatoes grown at fifteen hundred feet above sea-level 'lay the foundation of the fortune which every emigrating Briton expects to extract from the colony of his choice'.

On 29 November of the same year, Williams was described as 'the professional man who was lucky enough to jump from the post of medical attendant on board a telegraph repairing steamer', thereby increasing his salary from sixty to two hundred and fifty pounds a year.[17]

The tone of these comments is quite characteristic of the rough and tumble of the Dominican press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and entirely recognisable in Rhys's short fiction.[18] Nicholls, who had also passed through a process of being presented in the press as upstart foreigner and then as important, if often maddening, local dignitary, was eventually said to have received the task of heading a Commission on Yaws as a compensation for some loss of his income and practice.[19] A letter to the editor of the *Dominica Dial*, 20 August 1886, says bluntly, 'We all are alive to the fact that Dr Nicholls is the most prejudiced white man in the island.' Nicholls was inclined to engage in protracted skirmishes in the newspapers when he was attacked.[20] This was often: he clearly had both political and social ambitions, was evidently both pompous and had great status (Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert describes him and his wife as 'the equivalent of a Dominican royal couple' (1996: 12)), and was gifted with words as well as in medicine and horticulture. He was also quite willing to be provocative. Williams however seems to have remained silent in the face of verbal attacks, unusual in the world of educated Roseau in the late nineteenth century.

Sue Thomas goes further and argues Williams transformed from first appearance in the island as 'European exotic' to final development into a 'full-blown planter' (1996c). By the late 1890s, Thomas points out, he was a vocal member of the lobby for Crown Colony Government, perceived as a tributary of British control in that it resisted relative political autonomy for Dominica because of the power, political and economic, of the coloured elite in the island.[21] Perhaps most importantly, Thomas challenges Carole Angier's explanation of the reason why Rhys's eldest sister Minna went to live with relatives: instead of financial woes, Thomas suggests that Minna needed to complete her education at a higher level than was available in Dominica at the time. Thomas argues that Dr Williams was listed in the 1910 electoral register for the

Roseau Town Board as one of the seven richest men in the community so he could not have been financially fragile in the 1890s and early 1900s. Yet Rhys noted in *Smile Please* the loss of the two estates her father owned when she was small, Bona Vista and Amelia, explaining that they were not profitable because her father could not spare enough time from his medicine to farm them.

However, Lennox Honychurch describes an important economic change between the 1890s and the years before the First World War (1984: 113–21). Williams got out of agriculture just before an upturn in Dominican revenues from crops. He clearly, if we accept Thomas, became affluent again after his daughter left for England in 1907.[22] No doubt Rhys had the selective memory of her family history which we all do: she always told the story of her leaving theatre school in London concealing her failure to be able to continue her acting course, as Angier points out (1990: 49): she claimed the cause was her father's financial difficulties. She did not deny memory is selective and often self-protective: in *Smile Please*, a note of self-interrogation sounds in her admission that she probably romanticises her father, perhaps as she saw little of him (*SP*: 57). She did remember her mother crying to a coloured Dominican woman friend, maybe about money (*SP*: 34).

Veronica Gregg also questions Rhys's *Smile Please* account of a riot when she argues that there is no record of a riot in Roseau in 1902 or 1906 (*SP*: 37–41). Gregg ascribes 1902 or 1906 depending on whether Rhys's birth is calculated at 1890 or 1894. But according to Irving Andre, William Davies (the *Dial* owner, whom Andre identifies as a wealthy plantation owner as well as political leader and newspaper proprietor) declared in 1898 that 'race war' would be waged against the British if they introduced Crown Colony government (1995: 74ff). The actual unrest, which Rhys remembered as 'the Riot' from her childhood was provoked according to Andre by rumours that the Presbytery and Catholic cathedral were to be burned down by members of the coloured community. Rhys would have been eight, though she says in *Smile Please* she was about twelve, perhaps the age she gives Antoinette at the time of the riot in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. For Rhys, the cause was a local newspaper editor's article attacking the

power of Catholic priests in Dominica. André comments that the black community would at times riot in defence of the whites and against the coloured community: coloured elites had by no means always been supportive of the black majority and were often distrusted, sometimes even more than the white colonials.

The tensions between white, coloured or brown, and black people dominated the Dominica of Rhys's childhood and early adolescence, at the end of the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth century during which the country moved slowly away from the memory of slavery and towards a modern state: James (1978) claims Williams received the respect of many poor people when he died, signifiying he must have had some racial sensitivity and kindness. That this could be the same man who offended the anti-colonial middle class is not in the least unbelievable: the strength of internalised colonialism and the extent of racism could, for some people, make the slightest humane response on the part of the white doctor a matter for gratitude. For those however who had a critical and resisting eye on colonialism and racism, Dr Williams might easily have been just another opportunistic white migrant from Britain.

The Commonwealth of Dominica obtained independence from British colonial rule in 1978, after a period of Associated Statehood from 1967. The young high-colonial child Gwen Williams lived mainly in the family house on Cork Street in Roseau, a corner property with a courtyard and a large mango tree, stables and Dr Williams's surgery, holidaying on one of her father's small estates in the hills.[23] She was a Lockhart, a doctor's daughter, white and Anglican. Her father's mother, 'Irish Granny', sent gifts from England. In Dominica, a relatively modest income by the standards of Britain gave whites a life-style which was in caste and pattern much higher than their station. Rhys's family escaped the heat and dust of the town for holidays, most memorably at Bona Vista, where servants attended their needs. The slim margin by which such privilege was maintained is indicated by the sale of Bona Vista and another small estate, Amelia, both sold by Rhys's father when she was fairly young (*SP*: 16–17).

Rhys's ambivalence about race has to be understood in the light of her early memories of the times at Bona Vista, set against

her growing realisation as she grew older of the grim facts of racial tension and white isolation which informed her Roseau life. The family's journey was from Roseau along the coast to the fishing village of Massacre, then up inland along a narrow trail, set with stones to assist the horses and make the trail more durable, along a ridge line and up into the hills, across a valley to higher ground and the house, sitting on a gentle slope of hillside, overlooking the distant but still vivid sea: it was a journey of escape from the pressures of town to the holiday world of the hills. Amelia was on a slightly lower hillside not far from Bona Vista. Though the Bona Vista house has disappeared, except for some tell-tale pieces of foundation stone and roof, the site is immediately recognisable from Rhys's terse descriptions of the location and passages in her fiction and drafts.[24]

It is virtually impossible to overestimate the formative years in Dominica as shaping the idea of language Rhys worked with. The tension between the West Indian, white Creole accent she had as a young woman and could produce even in old age and the middle-class English voice she mainly used towards the end of her life reflects her response to British middle-class, largely literary connections. But her Caribbean childhood must have taught her that language is almost always a layered means of communication, with hidden codes and contrasting registers. It is very evident in her letters that French was an important linguistic resource for her throughout her life. She must have originally understood it not only as something learned at school but as living patois in her Dominican years. Later she learned different registers when she married Jean Lenglet, himself a French speaker who was not fluent in English, and she lived and worked in Paris.[25] Peter Roberts, in his history of West Indian language (1988), points out that plantation whites did not have to strive for formal language and slaves were denied language education, so that standardised forms of language were less significantly established in the Caribbean than in societies where a middle class struggled to become acceptable by adopting the formal language structures of their superiors. The very linguistic inventiveness which so marks Caribbean writing and performance was made possible by the history of lack of extensive imposition of formal language