Chapter 1

Life

Jean Rhys was a pen name, for a woman who thought the only important aspects of a writer are in the work. But her biography is important, precisely because she was often vague about key aspects of it, and therefore knowing her life as accurately as possible gives us valuable insights into how she worked the raw material of experience into fiction.

Gwen Williams 1890–1907

There is first the matter of name, something that reverberates in Rhys's work. She was christened Ella Gwendoline Rees Williams, and later (on the stage or in married life) was known as Ella, Vivien or Emma Grey, Ella Lenglet or Ella Hamer. Gwendolen is the spelling on her tombstone, and the one she used in her autobiography, *Smile Please*. But she was christened Gwendoline.[1] She hated the name Gwendolen (which she learned means white in Welsh), just as she hated being the palest of her siblings (five in all surviving): they had brown eyes and hair, and she had blue eyes, fair skin and lighter hair (*SP*:14).

Dominica, where she was born, on August 24, 1890, is still a wildly beautiful island, the heavily forested, mostly undeveloped top of a submerged volcano which still produces the sulfurous "Boiling Lake" in its crater.[2] In her childhood, it was very difficult to get around, and boats were often used to go from one part of the island to another. Hesketh Bell, the famous colonial

Administrator of Dominica (1899–1905), tried to build the "Imperial Road" to facilitate colonial plantations on the island: it was never finished.[3]

Dominica was a colony of Britain with a long history of slavery and a white English hegemony. But, unusually in the Caribbean at the time, this was challenged by a powerful, mixed-race elite, whose slave-owning ancestors had migrated from Saint Domingue around 1790.[4] In 1838, they were known as the "Mulatto Ascendancy" when they became the majority in the House of Assembly. They held onto this power until Crown Colony Rule was imposed by the British to obtain more direct colonial control in 1898.[5] The Lockharts, Gwen Williams' mother's white Creole family, belonged to the Anglican, British faction, established prominently in Dominica for five generations by the time of Rhys's birth, since James Potter Lockhart emigrated to Dominica to first manage a sugar plantation, Geneva, and then by the mid-1820s to own it, along with 258 slaves.[6] He became a powerful political figure in Dominica. His wife Jean was reputedly a Spanish princess from Cuba, though the young Gwen did not believe this story (*SP*:26). She was perhaps of mixed race, not uncommon among Creoles, but an issue for Rhys's mother's family, who liked to think their bloodline was only English.[7]

Gwen Williams was eight when the English made Dominica a Crown Colony. Property qualifications for voting were very high in Dominica at the time, so few could vote, but elected representation was prized and defended. Crown Colony rule replaced elected representatives with a Legislative Council made up of six officials and six members nominated by the Administrator.[8] Jean Rhys still remembered in old age how Administrator Hesketh Bell (known for charming those who were still angry about the political change) gave a very enjoyable fancy-dress ball for children in honor of his niece and paid her special attention (*SP*:73–4).[9] In that period, a thriving newspaper rivalry expressed the competing interests of the colonial English and brown skin elite, demonstrating the power and value of verbal skills: that she knew about this is clear in her short story, "Again the Antilles" (*CS*:39–41).[10]

Rhys's Welsh father, William Rees Williams, ran off to sea at fourteen and was quickly taken home, but eventually joined the Merchant Navy. He later completed medical school.[11] One of the feisty local papers, *The Dominica Dial*, reported that his medical career had begun inauspiciously on board a ship repairing telegraph communications, but his luck changed when he got a colonial appointment as a doctor in Roseau, Dominica's capital. He later temporarily acquired two estates in the interior of Dominica to which the family went via coastal steamer and horseback. The larger one Rhys remembered was called Bona Vista (*SP*:15) It had a wide and impressive view of Dominica's forested Mornes (the term for mountains in Dominica as in the French Caribbean), but also across valleys to the sea. In "Mixing

Cocktails," Rhys recalls the view from "the house in the hills" *(CS*:36–7). Though the house has all but vanished, the site affirms the spectacular view. In Roseau, the family lived in a pleasant, colonial-style house not far from the waterfront, with a jalousied balcony overlooking the main street and a courtyard at the back. It was here that Dr. Williams had his practice.[12] The opening of Rhys's third novel (*Voyage in the Dark*) describes looking down a street from "the house at home" to "the Bay": standing in front of Rhys's family home in Roseau, this is the view down to the sea.

The majority of Dominica's population are of African descent, mainly speaking French Creole and of the Catholic faith. Slavery ended there earlier than in neighbouring Guadaloupe and Martinique, from where slaves then fled to Dominica.[13] Race and shade permeated Rhys's child consciousness. When given a fair doll (her sister got the dark-haired one she wanted), she took it into the garden and ritually smashed its face with a rock (*SP*:30–1). She had a dark-skinned nurse, Meta, who, by Rhys's account, often played on her child's credulity, and told her terrifying stories of spirits and demons. She had to witness the annual Carnival procession from within her house, since it was an expression of the black Dominican community, though she was sent out with money to give to the stilt-man called the Bois-Bois. She had a close friendship "with a Negro girl called Francine" (*SP*:23) who was a very good storyteller. The Anglican church in Roseau, where the Williams family worshipped along with others willing to be affiliated with Britain, had segregated seats and entrances: whites sat at the front with a space between them and black congregants, who were fewer in number. Rhys remembered not having any problems with this arrangement as a child (*SP*:72), and reported yelling "Black Devil" at Meta. She had both what Ford Madox Ford called her "passion for stating the case of the underdog"[14] and a capacity to sound thoroughly white English colonial: "I never tried to be friends with any of the colored girls again . . . They hate us. We are hated" (*SP*:39). Rhys was contradictory about race. She was romantic about black culture as a child (she thought it more fun than white), but in old age she could sound resentful at the loss of white power in Dominica.

Race and colonialism figure in two stories about Gwen Williams' adolescent life, one a highly suspect rumor and the other recorded in one of Rhys's writing notebooks. The rumor is that Rhys might have had a love interest in someone partly Carib (this is based on a piece of fiction which her brother Owen wrote).[15] It seems, however, unlikely that such a violation of racial mores could have gone unnoticed in a world where adolescent white girls were constantly under supervision and servants noticed everything. But there is a sense of forbidden love across racial caste lines in the submerged story of Sandi and Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Then, in the

Black Exercise Book, Rhys wrote an account of being sexually and psychologically abused by an old Englishman, Mr. Howard, who touched her breast once, and then developed a sadomasochistic serial story about her sexual submission to him.[16] The married Howard was an emblem of colonial English privilege. Rhys's mother, thinking him a charming old gentleman, sent her daughter out with him to the Botanical Gardens in Roseau. Thus Rhys did not dare to tell her mother. The incident could easily have been amongst those aspects of her life that Rhys erased. But though she only wrote of it clearly in one story, she never lost her notebook account of it (and she lost much else). The narrative of a young female victim of sexual abuse is clearly one source of the sexual inhibition or emotional masochism that most of Rhys's protagonists display. Another is the devastating end of her first serious love affair.

Gwen Williams and Ella Gray 1907–1919

Gwen Williams left Dominica to complete her education under the guardianship of her English aunt, Clarice.[17] In Roseau, she had attended a convent school as a boarder, and in England she would again be a boarder at the Perse School for Girls in Cambridge, leaving in 1908. In 1909 she enrolled at what would become the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (then called, after its founder Beerbohm Tree, Tree's School). She left the same year and defied her family's wishes to go on the stage as a chorus girl, choosing Ella Gray (or sometimes, Vivien or Emma Gray) as her stage name. Though Rhys said she left Tree's School because her father died, Angier points out that he died in 1910, and that the real reason was that her West Indian accent was not acceptable for serious theater in England at the time (*SP*:86–91).[18]

Rhys writes about her chorus-girl experience in her autobiography (*SP*:86–91). The life she lived was both gloriously fake (makeup, costumes and make-believe during the performances), and brutally real (tawdry boarding houses in which the chorus spent their leisure time). In old age, Rhys was often seen as an elderly siren, always made up and responsive to male attention: this was the way she had learned to face the public as a shy young woman. Chorus girls were also very often working class, and took part in the pub culture of Britain. This may have been where Rhys first began to drink: there may have been a tendency to alcoholism in her family, because her father was described in the Dominican press as being too fond of the bottle. Chorus girls were also prey for men of means. Lancelot Grey Hugh Smith took up with Rhys, but she fell very much in love. He was well to do,

single, well connected, a successful stockbroker by profession at a time when that was breaking ground, and he had a London town house and a significant family home in the country. He was also twenty years older. Their relationship followed the usual pattern of such a man's casual sexual arrangements. He saw her when he felt like it, took her out to dinner, gave her money, had her visit him at his grand London town house but sent her home in a taxi before dawn, and was usually away at the weekends seeing his own family and friends at his parents' country house.[19] The relationship with Smith was in a sense a stage set, a place where the young Rhys could taste an English life she would have enjoyed, and forget that it was not anchored in real life.

Smith ended the affair before it got too serious for, whatever Rhys thought and hoped about her suitability for him, he would never have considered a white Creole chorus girl a likely long-term partner (moreover he never found any satisfactory candidate and remained unmarried). Following the social custom for men who indulged in cross-class affairs but wanted to be gentlemanly, he arranged for her to be financially supported, through money sent by his lawyer, for a number of years. But Rhys was emotionally devastated. Many years later she reflected: "It seems to me now that the whole business of money and sex is mixed up with something primitive and deep. When you take money directly from somebody you love it becomes not money but a symbol" (*SP*:97). Money and sex are often deeply intertwined in her fiction.

Her emotional collapse at the end of the affair is presented in her autobiography as triggering her entry into obsessively writing a journal, experienced as an extraordinary event: "My fingers tingled, and the palms of my hands . . . I wrote on until late into the night . . ." (*SP*:104). Writing thus became a release – but her portrayal of this as having the force of a conversion is likely a fiction, having the sort of shape actual experience would not: Diana Athill, Rhys's devoted editor for *Wide Sargasso Sea*, remarks that Rhys felt she had to rework experience to fit "the shape and nature of the work of art."[20]

Rhys's admission in her autobiography that she had an abortion ("after what was then called an illegal operation," *SP*:95) is located just after her lover leaves for New York (the end of the affair). It is followed by a suicidal period, and then the release into writing. Angier feels the timeline is the end of the affair in 1912, and the drift into a risky demi-monde life in 1913, including pregnancy and abortion early in that year.[21] She locates a particular intensity in Rhys's habit of writing notebooks from late 1913 into early 1914: these would become key sources for her fiction.

Rhys had a good many friends in the arts, suggesting that, though she loved a man who was in finance, she already wanted to spend a lot of time with artists early on, whether on the stage or not. However, she wrote sparingly about this. In *Smile Please*, Rhys speaks of a journalist called Alan, a proposal of marriage from someone she meets in a nightclub in 1914, a job in a crowd scene in a play, volunteering during the war in a canteen serving soldiers leaving for France, and a Belgian refugee called Camille whom she meets in a house in Torrington Square. Angier locates these men and others during the period between the affair with Smith and Rhys's first marriage: society painter Sir Edward Poynter (for whom Rhys posed), Alan Bott (subeditor on the *Daily Chronicle*, a leading national paper), Maxwell Henry Hayes Macartney (a journalist with *The Times*, to whom Rhys was engaged for a while), Adrian Allinson (a painter), Arthur Henry Fox Strangways (music critic for *The Times*) and Philip Heseltine (a composer and music critic).[22] Rhys's story "Till September Petronella" reflects this period, particularly through two artistic male characters, the music critic Julian and the artist Marston (*CS*).

Jean Rhys and Ella Lenglet 1919–1927

In 1919, Rhys had the pleasure of writing to her former lover, Smith, and telling him that his lawyer could stop sending her cheques (*SP*:113) because she was going to marry Willem Johan Marie (Jean) Lenglet. The marriage took place in The Hague on April 30. Angier offers details of how complicated this relationship really was, given that Lenglet was still, presumably unbeknown to Rhys, married to Marie Pollart until 1925. He left Rhys in Paris for periods during 1922–4. But Angier's portrait is not nearly as sympathetic and interesting as that of Kappers-den Hollander, who gives much more evidence of his complexity.[23] He was evidently a fine linguist, a brave soldier in World War I and a fighter against injustice who took enormous personal risks to combat fascism. He was entirely careless about paperwork, though he engaged in currency and art dealings, but this needs to be contextualized by the chaos of war and the aftermath of war. Many who profited far more deliberately got away with it. He was eventually a fugitive and a stateless person, arrested in 1924, accused of fraud and jailed. The Lenglets had two children, the first a boy, William Owen, who died in infancy in early 1920, and the second a girl, Maryvonne, born in May 1922, when Rhys and her husband could not afford to keep a child, so that Maryvonne probably spent some time in a clinic or with Rhys's friends.[24]

Rhys was highly protective of her daughter, and the experience of motherhood is almost entirely erased from her fiction. During the difficult period of Lenglet's absences, Rhys may have stayed with H. Pearl Adam, a journalist and the wife of a journalist, who later, when Rhys tried to sell her translations of some of Lenglet's work, encouraged her to develop her diaries into fiction, and even edited them herself into the never-published novel "Triple Sec." It was Mrs. Adams who, via this manuscript, introduced Rhys to Ford Madox Ford.

Ford was a literary impresario and indefatigable if uneven writer (he published eighty-one books and over four hundred articles).[25] He was known for helping and publishing promising writers, including D. H. Lawrence, Graham Greene and Wyndham Lewis. He held court in Paris restaurants, most famously Le Dôme, and made temporary consecutive sexual connections with attractive and gifted young female writers to boost his creative energies. Rhys moved in for a while with Ford and his companion of the previous six years, painter Stella Bowen, who eventually described Rhys as having a "needle-quick intelligence and a good sort of honesty" but also called her a "doomed soul, violent and demoralized."[26] Ford's affair with Rhys did serious damage to his relationship with Bowen, but for Rhys it was a very helpful training ground for her future work.[27]

She also had a strong friendship with Germaine Richelot, a kind, well-to-do and highly cultivated Jewish woman for whose family Rhys worked as a tutor for several months during her pregnancy with her first child, and who seems likely to have helped her a great deal. Also Rhys may have posed for a Jewish sculptor from England, Violet Dreschfeld.[28] There are minor but intriguing references to Jewish people and cultural symbols in her fiction: it seems likely that, over and above her loyalty to Jewish friends whom she loved, she also felt something of common cause between her own colonial displacement and the marginalization of Jews in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s.

No doubt being in Paris helped her remember the French Creole that so flourished in Dominica in her childhood. She developed a strong love for French poetry. She began to earn money by work related to writing quite early. During the ending of her affair with Ford, she worked briefly for a Mrs. Hudnut, a rich American woman with writing ambitions who lived in the South of France. She also translated a novel, *Perversité*, by Francis Carco, though when it appeared Ford's name was on the title page.[29] Lenglet and Rhys communicated in French and, in this period of her life, constant translation between French and English must have sharpened her sense of each word she used, as did her lifelong love of poetry. In her papers, when

she died, were poems she particularly enjoyed which she had copied out by hand. Her fiction has many of the attributes of the heightened, layered language of poetry.

Her first book was a volume of short stories, *The Left Bank* (1927). Ford published what became the last story in the collection, "Vienne," in his *transatlantic review*, which put this unknown and inexperienced writer in the company of modernist stars like Joyce, Hemingway, Pound, Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein, among others. He also helped her place the collection and wrote an introduction to the stories which is as much about him as about the stories, and has a patronizing tone at times, but was also important to Rhys's collection being noticed.

Jean Rhys 1928–1945

Rhys's second book was a novel, *Quartet* (1928), in which she fictionalized the affair with Ford. By the time it came out she was in London, now the writer, Jean Rhys. Rhys is a different spelling of her father's family name of Rees, and Jean could have been chosen for her husband, Jean, or her "Cuban" ancestor Jean, or both.

Quartet was only one of the four books that represented the "*affaire* Ford," the others being Jean Lenglet's novel, *Sous les Verrous* (written under the name Edouard de Nève, 1933), Ford's novel *When the Wicked Man* (1931), and Stella Bowen's account in her autobiography, *Drawn from Life* (1941). Rhys's fictional portrayal of Ford irritated him (and his friends among the London *literati*). He then wrote what is probably his worst novel, with a lurid white Creole character called Lola Porter who is suspected of murdering her husband and loves telling stories about voodoo and "obi" (obeah). Ford's narrator uncritically reflects the cultural and racial prejudices commonplace in Britain at the time, describing "Mrs Porter" in Harlem as insisting "on dancing half-naked in a regular tohuwabohu of negroes, mulatresses and gangsters."[30] Because Lenglet's novel was translated and edited by Rhys as *Barred*, appearing in Britain a year before his own version in French, we might see it as a fifth "version," by both of them.

When *Quartet* appeared, Rhys was living in London with Leslie Tilden Smith, a rather unsuccessful literary agent, who was very supportive of her work. It is ironical that she had romantic relationships with two Englishmen called L. Smith (Lancelot and Leslie). She married Tilden Smith on February 19, 1934 (the year *Voyage in the Dark* was published). Smith's daughter reported that he wrote to Ford to ask if he needed an English agent, and got

the reply that Ford didn't but Rhys did. Ford sent Smith some of her stories, and Angier believes Smith was both domestically and professionally an important part of the literary productivity Rhys achieved between 1928 and 1939.[31] But Rhys strongly disliked London and England, and probably returned to Paris when she could. She and Lenglet divorced in 1928 (though their literary connection lasted longer and was complicated: over a number of years they each revised, built on, translated, or, in Lenglet's case, perhaps appropriated the other's work).[32] She helped *Barred* be published and reviewed in Britain. This is interesting proof that Rhys's strongest connections were those through writing: it was what she and both her first and second husbands really had in common.

After 1924, when the Lenglets separated, the plan was for their daughter Maryvonne to live with each parent as convenient. Though Maryvonne spent more time with her father as time went on, she did remember staying with her mother for six months in the South of France.[33] She was schooled in Amsterdam and visited her mother for holidays, thus relieving Rhys of the distraction of raising a child. Rhys was unable to be a normally domesticated wife and mother, though she clearly deeply loved her daughter.

She was thus able to commit herself to writing, and she really did, publishing her second novel, *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, in 1931, her third, *Voyage in the Dark*, in 1934, and her fourth, *Good Morning, Midnight*, in 1939. She worked on shorter pieces of fiction. She had friendships with women who loved literature or wrote it (Peggy Kirkaldy and Evelyn Scott; see *L*). Scott, who liked *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, shared something of Rhys's racial complexities, being white from a culture that had been built on racialized plantation slavery. She extended Rhys's knowledge of American literature. Their friendship was to founder, as did many of Rhys's connections with literary women (*L*:34).

In 1936, as a result of a bequest Leslie Tilden Smith received, Rhys was able to visit Dominica, the only time she saw it after she left as a teenager. This was crucial in giving her a vivid new set of memories of its topography and in refreshing childhood recollections. It was in New York on the way home from this trip that Rhys quarreled with Evelyn Scott.

The end of the thirties saw the onset of fascism in Germany and the start of World War II in 1939. This was the year Rhys's fourth novel, *Good Morning, Midnight* appeared: understandably it was largely ignored. She burned an early version of *Wide Sargasso Sea* in this period, according to Angier, in a quarrel with Leslie.[34] The war years clearly were very hard for Rhys. She did not hear from her daughter for the entire duration of hostilities (1939–45), as Maryvonne had chosen to return to Holland to live with

her father in late 1939, while still a teenager. As the war progressed, Rhys received alarming news, that when the Germans invaded Holland Maryvonne had been staying with Jewish friends. It was only in 1945 that Rhys heard her daughter was safe, had worked in the Resistance and been arrested, and now was about to be married. Lenglet had also worked for the Resistance and had been arrested, declared insane and put into an asylum, then prison, then Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and had even survived the notorious death march of 1945.[35]

During the war, Leslie joined the RAF for several years, but he was able to serve at a desk. He died of a heart attack in 1945. Though it is clear that Rhys had the opportunity to work during these years, there were immense stresses: anxiety about her daughter and Lenglet and the loss through death of Leslie's loving support. During and after the war she seems to have worked on short stories and her habitual notebook entries, but after 1939 she entered a long period in which she vanished from public view as a writer and in literary circles was assumed to be dead.

Jean Rhys and Ella Hamer 1946–1966

Angier suggests that Leslie's death, and his active involvement in Rhys's writing life, prevented the publication of a volume of short stories which she had ready in 1945, and that she only published two new stories between 1945 and 1966.[36] In 1947, she married Max Hamer, a cousin of Leslie, who was devoted to her but not a literary man. Their life together was tumultuous, as well as happy. Max was impulsive, looking for ways to make money, which got him into trouble with the law, wrecking his career and ultimately his health.[37] As her alcoholism worsened, Rhys went through some years of fighting with neighbors and tenants living in the house she and Max had in Beckenham, a suburb of south London.[38] Though her family had moved to Britain, she had difficult relationships with many of her relatives. She quarreled or lost touch with several friends, and Maryvonne married a Dutch man and was living in Holland. Whilst Max was in prison, therefore, Rhys spent a good deal of time alone, out of which came a remarkable document, "From a Diary: At the Ropemaker's Arms." She prefaced it with a note, "While for a time I was separated from Max, I lived in rooms above a pub in Maidstone, and there wrote a diary in a little brown copybook. The year was 1947 . . ." (*SP*:129). Angier corrects the date to 1952 (Rhys did not even marry Max until October 1947, and he went to prison in 1950 and served exactly two years of his three-year sentence).[39] "From a Diary" contains "The