

THE BOOK OF EBENEZER LE PAGE

Guernsey and the Channel Islands in the 20th Century

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I

The Book of Ebenezer Le Page, a fictional autobiography written by Gerald Basil Edwards, was published in 1981. The novel is set entirely on the small island of Guernsey, one of the British Channel Islands, and presents the life of its first-person narrator, Ebenezer Le Page, against the background of great changes in almost all aspects of Guernsey life during the period from about 1890 to the 1960s.

Near the beginning of the narrative, as Ebenezer outlines the lives of his parents and grandparents, he remembers the Biblical counsel to “look unto the rock whence ye are hewn” (Isaiah 51:1). The usual commentary on this verse is that it emphasises the importance of understanding origins and context.^[1] It is surprisingly difficult, however, to establish the context of Edwards’ novel, or to pursue the metaphor, ‘the rock whence it was hewn’. The usual strategies for contextualising novels—the details of the author’s life, other works in the author’s *oeuvre*, affiliations of genre—shed little light in the case of *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*.

II

We know almost nothing about G B Edwards himself beyond a few details: he was born on Guernsey in 1899; he left the island as a young man after World War I to study at Bristol University, and returned only a few times; he mixed in London literary circles in the late 1920s and 1930s; he married and had children, but was estranged from them for most of his life; he worked as a minor official in the public service during World War II; and after the war, he lived in monk-like retirement. Edwards finished his days lodged in a small room in a house in Weymouth, the closest point on the mainland of Britain to Guernsey, where he died in 1976. Edwards seems to have destroyed most of his earlier writings. He began *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* when he was in his late 60s, and made only a few attempts to publish it when he was in his early 70s. Eventually, the novel was published posthumously.^[2]

There are a number of biographical allusions to Edwards' life in the story itself, but they are seldom straightforward, and are frequently ironic or misleading. For example, Ebenezer's father works for Tom Mauer (pronounced 'Major'), an amalgam of the first name of Edwards' father and his mother's maiden name. Edwards was born in Braye Road, St Sampson's, but in the novel this address is given to Ebenezer's cousins, Horace and Raymond Martel, rather than to Ebenezer himself. Edwards' self-reliance and his dislike of contemporary culture, especially in the way it had affected Guernsey itself since World War II, echo Ebenezer's attitudes. However, we should be wary of seeing Ebenezer as Edwards' 'alter ego', as John Fowles does in his introduction to the novel (Fowles, 1982:8). Although it is tempting to conflate a colourful narrator with a strong-minded author, this is always a naïve strategy for reading fictional first-person narratives, and it is particularly misleading here. Unlike Edwards himself, Ebenezer has been poorly educated, and his limited understanding is epitomised in the insularity, in all senses of the term, of his life. He has never been outside the islands; indeed, he has only even visited Jersey on one occasion, for a day-trip to watch a football match. A better case for Edwards' alter ego (if we need one) is Ebenezer's cousin, Raymond Martel. Raymond Martel is a tormented soul, driven out by his father and mother, struggling to come to terms with his own sexuality, separated from his wife and children, a man of intellectual promise who spends his working life as a minor official in the public service of the island, and a man of deep religious insight and conviction, albeit heretical enough to bring about his resignation from the Methodist ministry after preaching just one sermon. Ebenezer says at one point that it is hard to imagine the sheer amount of religion there was on the island in the early 20th Century. Despite Ebenezer's name, which evokes the dissenting religious culture of the island, with its Ebenezer chapels, our guide here is not Ebenezer, but Raymond, whose struggle with belief and with the culture of the Church provides some of the profoundest moments of the story, and whose mysticism underpins its grand climax.

III

There are similar problems in establishing the 'literary' context of the novel. As this is the only novel by Edwards that is extant, it is not possible to situate it in the context of the author's other work. There are some directions offered in the novel itself, but these are often used ironically. Ebenezer's own reading is confined largely to the *Guernsey Evening Press*, although his head is full of Biblical quotations remembered from his pious mother. The only novel that he ever seems to have read is *Robinson Crusoe*, which he acquires as a memento of his great friend, Jim Mahy, killed in World War I. Defoe's story (also a fictional autobiography) of a solitary life on a desert island for 28 years has obvious relevance, as it does at a deeper level in its exploration of the myth of *homo faber*, or man the builder and victor in the struggle against the forces of nature. But physical solitude is not Ebenezer's problem, and Robinson's restlessness as a young man, running away to sea for a life of adventure that takes him around the world before he is shipwrecked off the coast of South America, is quite the antithesis of Ebenezer's settled life. Indeed, Ebenezer amazes Raymond when he tells him that the moral of *Robinson Crusoe* is that it is foolish to go gallivanting around the world when you could stay at home leading a quiet life.

Raymond is much more bookish than Ebenezer, although Ebenezer comments on Raymond's mixed-up life that "I am not sure all that reading do a fellow much good" (Edwards, 1982:54). Some of the authors Raymond has read—for example, John Oxenham, who wrote a number of historical romances of Channel Island life, most notably *Carette of Sark*, and, most important of all, Victor Hugo—are very appropriate to the novel's themes. Raymond has read all four volumes of Hugo's *Les Misérables* in French, and it is surprising how few people know that Hugo spent eighteen years in exile in the Channel Islands in the 1850s and 1860s, fifteen of them on Guernsey, and that *Les Misérables* was mostly written there. Hugo was fascinated from first to last by the islands. The last book published during his lifetime was a study of *L'Archipel de la Manche*, based on notes he had made soon after his arrival there.

It is the novel of Hugo's that is not mentioned that is the most significant analogue, however. Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, published in 1866, is the profoundest fictional study of Guernsey life. Its central section is an extraordinary narrative of the salvage of the engine and funnel of a steam shipwrecked on the treacherous Roches Douvres, performed single-handed by the novel's hero, Gilliatt, who endures hurricanes, and fights off giant octopuses. It clearly recalls *Robinson Crusoe* on more than one level. Edwards seems, however, to have wanted to deal ironically with the 'toilers of the sea' motif that is powerful in Channel Island literature generally. Gilliatt's fight to the death with the octopus seems to be echoed in Ebenezer's struggle to land the conger eel that he has caught by accident and is desperate to take, so close is he to starvation at the end of the German occupation in World War II. Ebenezer is a part-time fisherman and lover of the *orfi*, or garfish as it is called in Australia, but (like most real-life Channel Island fishermen of his time) he cannot swim and has never done more than paddle up to his knees in the water. Ebenezer's inability to swim contrasts markedly with the prodigious feats of swimming and boatmanship in Hugo's novel.

IV

Biography and literary affiliations offer us only limited help in understanding the context of Edwards' novel. The true rock from which it is hewn is the history and culture of Guernsey itself, and a sustained meditation on the fate of the island in the 20th Century is at the core of the novel. There are several aspects to this, but for reasons of space I have limited myself here to the consideration of two: Guernsey's relationship with France and changes in the economy of the island. I have left those questions of belief and of religion, although in many ways the most important aspects of change in the history of Guernsey, to one side in this paper because they are too complex to deal with in a short space.

Guernsey was not the only place in Britain to experience more change in the first 50 years of the 20th Century than it had in the previous five hundred. The same could be said of many places in the south of England, for example. But the nature of the changes on Guernsey (and Jersey for that matter) was the product of unique factors and circumstances. At the heart of this lies a paradox: although the islands pledged loyalty to the English crown more or less continuously from the early Middle Ages, in most respects, their culture was French. Guernsey is only 50 kilometres from the coast of

France, yet nearly 130 kilometres from the closest point on the English mainland. Alderney, part of the bailiwick of Guernsey and the closest of all the islands to France, lies only 16 kilometres from the French coast. Any map will reveal how intimately the islands are cradled in the Golfe de St-Malo, with Normandy on one side and Brittany on the other. Despite this, ‘Frenchmen’, who were always present in considerable numbers on the islands, were widely disliked. As Ebenezer says *à propos* the unveiling of the statue to Victor Hugo, a man he describes as a “famous Frenchman” rather than a famous Guernseyman, notwithstanding Hugo’s long residence on Guernsey:

I didn’t like the French, and I think most Guernsey people felt the same. I thought they was dirty. Certainly Fountain Street and Rosemary Steps and round there, where it was mostly French people lived, nobody could say was a clean part of the town. (Edwards, 1982:123)

But then Ebenezer has little good to say about the English or the Americans either, and Jersey people are considered the worst of all.

Historically, the Channel Islands were part of the Duchy of Normandy, and thus became linked to England after the Norman Conquest. Ebenezer still speaks of that event as when “we” conquered England. In a comic touch, Ebenezer’s best friend spends his honeymoon at Hastings. After a visit to nearby Battle with his wife, he comments that King Harold of England was such “a slippery sod . . . it’s a wonder *we* ever got him at all” (Edwards, 1982:117). When King John lost the Norman lands in France to the King of France in 1204, the Islands chose, however, to remain loyal to England. They have never been subsequently part of the United Kingdom, but enjoy (with the Isle of Man) a peculiar status as a dependency of the British Crown. Therefore, constitutional links with Britain are maintained through the Privy Council, not through the government at Westminster. Citizens of the Islands are not represented at Westminster and the laws of the United Kingdom are only binding in the Islands if passed by the local governments in the two bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey—the ‘States’. The English monarch is received in the Islands as the heir of the Duke of Normandy.

Despite this relationship to England, one of the profoundest changes in Guernsey life was the loss of the *patois*, the distinctive dialect of Norman French spoken universally on the island until the beginning of the 20th Century and surviving in widespread use until World War II. This is Ebenezer’s native tongue, spoken within his family and to all the friends and acquaintances of his generation. At the end of the novel, when Ebenezer is an old man in the 1960s, he still speaks patois to the love of his life, Liza Quéripel, at the end of the novel. To put this into historical perspective, Ebenezer’s mother, born we can suppose in the 1860s, spoke a little English but read the Bible in English. (This is significant because although patois was the common discourse of the Le Page family, scraps of the King James Bible resonate in Ebenezer’s mind from his daily contact with his mother and are found throughout the text of the novel.) Ebenezer’s grandmother, born in the 1840s, spoke only French and read only the French Bible. The most recent statistics from the 2001 census conclude that approximately two percent of the population of Guernsey can speak patois fluently and up to fourteen percent can understand words and phrases.^[3]

The other profound change in Guernsey life in the 20th Century was economic. For most of its history, the island was poor, under-populated and culturally backward. Its economy was based on agriculture and fishing, and from the late Middle Ages a local domestic industry produced high-quality knitwear. A popular story survives that Mary Queen of Scots went to the block wearing a pair of stockings made in Guernsey. Many men were employed in fishing and in seamanship generally. Ebenezer's ancestors on his father's side had all been sailors, and Ebenezer himself considered going to sea when he was a child. The great economic change came with the quarrying of granite, in the north of Guernsey especially, in the 19th Century.^[4] Rock is important, not just as the literal foundation of Guernsey's economy and modernity, but as a symbol of the perpetuity of Guernsey culture, echoed in the biblical idea of the rock from which one is hewn. Hugo describes Guernsey in the preface to *Les Travailleurs de la mer* as a "rock" of hospitality and liberty. Although Ebenezer's father works in the quarry, Ebenezer himself is prevented from joining him when his father steps in after a young man is killed in an accident. Ebenezer's own house, 'Les Moulins', is built entirely from the blue granite of the island and will "last for ever". But, most of the granite quarried was exported, and destined particularly for the pavements of the industrial cities of England, while a large amount of it was crushed and used for aggregate in concrete. The exploitative and colonialist aspects of this trade are obvious. Hugo's novel is set in the 1820s, but he comments on the destructive aspects of the stone trade that are to come: almost all the locations and house sites mentioned in Hugo's novel were eventually to be obliterated—or literally, the land was taken away and put somewhere else.

After World War I, the industry declined, and both agriculture and stone-quarrying were superseded by 'growing'. Ebenezer's life is a microcosm of this change. His father finds him a job in the 'vineries' of Mr Dorey. Eventually, Ebenezer rises to be foreman before he leaves to set up on his own. Glasshouses were first introduced at the end of the 18th Century to grow grapes and pineapples, and also flowers from the 1820s, but it was the growing of tomatoes under glass that became the staple of the island's export economy in the years after World War I. The huge acreage of greenhouses became one of Guernsey's characteristic sights, and by 1900, growers outnumbered arable and pastoral farmers by four to one. But there is something decidedly unromantic about the life of the 'grower'. It is honest work, but cannot compare in glamour with the 'privateering' of Oxenham's novels or the heroic seamanship of Gilliatt in *Les Travailleurs de la mer*. This is another instance of the ironic stance Edwards' novel takes in relation to other stories of Guernsey life.

But for all its lack of romance, growing is an honest business, unlike the tourism that succeeded it. Although the origins of tourism in the islands lie in the years after Waterloo, the spectacular growth occurred after World War II, at the same time as 'growing' began to decline. By the time of the novel's publication in the early 1980s, over 300,000 tourists arrived each year (Marr, 1982:221). (This can be compared with the 30,000 tourists that arrive annually on Norfolk Island.)^[5] For Ebenezer, who typically is not above making a little bit of profit out of tourism when it suits him, the problem is that the islanders are too good at it. Tourism has become a holy word; Guernsey has sold out and become a whore of a place (Edwards, 1982:382). Edwards'

novel, however, was published before tourism itself became prey to a new competitor: the off-shore finance industry of merchant banks and investment houses, and before a new wave of migrants, the super-rich, arrived, who were attracted by low income tax, the absence of supertax, value-added tax, capital gains or transfer tax.

It is not hard to imagine what Ebenezer would have made of that development, but we should not read the novel simplistically. Ebenezer is not a poor man; his earliest memory is putting a penny into his money-box. The last third of the narrative is dominated by Ebenezer's search for an heir for his substantial wealth, someone to whom he can leave his house, land and money (including the cache of gold sovereigns buried in the garden and the stocking full of five-pound notes stuffed up the laundry-chimney). This theme of 'property' can only be appreciated in the context of the peculiarly complex property and inheritance laws of Guernsey. Edwards had himself been a victim of this, and there are a couple of sub-plots in the novel that revolve around the problematic nature of inheritance.

'Property', of course, becomes a metaphor for the transfer and inheritance of other, less tangible, possessions: a feeling for the history of Guernsey, attachment to the land and sea of the island itself, and knowledge of the patois and culture. Ebenezer begins to write his book in old age (not unlike Edwards himself), and in it he attempts to find comfort in the memory of family, friends and lovers set against the history of the island in the 20th Century that he finds so alienating. Ebenezer keeps his writing a secret, but he is eventually found out by Neville Falla, the rebellious young artist whom Ebenezer has selected (unbeknownst to Neville himself) as his heir. Neville wants to read the book, but Ebenezer will not allow him to. All he will do is promise that Neville will inherit the book after Ebenezer's death. To ensure Neville's inheritance of the novel, Ebenezer inscribes the manuscript in capitals with the words that stand as the epigraph to the novel, "THE PROPERTY OF NEVILLE FALLA".

Although the story ends for Ebenezer with reconciliation, religious vision and blessing, it seems unlikely that Edwards himself felt unequivocally hopeful about Guernsey's future. It is hard to imagine an uncomplicated optimism founded on Ebenezer. Etymologically, the name 'Ebenezer' is a Hebrew word meaning 'stone of hope', and refers to the monument that Samuel erected after the Israelites had inflicted a great military defeat on the Philistines. Ebenezer may be a 'stone of hope', but he is also the oldest man on the island. Can hope be founded on a figure that belongs so completely to the past? Neville will inherit Ebenezer's property after his death—both the book itself and the house and money at Les Moulins—but from what Edwards said to his friends we can infer that he was planning an early death for Neville in the novel that he sketched out as a sequel (Edwards, 1982:11). Despite Ebenezer's simplicity and candour, it is clear that Edwards himself did not know of any easy solutions to Guernsey's problems as a small island culture in the modern world.

Endnotes

[1] The specific context alluded to is Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of the Jewish people.

[2] The publishing history and some biographical details can be found in the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel by John Fowles.

[3] The most recent estimate for speakers of Jèrriais, the language of Jersey, is 3.2 percent (Johnson, 2005:73).

[4] Although Edwards' mother came from an old Guernsey family, Edwards' grandfather on his father's side had migrated from Devon in the middle of the 19th Century to work in the quarries. Census returns provide an interesting record of the family's improving fortunes. In 1901 Edwards' father was listed as an employer at the quarry. His next-door neighbours were the family of Henry Giffard, KC and Jurat, and from 1902 the Bailiff of the Bailiwick of Guernsey.

[5] Figures provided by John Buffett in his opening address to the 2nd International Conference on Small Island Cultures, Norfolk Island, 2006.

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