



WEST WORDS

The Newsletter of the International Rebecca West Society

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

During my opening remarks at the Rebecca West conference in London (September 2009) I took the opportunity to ponder a simple and yet important question relating to our individual and collective endeavor: What is it that draws us to one particular writer rather than to any other one? And what are the rewards and challenges of single-author study? The answers, I think, may shed light on the very *raison d'être* for a literary association such as the International Rebecca West Society.

To my mind, four conditions need to be met before scholars are likely to commit themselves to intensive study of a particular writer:

One reason why we respond favorably to a given writer is that he or she allows us to study ourselves, our time, and our society. Not every writer will give rise to self-reflection and introspection in equal measure. There are those writers who just give us more in that regard, and we are drawn towards them. Rebecca West is such an author. She serves brilliantly as a mirror and a lens, allowing us to interrogate ourselves and to look through the lens of her work to get a clearer picture of our world, our history, and our ideas. But we are not just drawn towards her because she is a catalyst who can throw more light on us and our times.

The second factor that attracts us is the added dimension of pleasure in reading a favorite author's work. It is that aspect which turns our interest into something more akin to a passion. There is something that we cherish and love about the shape of sentences, the world of imagination conjured up, and the mood of the writer that we chose to study. Consider this sentence from "The Salt of the Earth": "Not long after they were in the New Forest, where the new grass-blades were springing up like green fire through the dark, tough matting of heather, and in the same plantations the black ashes affirmed it was still winter, the elms went no farther than to show a few purple flowers, the oaks made their recurring confusion between spring and autumn and were ablaze with red young leaves, and the birches and hawthorns were comfortably emerald." This string of words reveals new worlds to us, it is a journey of discovery, and it contains surprises, both metaphorically and syntactically, as we

ANNOUNCING THE FIFTH BIENNIAL REBECCA WEST CONFERENCE.

To be held at CUNY Baruch (Manhattan), September 16-17, 2011.

"Rebecca West and Power"

The main focus of this conference will be the journalism of Rebecca West. We invite papers that analyze any aspect of West's journalistic oeuvre, but encourage especially contributions that investigate the idea of power—state power, patriarchal power, empire, God, and literary authorities. Any approach, including rhetorical analysis, political history, ideological critique, feminism, biography, and intertextuality are welcome. We also plan to organize at least one panel on approaches to the new collection of West's non-fiction prose *The Essential Rebecca West* (2010). Papers on other topics will also be considered, especially those exploring the nexus between West's fiction and non-fiction.

Send abstracts of 250-400 words to Ann Norton by March 15, 2011, at anorton@anselm.edu.

roll up the ribbon of this sentence. The author who touches us with such language is like a tonic to us—invigorating and essential. Granted, most of us have more than one such tonic in our cabinets, as few of us can make a living of studying one author alone. But I do think that there is one preferred draft to which we like to return again and again. That favorite tonic, to me—and I presume to more than a few of you—is Rebecca West. Her penetrating intellect, her rich world of ideas, and her allusive, dense, and knotty writing style have sustained my interest in her work and her ideas for years, and I do not expect this to change anytime soon.

Thirdly, and that applies especially to academics, "our" author needs to repay our scholarly attention in tangible ways. In that department Rebecca West is surely not deficient; she is not a troubled literary asset. On the contrary, studying West yields handsome returns. As our essay collection *Rebecca West Today* has demonstrated, West is responsive to a range of scholarly approaches from historic philosophical approaches, to textual analyses. Studying her work can be a sound professional investment, as

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THE ESSENTIAL REBECCA WEST: UNCOLLECTED PROSE

Pearhouse Press, 2010. Order it online at http://www.amazon.com/Essential-Rebecca-West-Uncollected-Prose/dp/0980235553/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=b&books&qid=1271134961&sr=1-1

I once interviewed a well-known writer who confessed that, when he turned a good phrase, he would pump his fist in the air. It's safe to say that this was not a habit of Rebecca West's—otherwise she would have suffered from a chronically sore arm.

Consider the opening of her review of a book called *Patriarchal Attitudes*: "There is, of course, no reason for the existence of the male sex except that one sometimes needs help in moving the piano." Such a bravura start seems impossible to sustain, but West does just that in the following three-and-a-half pages. She had a gift for—and an impish delight in—smashing icons. Here she is, for example, poking fun at Winston Churchill's vaunted style: "His rhetorical passages seem, like the first English automobiles, to be preceded by a man carrying a red flag."

Both quotations can be found in *The Essential Rebecca West: Uncollected Prose*, which should be essential reading for anyone enamored of insight, wit, and English prose that scintillates. Some of the book reviews—written for London papers over a period of more than half-a-century—will deliver the shock of the new to American readers. Others are historic documents, among them West on Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World" on its first publication in 1932.

The Essential Rebecca West also contains essays, reminiscences, and an excerpt from an unfinished project of West's, a book that would have used the assassination of Leon Trotsky in Mexico as an instrument for examining that country's bloody history.

For all its range and zest, this collection has one shortcoming: to adapt a phrase from another brilliantly impudent writer, Ambrose Bierce, its covers are too close together. —Dennis Drabelle

From the President Continued

the significant number of graduate students working on West demonstrates. Much of the success and of the visibility associated with work on “our” author depends on a proper institutional framework, a network of colleagues, venues for presenting and publishing work, support for travel and conference attendance, and official recognition of Rebecca West studies in tenure and promotion decisions. The International Rebecca West Society is there to further all of these interests and to make sure that scholars working on Rebecca West get all the support they need and deserve.

The fourth major reason why we study an author is that he or she needs to be relevant. Indeed, without this fourth factor, we would in all likelihood not be holding a fourth conference on Rebecca West; without the relevance factor, we might not even have held the first one. Granted that relevance is what ultimately keeps a writer’s legacy alive, we should not shirk the question of what exactly it is that makes Rebecca West relevant to us today. I might get as many answers to this question as there are audience members here today. But let me give you a few reasons from my own vantage point.

What is important to me about Rebecca West is that she was a forward looking thinker who got some important things absolutely right, as demonstrated by her early condemnation of Stalin, her persistent liberal feminism, and her grasp on the vital dialectic between patriotism and internationalism. In addition, her mind was broad and her thinking original enough to formulate ideas whose time may not even have come today yet—an example of this may well be her radical critique of atonement theology.

In more general terms, she is relevant because she was an interdisciplinary humanist, an anti-fundamentalist, and a politically active public intellectual—an impressive array of qualifications that she further enhanced by bringing to these serious critical qualities a penetrating wit, searing honesty, and stylistic brilliance. To some of her contemporaries, West’s pen was a weapon of mass debunking. A reviewer in 1918 outlined her critical reputation as follows:

Miss Rebecca West is the greatest anti-aircraft gunner among contemporary critics. Many a high-flying author has she brought down in flames. One has sometimes heard people, as they watched the flashes and stars of her wit playing round a doomed author, speculate as to whether she herself would ever take to the air and the perilous life of an artist. She has done so now in *The Return of the Soldier*, and the result is a brilliant success.

It is an assessment that has stood the test of time.



Caroline Krzakowski, Joanna Labon, Liz Leyshon, Bernard Schweizer, Debra Rae Cohen, Carl Rollyson

While the sharp needle of her wit could deflate pomposity, hypocrisy, and pretense in an instant, both in the literary and political spheres, she detested polemical hack work and knee-jerk partisanship. She always advocated skeptical inquiry and the virtues of thinking things through. At the same time, she would poke fun at self-satisfied high-mindedness: Here is a quote from *Survivors in Mexico*: “How would any of us like to be restricted to the company of high-minded groups? That would be a kind of hell” (*Survivors* 167). Maybe that’s one of the reasons she stayed away from Bloomsbury?

She may have been stubborn in some of her views, but she had integrity, and that

is why people respected her, even when they disagreed with her. How many purveyors of political discourse today can still command our respect in the same way? Let’s just say that the likes of Glenn Beck or Ann Coulter would not measure up to this level of engagement with issues, not by a long shot.

Rebecca West’s views continue to throw light on the past century, her ideas still emit sparks of insight, wit, and controversy today, and her work just keeps on giving—both in terms of contemporary relevance and in terms of aesthetic and intellectual stimulation. And now I look forward to two days of continuing discussion, inquiry, and celebration of her work.
— Bernard Schweizer

‘THE DAMNED PRECURSORS’: REBECCA WEST AND THE FAIRFIELD INHERITANCE

Unresolved disquiet about the dynamics of her family suffuses Rebecca West’s imaginative and personal writing. To uncover the roots of her troubled creativity she investigated and obsessively reworked the stories of her ancestry. As self-therapy her researches brought little or no consolation, and, insofar as they are in the public domain, have left a medley of uncorroborated and conflicting biographical material. Using unexploited sources in British and North American archives Julian Moore reconstructed key elements in her Fairfield inheritance.

West’s distant lineage, though turbulent and of interest in its own right, had less significance in the aetiology of her psychic unease than she herself sometimes supposed. In contrast, this talk offered a revised and substantiated account of fourteen years in the life of her father Charles Fairfield (1841-1906) which threw a startling light on his potential involvement in her emotional development. A detailed description of Charles’s years in the Rifle Brigade demonstrated that he was not a successful officer, though intermittently a successful betting man. An array of photographs

taken during Charles’s service in Canada provided a hitherto unsuspected clue to his youthful appearance and character. Most of the talk was devoted to following Charles through the maze of official papers generated by the theft for which he was sentenced and imprisoned, and which revealed something of his health and attitudes to life, both immediately and in the longer-term. These events shaped Charles’s subsequent career and must be considered to have cast a shadow across the formation of his children.

Two equally intriguing possibilities were opened to discussion: that West’s immediate family, both individually and collectively, succeeded in ensuring that she never knew the truth about her father; and that she both suspected the existence of a shameful secret and simultaneously denied it. Whatever was known by members of Charles’s own generation, Norman Macleod and Alison Selford made it clear that no word had ever filtered down to his grandchildren. It remains to be assessed how far West’s demons, to whose exorcism she devoted so much creative energy, were the product of this newly revealed predicament.

Julian hopes to publish an article based on his talk.

WEST IN THE NEWS

Our most exciting news item: West's whimsical essay "Why My Mother Was Frightened of Cats" appears in the April 29, 2010 edition of *The New York Review of Books*. They have named it "Pounce"—which was her beloved ginger cat's name—and they announce the essay in bold letters on the front page: "Rebecca West on the Cat, Pounce." You can read the first page online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/apr/29/pounce/>.

In *The Guardian Books Blog* from October 24, 2009, Alison Flood asked for nominations of forgotten literary classics. One blogger wrote, "To those who would say there is no such thing as a neglected classic, I'd recommend you look at Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel*, written in the early 90s. Elizabeth Taylor and Antonia White aren't mentioned; Elizabeth Bowen, Jean Rhys, Rebecca West, Rose Macaulay, Rosamond Lehmann, Barbara Pym and Penelope Fitzgerald are, but none of their novels is discussed in detail. All have written works which deserved to be called classics in my view." Review Pages, p. 21.

In the October 1, 2009 edition of *The Australian*, Peter Stubbs begins his reflection on the art of conversation by saying that he is "rather taken with" Rebecca West's "adage," "There is no such thing as conversation. It is an illusion. There are intersecting monologues, that is all." These are the opening lines of her story "There Is No Conversation," from her 1935 collection *The Harsh Voice*. Features, p. 18.

In the October 17, 2009 Saturday Books edition of *The Scotsman*, Lee Randall makes the case for Christina Stead and begins with West as her expert witness. "No-one reads Christina Stead these days, which is scandalous. Rebecca West called her, 'one of the few people really original we have produced since the First World War.' I concur: Stead is breathtaking." P. 3

Several obituaries of Lionel Davidson, a novelist who wrote international thrillers, mentioned West's comment about him. Dennis Barker in *The Guardian*, November 3, 2009, is an example. "Rebecca West once said he was a young Kipling." Obituaries, p. 35.

In a rather curious March 21, 2009, *Canberra Times* essay on the Victorians, the writer discusses the "daring" of Victorian adventurers who, despite the prudery for which they were famous, "invert[ed] that impulse whose most negative expression Rebecca West would label, with more accuracy than many would care to admit, the 'death wish' that lurks in the breast of every man." A, p. 15.

Many newspapers reviewed the biographical film *H.G. Wells: War with the*

World. Here's how Jane Howard and Gilly Waddacor described it in the July 19, 2009, *Australian Sunday Telegraph*. "Brilliantly acted biopic about the father of science fiction (played by Michael Sheen) and his utopian ideals and experimental love life. The controversial British visionary believed sex was 'as necessary as fresh air' and advocated ridding the world of human deformity. His long-suffering wife (played by Sarah Winman) endured his many liaisons, including that with feminist Rebecca West (Sally Hawkins) and Moura Budberg (Branka Katic)." Magazine, p. 6.

In her review of Lilian Pizzichini's biography *The Blue Hour: a Portrait of Jean Rhys*, Laura Thompson, in the May 9, 2009 edition of the *London Daily Telegraph*, quotes West.

"From the moment she arrived in London in 1907, never to return to the West Indies except for one unhappy holiday, Rhys suffered a sense of dislocation between the world of Dominica and that of Europe. This informed her most famous novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the story of Mr Rochester's "mad wife in the attic" and the book that, in 1966, gained plaudits from a literary establishment that had shunned Rhys's earlier output as—to quote Rebecca West—"enamoured of gloom to an incredible degree." Books, p. 20.

Every year I find this famous and delicious West morsel misquoted, and here's one of this year's entries. I will spare you all of them, but I will tell you that almost invariably they appear in essays describing the status of feminism on some particular date or in some specific place. In her article, "A century on! Feminism is still as vital as ever," from the October 11, 2009, Sunday Scottish edition of *The Express*, Nicola Barry commemorates the fact that "exactly 100 years ago, hundreds of suffragettes and suffragists marched along Edinburgh's Princes Street to demand the right for women to vote." She bemoans the fact that "people have been rubbishing feminism ever since. In the early days, those who did not want to be identified as feminists used to preface everything with: 'I'm not a feminist but?' What's new?" You know what's next. "The writer Rebecca West memorably said: 'I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is. I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments which differentiate me from a doormat.'" How, I ask, can they leave out the crucial, final words "or a prostitute"? Sigh.

Katie Roiphe expounds on the sexy celebrity photos taken by ex-model and photographer Ellen von Unwerth in the Style section of the September 20, 2009, *London Sunday Times*.

"[T]ake the wild charms of a woman such as Rebecca West, whom Virginia Woolf cattily said looked like a cross between a charwoman and a gypsy, with shabby clothes and dirty nails. West provoked the love of her life, HG Wells, into inviting her to lunch with a fiercely witty and nasty review of one of his books. And he said, after they became lovers, that she wrote like God. Which leads me to the last and final point: what's sexy in women is also power and its occasional surrender. Good news for most of us, since power (think Claudia Schiffer to Iris Murdoch) takes many and various forms." Features, pp. 32,33,34,35,36.

There were many obituaries for playwright Kenneth Jupp, author of *Tosca's Kiss*, produced in 2006 at the Orange Tree theatre, in Richmond, London. Sian Phillips, in the *London Guardian* from August 12, 2009, describes "his reworking of the English writer Rebecca West's attendance at the Nuremberg trials. His friend and frequent tennis partner Harold Pinter had taken part in a reading of the play at the Haymarket theatre the previous year, and the considerable interest created by the full production led to plans to present the play in New York." Obituaries, p. 30.

Nicholson Baker, in the August 3, 2009 edition of *The New Yorker*, asks, "Can the Kindle really improve on the book?" and he mentions West as one of the authors me might read should he get one. "Sure, the Kindle is expensive, but the expense is a way of buying into the total commitment. This could forever change the way I read. I've never been a fast reader. I'm fickle; I don't finish books I start; I put a book aside for five, ten years and then take it up again. Maybe, I thought, if I ordered this wireless Kindle 2 I would be pulled into a world of compulsive, demonic book consumption, like Pippin staring at the stone of Orthanc. Maybe I would gorge myself on Rebecca West, or Jack Vance, or Dawn Powell." Fact, Annals of Reading, p. 24.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Rebecca West Society now has a working bibliography prepared by Thaine Stearns and various student assistants: thanks to Thaine and helpers. This is a major accomplishment and a very valuable scholarly source. Feel free now to consult it! We do ask for your help, though: could you please let Ann Norton or Bernard Schweizer know of any errors or missing entries? And we are working on getting rid of the Latin place holder text that now appears on the first page; we appreciate your patience.

2009 LONDON CONFERENCE

Each time I write about a Rebecca West conference, I'm tempted to say that this was the best yet, and this year is no exception. Our 2009 conference in London—our fourth and the first to take place outside the United States—was a smashing success, due largely to the tireless efforts of Joanna Labon, who conceived and organized it. It was held in the tall and imposing Senate House of the University of London (apparently the inspiration for Orwell's Ministry of Truth in 1984), in the lovely Bloomsbury district. This American academic who lives in a New Hampshire village could not have been more thrilled by the bustle, beauty, and sophisticated multiculturalism of London, the gorgeous warm clear weather we enjoyed, and the enthusiastic camaraderie of Rebecca West's devoted fans and family. We had the largest number of attendees yet; the food was terrific; and we were fortunate to have as keynote speaker West's first biographer, Victoria Glendinning, who drew a large crowd both to her talk and to the reception following.

We began Friday morning with a superb panel on West as woman of letters. Kathryn Laing discussed West's early work as a complex layering of the many voices that would emerge in her long career as a journalist, novelist, and social/political thinker. Catherine Clay examined West's involvement with the seminal feminist political periodical *Time and Tide*, looking particularly at her contributions to its reincarnation as a more highbrow and less woman-focused publication. Margaret Stetz made connections between West's attitudes toward the aestheticism Max Beerbohm seemed to

embody and West's "London Fantasy" *Harriet Hume*. After some welcome and delicious coffee, tea, and goodies (I was especially fond of the shortbread we enjoyed a few times), we reconvened to hear talks on West as artist abroad. Janet Montefiore explored her relationship with Stanislav Vinaver, the Serbian poet and writer who appears so prominently in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Galina Dubova compared and contrasted the construction of Russia as a displaced nation in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* and West's *The Birds Fall Down*. Vesna Goldsworthy, a self-described "British-Yugoslav, an Anglo-Serb," spoke at length about *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* as "a hybrid work of life writing" rather than one-dimensional political narrative.

Lunch was lovely assortment of sandwiches and fruit, after which we heard a panel about West's first novel and, at this point, her most canonical work of fiction, *The Return of the Soldier*. Andrew Harrison compared the American edition—serialized in *Century* magazine first in 1917 and then published as a hardcover in 1918—with the 1918 British Nisbet & Co. edition, suggesting that the American text minimizes the Jamesian complexity of the British. Heather Goggans compared *Return* with Elizabeth Bowen's *A World of Love*, both of which feature "ghostly" World War I veterans enmeshed in "love quadrangles." Nicholas Turner considered the "canonicity" and "teachability" of West's novels in relation to the rest of her formidable body of work, arguing that her distinctive voice ensures its survival and broad appeal despite its disparate genres, moods, and subjects.

After another tea break, unsuspecting attendees were treated to the BOMBSHELL of the conference, Julian Moore's riveting, groundbreaking talk about West's elusive father Charles Fairfield and his hitherto unknown criminal past, during which we saw photographs and documents never before reproduced in relation to West or her father. Moore, a retired British Civil Servant, consulted previously unexploited resources in British and North American public archives to reconstruct events about which West, her

GRADUATE STUDENT PRIZES FOR THE 2011 CONFERENCE

The Board of the Rebecca West Society invites applicants for the Graduate Student 2011 Conference prizes. We can offer two \$750 awards to defray the cost of travel to the West Society conference at Baruch College in New York City, September 17-19, 2011. Winners will be chosen competitively from submitted abstracts of 250 to 400 words, sent to Professor Debra Rae Cohen, cohendr@mailbox.sc.edu by March 15, 2011.

sisters, and her surviving relatives knew nothing. I have never heard so much gasping during any panel at any academic conference, and I know I speak for many when I say that I eagerly anticipate the publication of Moore's extraordinary research. Generously, he has provided a short synopsis of his findings for this newsletter.

Fortunately, the panel that followed Moore's was so interesting and so delightful that it was not a letdown to the flabbergasted listeners! West's former secretaries Diana Stainforth and Elizabeth Leyshon—who have attended previous conferences but not together—shared their memories of "Dame Rebecca" in her late years as an imperious, eccentric, sometimes maddening great writer and a warm, funny woman. Their affection was palpable, as was their shared sense of West's brilliance, complexity, and vulnerability.

Victoria Glendinning's keynote address combined personal memories of West with some fascinating insights into the job of being a literary biographer. It seemed a natural step to invite the renowned American biographer Carl Rollyson to introduce Victoria. Carl has treated many awe-inspiring female subjects (Martha Gellhorn, Susan Sontag and Lillian Hellman as well as Rebecca West). Glendinning has written on Vita Sackville West, Elizabeth Bowen, Leonard Woolf and Edith Sitwell. Their accumulated expertise was breathtaking. We were left with an awareness of the special talents of the literary biographer—the patience, diplomacy and ingenuity required, the polite curiosity and the balance between intimacy and professionalism, the need to set down an accurate record, and the responsibility of interpretation. The lecture was open to the wider friends and members of London University and was sponsored by the John Coffin Trust. This meant the lecture drew quite a crowd! Afterwards we



Jane Marcus



Alison and Norman Macleod



Julian Moore



gathered in the marbled hall of Senate House for wine, hors d'oeuvres and excited conversation about Dame Rebecca and London and Glendinning. This was probably the biggest gathering yet seen at a West conference.

Saturday morning began with a very relaxed West Society meeting, with only a few of us attending and nobody worried about it! Much of what we discussed is covered elsewhere in this newsletter: the 2010 publication of *The Essential Rebecca West: Uncollected Prose*; the publication of the Broadview Press edition of *The Return of the Soldier*, edited by Bernard Schweizer; the possibility of a Facebook page for the Rebecca West Society; and the 2011 conference at Baruch College in New York City. We debated the value of placing an ad in PMLA for *The Essential Rebecca West*, which may be very expensive but very helpful, and we decided that the newsletter and membership renewals would now go out (mostly) electronically to save our precious society funds. An ongoing issue remains with West's grave in Brookwood Cemetery, which is hard to find and in need of beautification; perhaps we will attempt a fundraiser for this purpose. (Ideas are welcome, folks.)

In the first panel that followed, about "foreign bodies," Laura Cowan examined West's use and interrogation of various travel genres in *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, which helped her to create a feminist, yet androgynous, hybrid epic. Martin Hipsky compared West's early modernist novel *Harriet Hume* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* to explore their shared "fantastic" elements and to connect them with other modernists whose works contain a Romantic quest for transcendence. And we were happy to welcome back our first conference keynote speaker and groundbreaking West scholar, Jane Marcus. She spoke about an unpublished West essay for the French photography magazine *Vu* that Marcus acquired when compiling *The Young Rebecca*, which discusses Woolf and other women writers of the early twentieth century such as Clemence

Dane, Naomi Mitchison, G.B. Stern, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Mrs. Doreen Wallis. As a connoisseur of West's "voice of authority," Marcus quoted a classic West sentence from the essay: "We need an English Colette."

Another delicious coffee interlude preceded the panel on West "in many media." April Pelt discussed the recent stage adaptations of West's life: *that Woman: Rebecca West Remembers*, the one-woman show compiled by Anne Bobby (who played her), Helen Atkinson, and Carl Rollyson, and Kenneth Jupp's *Tosca's Kiss*, about her involvement in the Nuremberg trials. Pelt's opening imaginary dialogue between a would-be director of a biopic about West and the producer she's trying to woo had us chortling appreciatively; Pelt captured exactly the difficulties involved in explaining to West novices just why she's so important when there's no one genre, no one hugely famous work, no great event to which one can point and say, there, that's who West was and what she did and wrote. My talk described a 1937 film script from the Tulsa archive, a never-produced movie that was to star either Claudette Colbert or Carole Lombard: it is essentially a tragic screwball comedy about marriage and honesty and morality, in which a rich woman tries to reform a poor Hispanic woman with a criminal past. To my delight and fascination, Alison Macleod on the spot supplied answers to my questions about what she called "the movie that never got made": "They told [West] they didn't believe one woman would try to save another." Debra Rae Cohen analyzed a BBC radio interview in which West discussed her "abnormal" relations with sound as representative of her conflicted relationship with the BBC and to interrogate the importance, yet absence, of "developed soundscape" in her novels.

We ate lunch together at a long table full of good food, and Marion Macleod—always a source of unique memorabilia—showed us treasures from West's home, including a photograph of the mostly-

unknown formal portrait that hung in her imposing Kingston House flat. The panel on "Crisis and Belief" began with Bernard Schweizer's talk on West's complex relationship to Anglican modernism and her "passionate rejection of the Atonement" (we can read Bernard's new book to learn more!). Elizabeth Maslen explored West and Storm Jameson as writers and women "in touch with a wider world" than just Great Britain during the interwar years. Ellen Turner discussed West's dissection of patriarchal systems of thought, particularly in *Harriet Hume*, with its meta-narrative of sovereignty and the male "death wish" West condemned all her life.

Our last panel, aptly titled "The Bigger Picture," began with Lyndsey Stonebridge's discussion of West's reading and re-reading of postwar guilt in her *New Yorker* Nuremberg articles, her treason writings, and her fiction. Caroline Krzakowski read the *Cousin Rosamund* novels as a late-modernist response to the end of World War II and the British empire as it had been known and experienced and the start of the Cold War. Finally, Carl Rollyson spoke about the impact of the Dreyfus case on West's early and late political consciousness.

Many left that evening or the next morning early, but I had allowed myself a free Sunday to visit Trafalgar Square and the National Gallery, Westminster, and the British Museum, and I strolled around Bloomsbury marveling at its quaint beauty and historic literary sites. For me—and I hope for all who were there—it was a memorable, wonderful conference and trip. Thanks to all who made it happen and attended!

— Ann Norton

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KATHY LAING REMEMBERS THE CONFERENCE

Bloomsbury, the venue for the fourth biennial Rebecca West conference, is very much the territory of Virginia Woolf and the iconic Bloomsbury group. As Jane Marcus pointed out in her fascinating talk at this conference on yet another recovered and unpublished West treasure, Rebecca West helped to make Virginia Woolf's reputation, but "the sisterly gesture was not returned". Rebecca West was never completely at ease with Woolf and her literary and artistic set, but the ethos and emphasis of the Bloomsbury group, that of friendship and conversation, made the area and its associations for a West conference ideally suited.

One of the main characteristics of West's writing throughout her career is its dialogic and discursive mode. And one of the main features of Rebecca West conferences, since the inauguration of the very first one in New York 2003, is the nurturing of lively conversation, scholarly debate and conviviality. The London conference was no different, and the spirit of conversational Bloomsbury melded with the spirit of vigorous debate, where veteran Westian's, including her own family, and emerging West scholars, could meet and renew old friendships and develop new ones. Here speakers and audience alike could enjoy the exposure to innovative readings, perspectives and sometimes extraordinary information, and most of all, they could simply revel in talking about Rebecca West! Congratulations and thanks to Joanna for making all this possible. —Kathryn Laing

BERNARD SCHWEIZER'S NEW BOOK

Bernard Schweizer, our president, is lending added visibility to Rebecca West by ranging her alongside other writers like Algernon Swinburne, Zora Neale Hurston, and Elie Wiesel, as one of the great God-wrestlers in the history of ideas. In his book *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2010), Schweizer dedicates one key chapter to Rebecca West, revealing the misotheistic core of her ethos of heroism and rebellion. Schweizer shows how carefully West calibrated her expressions of misotheism, as if dreading to admit the full implications of this view, even to herself. But one of the most searing indictments of God in the history of misotheism, "The New God," was actually penned by West during World War I, and it indicts God as a "master criminal," on the loose in a disorderly universe devoid of divine grace. Although West did not publish this essay, other indications of misotheism can be found throughout her published work.

However, West's revolt against God fluctuated over the course of her life time in response to external circumstances. Schweizer chronicles that development from opposition to God, to the attempted Catholic conversion in her mid-life, and then back again to sheer disappointment with God. Interestingly, this development stands in a direct inverse relationship to Elie Wiesel's spiritual trajectory. *Hating God* inquires into the history, the causes, and the manifestations of people's aversion against God. Throughout his inquiry, Schweizer found no sustained correlation between hating God and immorality. Indeed, misotheists number among them humanists of the highest caliber. By probing the deeper mainsprings that cause rational, talented, moral people to become blasphemers, Schweizer offers answers to some of the most vexing questions that beset the human relationship with the divine.

2009 WEST CONFERENCE

It was a pleasure and an honour for me to organise the 2009 West conference in London. During the planning stages, my fellow members of the West Society were always prompt, enthusiastic and accommodating, and in the best tradition of West's early hero Henri Bergson, flexibility and intuition were often at work among creative minds. In this way, responsibility never became a burden and my efforts



were amply rewarded by the conference itself which was, as Ann Norton's account describes so well, a great occasion.

Now that we have gathered in London, who knows where we will be in the future? In Paris, to follow West to buy a book of poems at Shakespeare & Co? At Lake Ohrid, to see the church of Sveti Naum? Or maybe in Nurnberg, to revisit the meaning of treason? Time will tell. I hope to see you there. —Joanna Labon (UK)