



“A DISTURBING, THREATENING, UNCLASSIFIABLE FEMALE”

I would certainly have flunked Margaret Stetz's "Name the Modernist" puzzle before October 1987, when I read Samuel Hynes' review of Victoria Glendinning's *Rebecca West: A Life in The New Republic*. Fascinated by his description of West as "a disturbing, threatening, unclassifiable female who said what she thought and did what she wanted" over the course of "a long, successful career"—not to mention his point that "it doesn't seem too fanciful to call such a woman a witch"—I bought the first West novel I could find. It happened to be *This Real Night*, which at the time was still on the shelves in paperback. After reading the first few pages, I put the book down in amazement. Here was an extraordinary voice: intelligent, witty, and lyrical, feminist, liberal, and skeptical, vastly knowledgeable and masterfully polemical. I vowed, on no other evidence, to write my dissertation on West.

I then discovered, to my relief as a graduate student and regret as a reader, that in fact scant West scholarship existed. That sealed it: my career as a West devotee began. Like all West scholars before and since, I continue to be amazed—even daunted—by West's astoundingly prolific, varied

work. And also like them, I want to bring West to a wider audience. Certainly she fits within the alternative modernist canon that Bonnie Kime Scott and others have identified and analyzed. But West warrants extra attention. Not only was she a brilliant novelist, essayist, and travel writer; she was a genuine public intellectual who influenced the artistic and political world of the twentieth century. As our inspired founder Bernard Schweizer said in September, we are missionaries bringing West back to a world that has partly forgotten her, and that frankly could benefit from her wisdom.

— Vice President Ann Norton

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Hydrolysis in History

A Childhood REMINISCENCE AND CRITIQUE of REBECCA WEST AT WORK

By Norman Macleod, her nephew. September 2003



REDEFINING WEST'S IMPORTANCE

In spite of her highly visible role as critic, novelist, biographer, and journalist, Rebecca West has too quickly faded from cultural memory. When I gave a talk in the history department at Georgetown some years ago, a colleague asked me what I was working on and when I mentioned West, he began to say how much he liked her work. After a minute or so I realized he was talking about Vita Sackville-West. It is not unusual, however, for even great writers to suffer an eclipse after their deaths and then to be rediscovered. This is certainly the fate I would wish for Rebecca West for the reasons Ann Norton has already enumerated.

It is also my hope that through this newsletter and the activities of our Society we can reclaim attention for Rebecca West's essays, hundreds of which have never been reprinted and deserve to be preserved in a multi-volume collected edition. In terms of her range and depth, she far outranks contemporaries such as Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, John Updike, and Susan Sontag. Journalists like Pete Hamill seem to know this better than academics who narrowly define a writer's canon in terms of great novels. If we think of West as having created a body of literature in the essay form, much of which first appeared in newspapers, we will begin not only to redefine her importance to twentieth century writing: we will also, I contend, challenge what a literary oeuvre should look like.

— *President Carl Rollyson*

One fine morning in mid-August 1939, my father and I were returning from a delightful swim in the open-air baths of the Swiss holiday resort of Chateau d'Oeux. A French newspaper placard caught my eye. Even with my 13-year-old's comprehension of French and current affairs, I recognized the importance of its message, to which I then drew my father's attention. This was our first intimation of the signing of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact. On our return to our hotel, my father and mother decided that war was inevitable and imminent. We accordingly broke off our Swiss holiday forthwith and returned to England on the following day.

On arrival at Dover, my parents made for our home in London.

I, however, was put on a train bound for rural Sussex, where my uncle and aunt, Rebecca West, had been alerted by telegram to expect my arrival at Possingworth Manor, the country house they had rented for the season. Here, it was assumed, I would be sufficiently far away from London to escape the aerial bombardment of the Capital, which everyone anticipated would follow immediately on the outbreak of war. At the start of the school term, I was to enroll in a country boarding school; but meanwhile, I enjoyed the hospitality of my aunt and uncle in the depths of Sussex.

Possingworth Manor was an ideal place to sit out the preliminaries and opening phases of a war. The autumn of 1939 was particularly fine and sunny, my aunt and uncle were unfailingly hospitable and concerned for my welfare, the house and grounds were attractive and comfortable. I was in daily contact by telephone with my mother and father; and my anxiety about their location in London was soon allayed by their removal to Bath with my father's Department of the Admiralty. My only serious frustration was my separation from the experimental chemical laboratory that I had set up a year or so before in a room in our London house. The study of chemistry and the making of chemical experiments were my passions. Now, in Possingworth, I could satisfy these interests only by the study of the few chemical text books I had brought from home with obsessive zeal via the Swiss holiday.

These boyhood preoccupations did not blind me to those of my aunt Rebecca. In those last days of August, she threw her extraordinary energies and organizing talent into preparing for the siege which we expected to descend upon us immediately on the outbreak of the war. Fruit was to be bottled or made into jam on a semi-industrial scale; stores of all kinds

had to be procured and laid in – an action which in those days seemed simply prudent, even praiseworthy, not yet vilified as hoarding; and, most urgently of all, every window in that substantial house had to be blacked out, made sufficiently light-tight to render the house invisible at night to passing German bombers; a requirement involving prodigious labour in the running up of special heavy curtains and the construction of timber frames and screens.

I was well aware also that amid these preparations for war, Rebecca was putting the finishing touches to the work in which she sought to explain how all this had come about, why the coming war in Europe had to be fought.

Black Lamb and Grey Falcon had long been in preparation; intensive work, aided by my uncle and a secretary would bring it to publication little more than a year later. Meanwhile, snippets of it would surface for discussion, whenever the household was gathered together, particularly at mealtimes. I was considered quite grown up enough to contribute to such discussions. Not surprisingly, I cannot recall making any significant contribution whatever.

And yet, how well I might, I might! Not indeed in relation to the tangled intricacies of Balkan history or politics; but concerning the failed suicide attempt of Gavrilo Princip, the Sarajevo assassin.

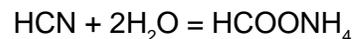
Rebecca West's account of the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand in 1914, and of the events leading up to that momentous killing, represent a sublime achievement of narrative art, well worthy of separate publication outside the Bosnia section of the formidable body of *Black Lamb*. We learn that after murdering the Archduke, Princip quaffed the prussic acid supplied to him by the spymaster Apis for the purpose of evading capture and its dreadful consequences.

The suicidal draught had no effect. His subsequent attempt to shoot himself was foiled by a well-meaning bystander, who snatched the gun from his hand. Princip was consequently arrested and brutally tortured; too young for the death penalty, he was then sentenced to languish in a fortress prison, where he died of his unattended injuries. Rebecca draws a curious inference from the failure of the poison draught – ineffective also in the case of Princip's fellow activist, Chebichev. It shows, she concludes, that Apis, their instructor, never took seriously the professed assassination plans of these youths who were, indeed, little more than schoolboys. He therefore supplied them with phials containing plain

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water or “something equally innocuous.” She dismisses the alternative “that the poison had somehow gone bad... prussic acid is not subject to that misfortune.”

“Oh, but auntie, indeed it is,” would have piped up the 13-year old chemist if only the matter had come up over the pudding course at Possingworth. With the morbid enthusiasm of the schoolboy in such matters, my knowledge of chemistry was directed particularly to the chemistry of poisons. I knew that prussic acid, commonly so called, is a solution of hydrocyanic acid in water; and that this in time hydrolyses to harmless ammonium formate:



Even without such chemical knowledge, it would strain the rational belief of a 13-year old that Apis, the code-named arch manipulator of these wretched young activists, would have wished their draught, taken in extremis, to be innocuous. For in setting them on, he must have contemplated the only two circumstances in which they would drink the poison; success in the assassination, or a bungled attempt leading to self-incrimination and arrest. In either case, if left alive in captivity, they would be likely to betray their paymaster under torture. This is indeed what happened; Apis was caught and executed a year or so later.

It is extraordinary that Rebecca West, whose continuing fascination with spymasters and their ways prompted her to devote whole books to them a few years later, should have shown so little insight into the mind of Apis. I never drew her attention to this oddity, even after I had legitimated my boyhood passion by making chemistry the foundation of an academic career. Perhaps as an academic I would have been embarrassed to reprove her for failing to check her facts. This failure was founded upon mere ignorance of chemistry and failure to take chemical advice. What would have troubled me more, and puzzles me still, is the apparent, and uncharacteristic, defect of insight; the supposition that a spymaster could wittingly deny to his creatures their ultimate means of silence.

—Dr. Norman Macleod

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL REBECCA WEST SOCIETY CONFERENCE

Rediscovering Rebecca West—The first International Rebecca West Society Conference—was a great success, full of excitement and enthusiasm for this new and deserving venture. An unexpected strike at Long Island University sent West Society founder Bernard Schweizer scrambling to find an alternative site, but the Mercantile Library, near the bustling diamond district in midtown Manhattan, proved perfect. West scholars came from America, Britain, Ireland, Italy, and Mexico to enjoy good conversation and good food, as well as panels that covered myriad aspects of West's long career.

It began with a stellar keynote address by Jane Marcus, the seminal feminist critic who worked with West to publish *The Young Rebecca*, and whose status as groundbreaking scholar and academic "mother" beautifully fit the occasion. The political panel that followed afterwards was highly stimulating, confirming once again the quick-silvery quality of West's ideology. Bernard Schweizer characterized it once like this: "Never willing to toe any specific party line, West often stepped on the toes of her political opponents in almost every camp." Indeed, each panel—whether on music, gender, archival documents, or philosophy—confirmed Schweizer's point, and inspired lively discussions.

Anne Bobby's Saturday evening performance of Carl Rollyson's *Rebecca West: A Saga of the Century* was

a remarkable tour-de-force, a bravura performance that will be long remembered. The setting (she was standing right in front of the bookshelves) was perfect. It was a magic moment, enhanced by the wine and hors d'oeuvres we enjoyed first. We heard, as if straight from a fiery, living West, her youthful



socialist liberal ideas, her tortured early desire for H.G. Wells, and her disgust for the rock where black lambs were sacrificed: "This stone, the knife, the filth, the blood, is what many people desire beyond anything else. . ." Anne's dark beauty and intelligent, passionate reading made our spines prickle in recognition: this was the breathing, thinking woman. We are grateful to Anne and Helen Macleod for adapting and producing Carl's superb collation of West words.

The teaching panel next morning contradicted conventional wisdom about conferences: practically EVERYBODY showed up for it at 9:00 a.m.! We arranged ourselves in a circle, and one could feel the germination of a real sense of community there. Bonnie Kime Scott gave a witty and informed introduction, and the participants did not hold back with comments and reminiscences about their own experiences teaching West, especially "Indissoluble Matrimony," which was disliked by students for its apparent "male-bashing" and unbalanced emotionality. Other students felt it was uneasily situated between tragedy and grotesque. At one point, Marion Macleod delivered a wonderful anecdote, in which she reminisced that Rebecca always complained about H.G. Wells slashing the air with his arm as he shook his writing utensil, because he usually had a "leaky pen." (Well, that's one way of putting it.) Thus we learned that Rebecca's famous affair included, not so famously, constant cushion cleaning.

The publisher's panel that ended the conference was incredibly interesting, and posed a real challenge to West "missionaries." Jean Casella from the Feminist Press remarked that constituencies far more militant than the tame Rebecca West group had badgered her relentlessly to publish their favorite authors, implying that we may feel free to step up the effort. Edwin Frank from NYRB Classics said that issuing the Aubrey trilogy as one volume (Bernard's perennial pet project) is out of the question, both financially and practically, since they already issued *The Fountain Overflows* separately. (*Fountain* is selling far above expectations mainly because it was briefly mentioned in the *Oprah Magazine*, as the one novel Jay Leno's wife recommends!) He also suggested that publishing West would be easier if we could only agree on the ONE central text that each one of us would teach and



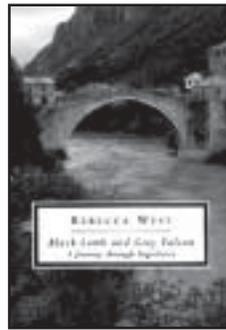
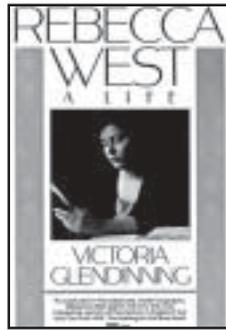
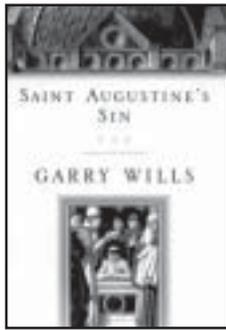
that would be required reading for students. (Any suggestions?) John Kulka from Yale insinuated that there “might be room for a West anthology if it were done exactly right.” Carl Rollyson then made the visionary proposal that we could self-publish a certain number of copies of, say, *The Birds Fall Down*, to satisfy the teaching demands of a specified number of West scholars. Once the teaching can be shown to “move” a certain number of copies regularly, a trade publisher might be willing put the book on their list. From Dennis Drabelle (*Washington Post*) we learned that re-issued books are almost never reviewed, while new publications are, such as *The Sentinel* and *Survivors in Mexico*.

Finally, we were thrilled to have in attendance several members of West’s family: her niece Mrs. Alison Selford, her nephew Dr. Norman Macleod, his wife Marion, and their daughter Helen Atkinson. Each contributed fascinating stories (see Norman’s essay in this newsletter). West’s last secretary, the novelist Diana Stainforth, discussed the particulars of working for “Dame Rebecca,” and stressed what Alison Selford had said earlier: “Rebecca was a worker” whose energy and discipline helped her to

produce an enormous body of writing. Generous, warm, demanding, she remained in her old age “interested in everything.” She loved to “go through the shops,” Diana said, and was convinced that her secretary—who wanted to work part time in order to write—must be having an affair with a married man on her days off! West’s friend Kit Wright, who had hosted her in Mexico and Connecticut, was also at the conference.

From all these friends and family members, scholars and readers, we sensed real affection for the woman and artist Rebecca West. If at times it was mixed with disagreement—how could it be otherwise with Dame Rebecca?—nevertheless respect and admiration always won out. We anticipate our next conference with pleasure, and hope to see new members among the originals who made this first so fine.

—Bernard Schweizer and Ann Norton



Visible: A Memoir of War (Knopf, 2003); *The Unexpurgated Beaton: The Cecil Beaton Diaries as He Wrote Them, 1970-1980* (Knopf, 2003); and *A Personal Biography of William Joyce, "Lord Haw-Haw,"* by Mary Kenny (New Island, 2003).
 Jeremy B. Shea, in an August 20, 2003, St. Louis Post-Dispatch

IN-PRINT WATCH

Many major newspapers and journals this year have published favorable reviews of *Survivors in Mexico*. One particularly notable article appears in the November 17 issue of *The New Republic*, by Mexican historian Enrique Krauze, editor of *Letras Libres*. Krauze compares West's and Lawrence's ideas about Mexico at length, and calls *Survivors* "one of the most original and intelligent attempts at comprehension" of Mexican history and society. Krauze also commends Schweizer for a "commendable, painstaking, and timely edition." Jack Coughlin's drawing of an elderly West accompanies the article.

The Sentinel, discovered and prepared for publication by Kathryn Laing, has also garnered tremendous interest. Look for reviews in *the Times Literary Supplement*, the *Financial Times*, and particularly Gillian Glover's article in *The Scotsman*, January 24, 2003, which ran it as a cover story. Glover quotes West's 1907 letter to *The Scotsman*, in which she excoriates another letter writer for opposing the NWSPU, and for not realizing "the profound national effects of the subjection of women on the nation." Noting that with this letter West "broke into print for the first time," Glover wryly remarks that "*The Scotsman* does not receive quite such forceful letters from George Watson pupils today."

Victoria Glendinning's biography *Rebecca West: A Life* is now available as an audio-book, narrated by Donada Peters. To order, go to www.audio-book.ws/books/rebecca-west-life.php. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, also narrated by Donada Peters, is available from the same company.

For a great caricature of West in old age, see the David Levine drawing that accompanies Rosemary Dinnage's article "Staying the Course" in *The New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1982.

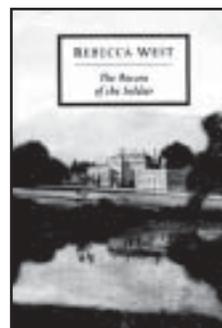
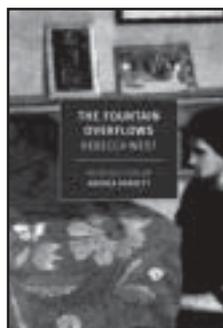
There were several mentions of West in reviews of recent books: Gary Wills' *Saint Augustine's Sin* (Viking, 2003); Janine di Giovanni's *Madness*

article that summarizes recent books about spies, mentions that Allan Furst's *The Book of Spies* includes West among its "superb writers [with] authentic credentials," and calls West a "legend."

West was quoted in several obituaries for Lord Hartley Shawcross, a Nuremberg prosecutor who died July 10, 2003. She wrote that his final address was "full of living pity, which gave the men in the box their worst hour."

Liz Smith began her gossip column in the June 4, 2003 edition of *New York Newsday* with a West quote: "The world loves a liar. There is a kind of sanctity about a lie. If a man says of another that he is guilty of meanness, dishonesty, sexual depravity or cruelty, even of murder, it does not matter how worthless the accuser may be, the accusation will joyfully be believed by a large number of people, provided it be false." Smith goes on to say that though West is one of her "literary heroes," she "part[s] company with her here" because [p]eople are not as stupid as Miss West would show them to be."

Natalie Angier's article "Are Women Necessary?" in the November 11, 2003 edition of the *New York Times* explains recent experiments with stem cells that could allow for all-male reproduction. Near the end, Angier writes, "Given such recent and imminent developments, Rebecca West, journalist, novelist, and companion of H.G. 'Doomsday' Wells, was eerily prescient in her observation that motherhood is 'like being one's own Trojan horse.'"



WEST WORDS

The Newsletter of the International Rebecca West Society

Volume 1 Fall 2003

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WEST SOCIETY LAUNCHES NEWSLETTER

So it is with great excitement that we launch this first newsletter of the International Rebecca West Society, following the fabulous inaugural conference in New York City. We are honored to serve as President and Vice President among such distinguished West scholars, and with the help and blessing of West's family. We ask you, Society members, to contribute in any way you can: by sending us news items, teaching points, evidence of scholarship—anything and everything that will further our mission. Welcome, and thank you.

— Pres. Carl Rollyson and V. P. Ann Norton

NOTES AND QUERIES

Ann Norton seeks any information West Society members or others may have about the editorial process involved in publishing West's posthumous novels *This Real Night* and *Cousin Rosamund*. anorton@anselm.edu

Here are a few of the goodies in the West Collection at the McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa:

A play in outline called "Jocasta."

Several articles West wrote for women's magazines, in handwritten and typed manuscripts as well as copies from the magazines themselves .

Several typed manuscripts of West's *New York American* column, "I Said to Me."

The typed script from the BBC production of *The Birds Fall Down*.

An unfinished story called "The Heiress." At the end of this handwritten manuscript Diana Stainforth notes, "To the best of my knowledge the last story [West] began."

Some passages in handwritten notebooks and typed manuscripts cut from *This Real Night*, including the Cordelia chapter (discussed at the West conference); a scene in which the Aubreys go to a London teashop following one of Rose's concerts; a discussion of Rose's two piano teachers, a man and a woman; the mention of Rose's potential lover "Eric"; and Rose, Mary, and Cordelia dressing, traveling to, and attending a party at Lady Tredinnick's, in which Mary publicly fails in a complicated dance called "The Lancers."

Please contact Ann Norton with notes or queries for future newsletters.

Bibliographic Update

At the conference, participants could browse through recent books by West, about West, or that included chapters on West. Here's what was available.

Survivors in Mexico

By Rebecca West. Ed. Bernard Schweizer. Yale, 2003.

The Sentinel

By Rebecca West. Ed. Kathryn Laing. Legenda, 2002.

Rebecca West: Heroism, Rebellion, and the Female Epic

By Bernard Schweizer. Greenwood, 2002.

Remapping the Home Front: Locating Citizenship in British Women's War Fiction

By Debra Rae Cohen. Northeastern UP, 2002.

Radicals on the Road: English Travel Writing in the 1930s

By Bernard Schweizer. University of Virginia Press, 2001.

British Women's Comic Fiction 1890-1990: Not Drowning But Laughing

By Margaret D. Stetz. Ashgate, 2001.

Selected Letters of Rebecca West

Ed. Bonnie Kime Scott. Yale, 2000.

Paradoxical Feminism: The Novels of Rebecca West

By Ann V. Norton. International Scholars Publications, 2000.

Rebecca West: A Life

By Carl Rollyson. Scribner, 1996.

Refiguring Modernism, Volume One: The Women of 1928. Volume Two: Postmodern Feminist Readings of Woolf, West, and Barnes

By Bonnie Kime Scott. Indiana UP, 1995.

Recent works by West Society members:

"Stepping Westward," an article about the West conference. By Dennis Drabelle. In *The Washington Post*, October 12, 2003. His review of *The Sentinel* appears in the same edition.

"Immortal Goodness: Ideas of Resurrection in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*." By Marina MacKay. In *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, Spring 2002.

"Dystopian Modernism versus Utopian Feminism: Burdekin, Woolf, and West Respond to the Rise of Fascism." By Loretta Stec. In *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictators' Seduction*. Ed. Merry M. Pawlowski. Palgrave, 2001.

"Her Own Lambs and Falcons." Review of *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*. By Georgette Fleischer. In *The Nation*, April 24, 2000.

"Writing Around Modernism: May Sinclair and Rebecca West." By Lyn Pykett. In *Outside Modernism: in Pursuit of the English Novel 1900-30*. Edited and introduced by Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton. Macmillan, 2000.

Other recent works:

"Unfinished Business and Self-Memorialization: Rebecca West's Aborted Novel *Mild Silver, Furious Gold*." By Lynette Felber. In *Journal of Modern Literature*, Winter 2001-2002.

Perspectives of Four Women Writers on the Second World War: Gertrude Stein, Janet Flanner, Kay Boyle, and Rebecca West. By Zofia Lesinska. Peter Lang, 2002.

"Oedipus and the Modern Aesthetic: Reconceiving the Social in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*." By Susan Varney. In *Naming the Father: Legacies, Genealogies, and Explorations of Fatherhood in Modern and Contemporary Literature*. Ed. Eva Paulino Bueno, Terry Caesar, and William Hummel. Lexington, 2000.

"Travel Writing as Autobiography: Rebecca West's Journey of Self-Discovery." By Vesna Goldworthy. In *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/Biography*. Ed. Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey. Macmillan, 2000.

The MLA bibliography lists nine dissertations since 1997 that include studies of Rebecca West.