

The Welshness of Goronwy Rees

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Mr President, Mr Chairman, officers and members of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, ladies and gentlemen: it is a very great pleasure to be with you here this evening to talk about my father, my infamous father. I know that he, too, would have been very touched by this invitation from his fellow countrymen – he would, of course, have been far more entertaining for you to listen to. And he could have done it in Welsh.

There may well be those among you here tonight who knew him or encountered him somewhere on his eventful journey through life and will have formed your own impressions of him, which won't be quite like my own. It is impossible, though I have tried often enough, for me to be dispassionate and objective about him. In fact, just thinking about him, as I have done so many times since his death over thirty years ago, still very often can reduce me to tears. How could a man so generously endowed with gifts, so intellectually brilliant, handsome, charming, and witty, have contrived to make such an apparent mess of things? It is something of a puzzle, and although much has come out since his death, we may probably never know the full truth of the matter.

Recently, I have taken to thinking of my father's life in terms of that television game show, in which the panel is shown around someone's house and asked to guess who lives there. 'What kind of a person lives in a house like this?' is the big question. In Rees's case, it would have to be something like, 'What kind of person would make a life like this?' In an interview he gave towards the end, he concluded that he did seem to have the propensity for leaving chaos in his wake; too many things were started and too many things left unfinished. And, at times, looking at his life, it is rather as if he had been a dangerous unguided missile, going who knows where, direction unknown.

One thinks of the rather similar trajectory of the hugely brilliant architect, Frank Lloyd-Wright, thousands of miles away among the chapels and farms of the Valley of the God-Almighty Joneses in rural Wisconsin, who was from very much the same kind of background. Among the many catastrophes to which he was prone, he managed to burn his house down. We, fortunately, were saved from that, but it was a close-run thing. He used to say that one should always remember that if you choose to leave the well-trodden path and take one of the smaller turnings, you are taking a risk and may well find yourself lost in the middle of a dark forest.

So, the Welshness of Goronwy Rees? I am not suggesting, of course, that creating chaos is a speciality of Welshmen. But I do suggest that his Welshness formed him and made him the man that he was; it mattered very much to him and it matters to this story. For in his deep, deep roots and in his attitude towards his childhood and his upbringing lie the major clues to help solve the conundrum of what happened to him and why. I offer a few candles to light the way; nothing scholarly or scientific, but they may help to clear away some of the clouds of mist that hang over his name.

Morgan Goronwy Rees, born November 29, 1909, North Road, Aberystwyth. When asked where he came from, later in life, he was always to say Cardiganshire. He was christened Morgan, after his father's brother, a doctor, who died in Thiepval on the Somme, and Goronwy, after the eighteenth-century poet Goronwy Owen. He used to tell me that Goronwy meant a spring of sparkling water.

Who could have chosen a better name for him?

His family called him Gony; he was known to his friends later on as Goronwy, and to my mother, Rees. He was a child of the manse: the youngest of four children of the Reverend R. J. Rees, an eminent and respected Calvinist Methodist minister, and his wife, Apphia, nee James. There were two older daughters, Enid and Muriel, then Geraint, who was two-and-a-half years older than little Gony. They were very fortunate children, born into the top drawer, so to speak, of society in what Rees called the 'priest-and-professor-ridden' little town; a stranger I met once at a party told me the Reeses were considered aristocracy.

Little Gony was brought up in a house full of books, words, and powerful imagery. His father was loving but strict, and his mother was tender-hearted and charitable – she dispensed food and whatever comfort she could from her back door to the poor and the hungry. Things have changed greatly since the days of Edwardian Aberystwyth; then, as well as having the University College and the National Library of Wales, the town had some forty or so chapels and churches, of which RJ's Tabernacle, with seating for a thousand, was the largest and most prosperous, I am told, in Wales. Rees writes about passing a Salem, a Shiloh, a Tabernacle, a Bethel and a Moriah on his way to school and as a result always thought of Israel as a Welsh-speaking Nonconformist country.

He was, naturally, well-versed in the Old Testament – much of it he had learned off by heart – and from this, I think, came his close affinity with Jewish people. They spoke, as it were, the same language. He used to say that he felt that he – and the Welsh – belonged to one of the lost tribes of Israel. It was a Welsh-speaking household, of course. My father used to tell me that he didn't really speak English with any ease until he was eleven, when the family moved to Cardiff and he went to the grammar school.

I remember being rooted to the spot when, as a child, I first heard my father speaking Welsh, arguing with his brother. He seemed a totally different person. But people who came to our house often asked me what country my father came from as he seemed so obviously different and foreign – and that was when he was speaking English!

Life in Aberystwyth was, of course, dominated by the chapel; life revolved around the chapel. Little Gony and his siblings had to go twice on Sunday, sometimes three times, and there were numerous other meetings and events during the week. From Rees's charming portrait of his early years in Aberystwyth, we learn that, because of RJ's stature in the scheme of things in the little town, the Rees children were expected to practise their religious observances more strictly than other children. They had to be good, they had to be exemplary. Right and wrong, good and bad; this was the stuff of their daily lives.

Some of what little Gony saw and heard in Tabernacle scared him stiff. My father, as a small, highly sensitive child, had, on Sundays, to watch his normally

affectionate, if strict, father transformed into another being altogether. The father they loved during the week on Sundays towered over the children, 'high in the pulpit, a huge black figure, angry and eloquent, its arms outstretched, like the wings of a great bird, preaching endlessly on the tremendous themes of sin, grace, redemption and eternal punishment'. Things could get very dramatic – some of RJ's flock ripped their garments and beat their breasts to renounce their sins. And then there was *hwyl*. Little Gony found it terrifying.

He remembered, 'One saw before one's eyes a man, whom one had taken to be a man, quite suddenly transformed into a kind of witchdoctor, demoniac and possessed. It was as if, without any warning, he had gone off his head [...] Whatever form it took the *hwyl* inspired fear and terror in me and a kind of shuddering, shrinking from such a bare-faced, bare-breasted display of real or simulated emotion. And also a kind of alarm, because my father could also become, whenever he chose, a victim of this kind of possession. I resented it because in my heart I felt him to be a great man, too good for this kind of thing.' Were these, perhaps, the first stirrings of the rebel spirit in the son of the manse?

Rees's first volume of memoirs, *A Bundle of Sensations*, was written a few years before RJ's death in 1963, and on the whole he wrote lyrically of his childhood, a time of intense happiness.¹ He was adored and spoiled by his mother, who had lost three of her seven children, and little Gony was her cherished baby of the family. Geraint used to say it wasn't fair; he was clever, too, he went to Cambridge (and was later appointed a judge).

Rees wrote that these years had all the warmth and security of the womb, but that there was also the 'intoxicating, physical presence of the green waves and waters of Cardigan Bay, the grey stones of the little town huddled between the sea and the hills and the streams that poured down in silvery waterfalls to form the estuary on which the harbour was built'. For Rees, as a child, it was a kind of Paradise, and he and Geraint could, on Saturdays, wander to their hearts content like Tom Sawyer, with billy cans and haversacks, to clamber over rocks, swim in the sea, and boil up tea over a fire made of driftwood.

This childhood, I believe, perfectly formed him. He emerged, at eleven, when he and his family moved to Cardiff, complete, as it were, fully-equipped to deal with what lay ahead. He was already highly romantic; the childhood in the chapel had given him his writing style (like verses of psalms, as my sister says) and he never, as long as I knew him, seemed to despair in the face of adversity. He felt somehow protected. Rees himself describes the precocious intellectual training he received at home, which left a much deeper mark on him than anything learned at school. All the discipline of the intense theological instruction and use of language was to stay with him for life. He was always to be highly argumentative.

He writes: 'Our house was the scene of endless debate [...] in which we all, including my father, who was the oldest and most reasonable, and myself, the youngest and most violent, took part on terms of equality. Like a French revolutionary assembly, we were in permanent session, and we never adjourned;

1 Goronwy Rees, *A Bundle of Sensations: Sketches in Autobiography* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960).

to the most ordinary and trivial affairs of daily life were applied the pedantry and acrimoniousness of textual scholars.’

Rees was combative and agile in argument, perverse and provocative. There was nothing, it often seemed to me, that he liked better than a good fight. He was particularly vehement with those who, he felt, ought to know better. In the Sixties and Seventies, it was to be the progressives who took the brunt of his attacks: ‘What the permissive society chiefly permits,’ he wrote, ‘is an unlimited liberty to talk nonsense.’

But those years in Paradise came to an end when Rees was eleven: from then on, as he says himself, he was an exile. He was an exile wherever he went; always an outsider looking in. Critics have suggested that Oxford turned him into a sort of pretend Englishman, but he was never to be that. About Oxford he always said that he might just as well have been in Timbuctoo – he was in a foreign land.

This sense of exile that he was to carry with him forever had as much to do with leaving Aberystwyth as his romantic longing for the enchanted place where he felt his real roots were – the green valley near Bow Street, just outside of Aberystwyth, where generations of his family, on both sides, had been farmers. His mother, Apphia, who died tragically early when Rees was at Oxford, came from a little farm called Tynrhos, and his father’s family were tenant farmers on land owned by the Pryses of Gogerddan on the opposite side of the valley. Rees had a passionate attachment to the idea that this was where his roots were; this was his *tierra*, his earth, as the Spanish say. I remember, visiting Wales for the first time as a child, my father pointing out of the car window as we crossed over the border and began to see the Welsh landscape. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘Look at the little farm on the hillside there, and the sheep and the cattle. That’s *twt*, that is.’

I think it was always there in his head, his Arcadia, his sunlit uplands. As a child he was told that the shape of his head showed that he was of the purest Celto-Iberian stock. He wrote: ‘So pure a descent almost makes one an exile anywhere outside of an area about twenty miles square which is almost uninhabited except for one’s own relatives.’ And that was where he came from.

Apphia was inordinately proud of her youngest son. He and his sister, Muriel, were already the intellectuals, the dreamers; Enid and Geraint were blessed with common sense and had their feet more firmly on the ground. But relatives were to say later that there were many indications that Rees had felt thwarted by the demands made on him by his parents – the admonitions to be good, the chastisement and the punishment, the constant reference to good and evil. All this could be very oppressive to a sensitive and imaginative child, longing for some kind of release from having to conform to so many expectations. And through his father he knew that there was a wider world outside, with more freedom.

For RJ had been raised in London, where his Welsh-speaking parents – from the Arcadian green valley – had a little dairy in the East End, at a time when Welsh dairies were very much part of London life. There, according to my father, exactly as they might have done on a farm in Bow Street, they preserved, in ‘almost artificial purity’, the customs and manners, the religious observances, and above all the language of the remote Cardiganshire hills from where they both came. They grazed their cows on Hackney Marshes and had simply replanted their rural roots.

RJ went to the City of London School, but at sixteen had been called by God – in Welsh. He entered the Calvinist Methodist Church, after getting a First in Theology at Mansfield College, Oxford, one of the first Nonconformists to do so.

By the time the Rees family packed up and left for Cardiff, my father was, by all accounts, Wordsworth's 'child as father of the man'. And however thwarted he felt, Calvinism was, in its mysterious way, to protect him for the rest of life. It is not a comforting religion, he wrote, but it has for the elect the knowledge that he can never fall from God's grace, whatever their sins. 'All my childhood, I had the comforting confidence that, as my father's child, I could not fail to be among the elect. It was as if I had been put down from birth as a member of my father's club,' he explained. Inevitably, quite a few of those rules he was going to break, but in many, many ways he remained a good member of the club.

He rarely talked about religion, but I never, ever heard him put forward the fashionable proposition that it was absurd for modern rational man to believe in God. Indeed, he used to say that to deny the existence of God would be to cut oneself off from another world of thought, understanding, and inspiration, and in doing so one's life would be profoundly impoverished. Like Pascal's Wager, even if the existence of God cannot be proved, you would come off much better making the bet that He does exist because you might well find yourself the winner. Rees used to say he was sorry for his friend, Freddie Ayer, so much the public atheist, because he refused to admit this dimension into his life and thought.

I never, ever heard my father swear or blaspheme. 'Damn' was about as far as he would go. And he was as neat as a pin, like his father and his brother, Geraint. I never saw him unshaven. He would emerge from the bathroom in the morning looking like a cat that had just finishing washing itself, with sleek coat and spruced whiskers, ready for another new day. I spent my childhood among poets and intellectuals, my father's friends, and many of them were wispy, with wild hair and untidy attire, as if they had been too busy with their ideas to take care of their appearance. My father, in contrast, seemed one of a piece, tip-top mind, tip-top appearance. He had very few material possessions, he travelled light; all he needed were his books, which moved about with us wherever we went, and one good suit. Everything else was in his head.

Things were never to be the same again for my father once they moved to Cardiff. It was traumatic; he had been cast out of Paradise. Among Cardiff's dull, grey, city streets he felt unhappiness for the first time. There were no more green valleys; the countryside was scarred by industry. The boys at the grammar school laughed at his country accent. And his father, so central a figure in Aberystwyth, spent less and less time at home as he had been charged to lead the church's English-speaking Forward Movement, to bring God to the thousands of men who had come with their families from England and Scotland to work in the mines. They were turning to socialism rather than God and were more interested in drinking and fighting than going to chapel.

My father began to suffer from the depressions that were to dog him for the rest of his life. But at school, after a slow start, he worked and worked; he wrote poetry. At fifteen, he decided he wanted to be a writer, and would do it in English. This happened almost by accident, he wrote. His Welsh master, himself a Welsh

poet, told him that if he wrote in Welsh he could make a name for himself as the field would be small and amateur, but if he chose to write in English then he would be up against a stiff competition and he might not survive. This annoyed Rees – he did not want to take the easy road. He explained, ‘It was all the less attractive in the mouth of a patriotic Welshman [...] I have no doubt that, in a sense, and without knowing it, I turned my back upon Wales at that moment.’

He was, by all accounts, a brilliant scholar and he won two scholarships to New College, Oxford. And when, during the Christmas holidays of 1927, when he was seventeen, he went to Oxford to sit the exam, it was only the second time he had ever been out of Wales. The other occasion was when he went to play rugby in Gloucester. I think I can safely say that the young man who went up to Oxford in October 1928 was a very young, naive nineteen-year-old. He had lived a sheltered existence and had rarely been away from home. Oxford came as a shock.

The most exciting thing that happened to him in Cardiff was the General Strike of 1926 when he, forming his youthful ideas about politics, had taken against the *Brideshead Revisited*-type undergraduates from Oxford and Cambridge, in their sports jackets and flannel ‘bags’, shipped down to South Wales to help maintain the public services. They – ‘oafish and arrogant’ – were the enemy.

As I said earlier, New College might just as well have been Timbuctoo. Of course, later he was able to write, most elegantly, about this time with the benefit of hindsight, but he had arrived in a foreign country, with a totally different culture. He was an outsider – and he always remained an outsider, observing, working things out, writing. The public schoolboys who surrounded him were not particularly any more adult or mature, but they had been prepared for Oxford by another kind of education and background; they were used to communal life among courtyards and quadrangles. They had been away from home before; they knew each other. Rees knew absolutely no-one.

I was lucky to have been able to talk to Sir Patrick Reilly, later an ambassador to Moscow, about Rees’s time at New College. He said he had sat next to my father at dinner in hall on their very first night. He said, ‘It struck me straightaway that the English he was speaking was not his mother tongue. But his conversation was scintillating; he was very good company. When I think of him now he always has that delightful smile. He was so different from the rest of us.’ His contemporaries remembered the Byronic black curls, his charm and his intelligence. He was regarded as an exotic.

And so, with one bound, my father had made himself free; he was off the lead. For the first time in his life he was financially independent. He started to smoke. He started to drink, and he continued to drink a lot all his life. He wore white socks and I believe started something of a new vogue when he wore a soft-collared shirt with a dinner jacket. He played bridge and he played rugby and he made a lot of friends. He became infatuated with all things German. He enjoyed himself; he was a social success. He was a big success with women, at first with high-minded Oxford girls and later, as we know, with his two lady novelists. He used to say Oxford had been bad for him; many said it ruined him.

Emyr Humphreys suggested to me that Rees must have suffered from a great sense of dislocation. He would have had to make a choice between two cultures,

which is a difficult thing to do. Emyr told me: 'You can be one of two things all the time, Welsh or English. It has been a dilemma for us since the Tudors. It can be painful.' Rees himself wrote about having to change colours like a chameleon to fit in with his new surroundings. But many years later, writing about Auden and Isherwood, he said he didn't see himself as a conspirator, like them. He observed, 'You can only conspire against a society of which one is a member. And I was not.'

New College, as we know, produced socialists – many of Rees's contemporaries went on to become leading members of later Labour governments. But they weren't his kind of socialist, he said, they were too dull, earnest, and worthy. Richard Crossman and his like didn't fit in with his youthful Utopian dreams of revolution. His kind of socialism, he said, was based on his admiration for the South Wales miners and somehow connected with pictures in the illustrated texts of the Bible of his childhood.

But I venture to say here that my father was not really very political at all and there are those who agree with me. It very often seemed to me, growing up, that mischief was much more his line. I would see him deliberately and provocatively take the opposite point of view to that proposed by anyone engaged in an argument with him. He liked to turn things upside down, or back to front. And he liked to win.

He ended his undergraduate years at New College with a first in Modern Greats, but there was little time to celebrate, for in the summer of 1931, his beloved mother, Apphia, died. This cast a great shadow over his life. 'It was the single worst thing that had happened to me,' he wrote. It left him dazed and bewildered and he felt as if her death had taken away from him the power to make any rational decisions. There were to be other instances where he found himself in this powerless state of mind. There were to be times when, as my brother puts it, he 'couldn't quite find in himself what was needed to solve a crisis or a problem'.

For smaller disasters, I used to hear him turn to Mr Micwaber and say, 'Oh, well, something will turn up.' And this time it did. Aimlessly, because he didn't know what to do, he returned to Oxford to take up the offer of a senior scholarship for a further year at New College. One day, he bumped into his history tutor in the street who suggested he try the Fellowship examination for All Souls. This was the most glittering prize that Oxford had to offer in those days. So, Rees became the first Welsh prize Fellow of the college – and the boys at Cardiff High School were given a half holiday to celebrate. And when, in the following year (1932), his first novel, *The Summer Flood*, was published, it looked as if, for Rees, there were to be no obstacles in his way. His star was set.

After all this success and acclaim how could anything come along to spoil his achievements? But, alas, he was somehow to do this for himself. *The Summer Flood* horrified his family and relatives. It is pretty autobiographical: a sensitive young undergraduate returns home from Oxford to spend his summer vacation with his family in Cardiganshire and falls in love with his cousin. However, not only were members of the family easily identifiable, such as a stuffy aunt and Geraint, but they really did not enjoy seeing all the details of his physical yearning for his cousin laid out for all to see. They didn't want to hear any nonsense about Karl Marx either. The novel was emotional and angry and even included a section

about a homosexual affair.

The publication of the novel caused immense hurt and upset, not to mention embarrassment, to a family still in grief after the death of Apphia. I am not sure that my father was ever forgiven for this and from this point onwards, although there are letters from Rees to his father, the distance between them just grew and grew and he hardly returned home to Cardiff at all.

But very soon, Rees was in Germany – his German was good – supposedly to undertake research for a book on Ferdinand Lasalle, the nineteenth-century German political activist, but somehow that never got done. Freddie Ayer went to Vienna and, going to the cinema one evening, saw Rees in a German feature film, playing a Scottish soldier in a kilt.

When he returned to Oxford, friends remembered that he was totally preoccupied with Hitler. He had watched with horror and alarm the developments that followed Hitler's coming to power as Chancellor, he had seen for himself the persecution of the Jews. They said he was restless, excitable, moody, and angry, and some thought they detected signs of instability. Some remarked he was 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'.

Rees was twenty-four when, on a visit back to Oxford, he first met Guy Burgess in 1934 at a dinner party. Guy was two years younger, and my father was immediately drawn to him. He takes a whole book to explain fully why – in *A Chapter of Accidents* (1972) – but they talked and talked, and I think a rather young and impressionable Rees was more or less spellbound by Burgess, a skilled manipulator even at that age. One of their favourite subjects that kept them up into the early hours of the morning, drinking heavily, was Marx, about whom, according to my father, Guy had many original and fascinating ideas. If Britain was not going to fight Hitler, then the Soviet Union might have to do so.

We know that Rees, very much the Angry Young Man, was rather well placed for handing on information to Guy. All Souls was, at that time, the heart and soul of appeasement. Among the Senior Fellows were Lord Halifax, Chamberlain's Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Geoffrey Dawson, editor of the *Times*. In 1955, Bob Boothby denounced the college for having been what he called the intellectual HQ of appeasement, saying it would be hard to understate the damage done to the country at that 'disastrous' dining table.

There has been a lot of argument and discussion on this point. Some have gone so far as to say that Halifax, Simon, and Dawson dined together only twice at All Souls between the Nazis coming to power and the outbreak of war. But, of course, there was High Table talk – the whole of Europe was talking about Hitler – and Guy would certainly have been interested in whatever crumbs Rees could pick up. We know, through witnesses, that Rees was extremely angry and bitter at the time. But it was not until 1937, when Rees was assistant editor of *The Spectator*, hardly a revolutionary publication, that Guy told my father that he was a Comintern agent and wanted Rees to help him.

Rees is diffident in his memoirs, and said he most certainly would not, but we know this to be not entirely true. He said that someone else – not named in Rees's memoirs for legal reasons imposed on him – was in on an arrangement with the Russians. That person was Anthony Blunt. But we know that Rees did

agree to help Burgess, and, as a young Fellow of All Souls, he was something of a feather in Guy's cap to the Russians; someone to boast about. When I talked to Rees's contemporaries about whether they thought this could be called spying, they ummed and aahed. Well, not exactly, they said, it was just gossip, anyone could have told Guy these things. Isaiah Berlin, who knew Rees well at Oxford, told me that Rees knew perfectly well what was right and what was wrong; Guy was immoral.

However, in 1993, when I went to Moscow to find out what exactly Rees had given to Guy, I was told by the KGB that yes, my father had co-operated with Burgess, but that the information he had handed on was insignificant. The Soviet Union needed to know, at that time, what Britain was going to do about standing up to Hitler. Rees hated and despised Chamberlain and his government. The Munich Agreement of September 1938 sickened him: he did not want peace at any price. To him, Hitler had to be stopped at all costs. Douglas Jay remembered Rees arguing vehemently against appeasement in college. Hitler, Rees said, could never be taken at his word, he lied – it was all in *Mein Kampf*. Well, if no-one else was prepared to fight Hitler, Rees was.

In April 1939, a month after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, he walked out of his office at *The Spectator* and went around the corner to the TA Drill Hall and joined up. He was posted to 90th Field Regiment, sent on the officer's course at Sandhurst, and was commissioned, as a captain, into the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Everyone said he always looked very smart in his uniform and his military experiences, as we know, provided material for some wonderful writing. He had a surprisingly good war as an intelligence officer, first interrogating German prisoners, then on Montgomery's staff and later in Germany with the Control Commission. It satisfied one of his greatest ambitions, to be not just a man of ideas but a man of action, like one of his heroes, Andre Malraux. So, there he was in April, in uniform and ready to go, but, as he remarked at the time, it was rather like fighting for the Devil, signing up to fight for Chamberlain's detestable government. Guy, apparently, told him he was a traitor.

Then, suddenly, without warning, the situation changed. For in August 1939, the Russians and the Germans signed their non-aggression pact. Rees was devastated. The Soviet Union that he had wanted to help, the Soviet Union that he had been led to believe were prepared to stop Hitler carrying out his threats, had changed sides. This was the turning point for Rees. It was too much for him. He told Guy that he wanted nothing more to do with the Comintern, or Burgess; this was the end for him. I was told, definitively, by the KGB that from that day onwards any mention of Rees disappeared from the files.

Burgess informed them that Rees had 'broken' and would give no more help or succour to the cause. But to Rees himself Burgess said he would be doing exactly the same thing, as would Blunt. They completely understood his decision, they said, and they would not be continuing their work for the Comintern either. But Burgess lied to him; Blunt and Burgess continued with their spying. Rees was deceived. But events moved so quickly that Rees hardly had time to think about what had happened. Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939 and, within days, war was declared. He notes that he was continuously exhausted and gave up

wondering about Guy.

The war changed my father in many, many ways, as it did many other people. ‘The only profitable aspect of the atrocious business of war,’ he wrote, ‘is that it exposes the principle of indeterminacy which governs all our lives in all its nakedness and simplicity; for war makes such a mockery of all personal pretensions that for ever after we recognise them, or should recognise them, for the illusions that they are.’

He rarely talked about the war, except to say that it could never have been won if seemingly unexceptional people in civilian life had not turned out to have the capacity to do extraordinary things in wartime. As children, we were told always to wave to soldiers to thank them for winning the war. He would not tolerate any anti-Americanism; Churchill became one of his heroes, and he very happily wrote his ‘R’ column for *Encounter* for seventeen years as a ferocious critic of Communism. He was someone who minded very much about being right. He knew he had been right about Hitler; but he carried the burden of the shame he felt about giving any support to the Soviets with him to the end of his life. On that he had been very wrong.

And so he returned from Germany after the war, worked for MI6, became a businessman for a while, and then Estates Bursar for All Souls, and all was fine until May 1951 when Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean defected to Moscow. It was a shattering event – and we know of the consequences. Anthony Blunt attempted to prevent my father from telling the security services what he knew about Burgess – and indeed Blunt – and the security services did not appear to want to listen. For years, Burgess had successfully misled and manipulated and deceived, and the fallout was enormous.

Talk of the ‘Missing Diplomats’ was everywhere from then on; the newspapers thrived on new daily revelations. And no-one was safe in the hunt for the Third Man, the Fourth Man, the Fifth Man... But Anthony Blunt went on from strength to strength: he was knighted, he was made Keeper of the Queen’s Pictures. I briefly include this because it is the overture, if you like, to what happened regarding my father’s downfall at Aber. He wrote about it in his second volume of memoirs, *A Chapter of Accidents*, published in 1972, many years after the event.

As we know, Rees was proposed as the new Principal by Tom Jones. There were objections – his Welsh might not have been quite up to scratch and questions were asked about him in Oxford. He didn’t actually need the job; he was enjoying his term as Estates Bursar at All Souls, visiting the college’s many farms and lands all over the country. He was comfortably off and had few worries.

But, as he said in his memoirs, something from his past tugged at him. He wanted to go back to Wales, he wanted to go back to Aber. He was excited by the idea of the college and the importance it had played in Welsh life; it was an institute of learning that genuinely fulfilled its purpose. It had been founded, as he explained, with the pennies of the poor.

‘The founders believed passionately in the native intelligence of the Welsh people and their capacity to achieve a wider and more self-critical culture than that of the mine, the chapel and the farm’, he wrote. It had been a noble dream and he enthusiastically – and I believe sincerely – imagined himself continuing the work

that still had to be done.

Moreover, he mused, it was time for him to stop being an outsider, an onlooker on life and to engage in something. And there, in the back of his mind, too, was the idea that we, his four children at that stage, could enjoy some of the pleasures of the childhood he remembered with such affection, among the unspoilt natural surroundings of Cardiganshire, with its green hills and streams.

Of course, it is possible to think now that he was not destined to stay long at the college. Being the sort of person he was, he made enemies. He used to say that no-one understood him when he was being flippant. He offended people. My aunt told me that he was pompous at Aber, for the first time she had known him. And my mother, famously, disliked the house, Plas Penglais, which she found characterless and institutionalized and which, even with all her gifts, she felt she could never make into a home for us all. And she resented Professor Newton's plant specimen beds in what she regarded as her garden.

But I remember how much Rees liked the students; he did feel he was doing something worthwhile. He was a good educator and, as far as I know, there were no serious mishaps at the college while he was at the helm.

However, the question of whether he was to stay or go was whipped out of his hands one day in February 1956 when Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean appeared for the first time since their defection at a press conference in Moscow. They said nothing except that they had both been communists and Comintern agents and would be staying in the Soviet Union.

My father panicked.

He was, as he put it, 'transfixed in a state of shock'. Setting eyes on Guy again made him see himself, suddenly, as if for the first time, 'like a man who had voluntarily engaged in the cruel and murderous operations of a regime responsible for the destruction of millions of people by death, torture, starvation, and any other means that its ingenuity could devise to achieve that purpose'. He saw Guy as a man with blood on his hands. And some of the blood was on his own hands. And in him arose a great wave of guilt for the support he had given, through Guy, to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

He could not forgive himself for this.

'I must pay,' he said. Absolutely nothing had come of his attempts to tell MI5 the full story about Guy, and, if they could not be trusted, then somehow he must find a way to release the information himself. He already had a manuscript ready – friends had seen it – something he had been working on for some time. His involvement with Guy, and Guy himself, were so extraordinary that he simply had to write it all down, he said, and so he had done. But there are other interpretations than his own. A friend told me that Rees was very worried about the possibility that if Guy were to give any interviews in Moscow he might well incriminate Rees. This never happened, but one can understand his fear. So, he needed to make a pre-emptive strike.

And here, at this point, I always think back to something Rees made a point of including in his memoirs. Guy never, ever, destroyed letters. It was a very sinister side of him. Rees could only surmise the reason why Guy kept these letters: so that they could be used to manipulate and threaten, they could be used for blackmail.

Did Guy have a letter, or letters, of Rees's that he might try to use against him?

So, as we know, these lurid articles, which not only incriminated Burgess but many other people in his circle, too, came to be published, anonymously, in the *People*. They had been sold to the newspaper by his agent. Rees was identified as the author very quickly by the *Daily Telegraph*, although it cannot have been difficult for anyone who moved in Rees's world to guess correctly. He immediately lost most of his friends: he was said to have betrayed Burgess. He lost his job, although I understand that he just might have managed to hang on were it not for the fact that two members of the Council said they would resign if he stayed on.

And what happened next is just tragic. Very soon after my parents left Aberystwyth, my father was hit by a van and spent a year in hospital recovering from serious injuries to his head and to his leg. He walked with a limp thereafter.

So this should be the end of the story. That he slowly got better and he became the writer that he always wanted to be. But it isn't. For shortly after my mother died in 1976 – and he was released from his promise to her not to get himself into any more trouble over Guy – he was contacted by a journalist called Andrew Boyle, who was writing a book about the Cambridge spies called *The Climate of Treason* (published by Hutchinson in 1979). Rees told Boyle about Blunt, and, while the book never named Blunt but used a pseudonym, a series of parliamentary questions forced the truth out into the open.

It was sensational.

When this took place, late in 1979, my father was in hospital in London, seriously ill, and in fact dying of cancer. He asked my sister to bring him a copy of *The Divine Comedy* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*; he needed nothing more, he wanted those two books by his side, he said.

So, from his hospital bed he was able to watch, on television, Mrs Thatcher tell the House of Commons that Anthony Blunt had admitted to the security services in 1964 that he had been a 'talent spotter' for Russian intelligence, when he was a don at Cambridge before the war, and had regularly passed information to the Soviets while he himself was a member of the security services between 1940 and 1945. It was an extraordinary moment for Rees, only days before he died, just after his seventieth birthday.

Mrs Thatcher continued, 'He made this admission after being given an undertaking that he would not be prosecuted if he confessed. He was known to have held Marxist views while at Cambridge, but the security services had no reason either in 1940 or at any time during his service to doubt his loyalty to his country.'

She went on, 'He first came under suspicion in the course of the inquiries which followed the defection of Burgess and Maclean in 1951 when the security service was told that Burgess had said in 1937 that he was working for the [...] Comintern and that Blunt was one of his sources. There was no supporting evidence for this. When confronted with it, Blunt denied it...'

Shortly afterwards, Buckingham Palace announced that Blunt would, forthwith, be stripped of his knighthood. This was the first time this had happened since the trial and execution of Sir Roger Casement in 1916. Justice had been done. As a little boy in Wales, Rees had listened to his father preaching on the tremendous themes of sin, grace, redemption, and eternal punishment. They were themes that

were to be with him until the very end of his life.

In one of his final letters to a friend in Wales, Rees said he had been told that he only had a few months left to live, but that he was not frightened.

He wrote: 'I was brought up a Calvinist and taught that if one is born one of the elect one never ceases to belong – a doctrine that has had strange effects on me.' I believe it gave him great strength in the face of all his adversities. Indeed, his last words were: 'I wonder what happens next?'

One of the remarkable things about Goronwy Rees was that he never complained about his life and the way it had turned out. He never became bitter. He was a man with many, many gifts and one of the greatest was his gift for life itself, which I see now came from his childhood and his upbringing.

It is time to end, and I would like to leave you with one of my father's bits of advice; they were always good. He told me, 'Never believe in ideologies and dogmas that claim to have all the answers; go out into the world, look for yourself and make up your own mind.' It has served me very well.

And so has the thought that had my father's life been otherwise, had he been less sparkling, more careful and circumspect, and had he not involved himself so much in the 'tremendous themes', we would not have his marvellous writing to remember him by, described by Cyril Connolly as so 'delightfully refreshing and intelligent [...] so cool, so collected an arrangement of consciousness.'

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't miss him.

[With many thanks to John Harris.]