

## THE FORGOTTEN QUEEN OF ROMANCE

*Liz Jones*

The minibus rattled along the narrow country roads of Ceredigion. We were on a literary tour; a talk and tour, to be precise, of the Ceredigion-born author and *enfant terrible* of Welsh writing in English, Caradoc Evans. On our return, we stopped at the hamlet of New Cross, some five miles south of Aberystwyth, where Caradoc had lived during World War Two. Our guide – Caradoc’s biographer, John Harris – led us into the graveyard of what was once Horeb chapel and, pausing only to take in the majestic view of Pumlumon across the valley, we followed him up the muddy bank, past rows of lichen-smearred gravestones.

Caradoc’s grave came with an unusual lozenge-shaped headstone. It looked very much of its time, very 1940s. This was chosen, said Harris, by Caradoc’s second wife, Marguerite Jervis. Nineteen years later, she was buried there too, in accordance with her wishes. Marguerite was no demure, self-sacrificing literary wife, but a bestselling author of popular romances on whose royalties Caradoc depended. At various times in her life she had also been a theatre proprietor, an actor, a showgirl, and a spiritualist. All in all, she was, added Harris raising his eyebrows, *quite* a colourful character. It was the kind of *quite* that contained volumes. We searched the stone’s weather-beaten inscription for her name. There was nothing, not even a solitary ‘Marguerite’. She was buried anonymously, leaving no sign that she had ever existed.

Her anonymity did not end there. Few had heard of Marguerite Jervis locally, even though she had lived in and around Aberystwyth for some twenty years. How, I wondered, could a woman who must, by anyone’s standards, have been remarkable, be so erased from memory? Surely, her appearance alone (as described by Harris) – those enormous veiled hats, that scarlet lipstick, those voluminous layers of brightly-coloured chiffon, and her collection of Indian bangles that jangled when she walked – would have been the stuff of local legend. Far beyond her locality, she was, at least for a while, a household name. Her books had been read and loved by millions of (mostly) women throughout the English-speaking world, and beyond. Yet today she lay forgotten, beside a man, another author, we had travelled miles to see.

Weeks, months later, my thoughts would return to that afternoon in Horeb graveyard. That gravestone, and the unmarked space where her name should have been, would not leave me alone. I could not stop wondering how a woman who had once been so famous could have faded into such obscurity. I had to find out more. As I began my research, one of the first lessons I learned was that it was futile to try to discover the one ‘true’ version of her life. Marguerite’s own accounts of her life would pay scant regard to the boundary between fact and fiction and both were as entertaining and as distorted as any fairground hall of mirrors. Her life story, as told by her, reminded me of the old Japanese puzzle box I used to play with as a child. Whenever I solved one puzzle, another, more complicated one, would always pop up. Only with Marguerite, there would be no hidden drawers at the centre to

spring open to reveal its secret. With Marguerite, there were only more puzzles to unearth, more contradictions to solve.

My research would also lead me on a compelling journey through the forgotten story of popular women's fiction, the silent film industry, the early Edwardian days of variety, the heyday of the repertory theatre, and the shadowy world of mediums and seances; through her Indian colonial childhood, her early multiple careers in theatre, film and Fleet Street, to her romantic 'escape' to Aberystwyth with Caradoc, and on to her impoverished later years. At every turn, I found myself stumbling upon half-hidden worlds of the early and mid-twentieth century.

Her life, I concluded, was built on contradictions. One of the highest earning women in the country, she had grown rich through promoting love and romance and, ultimately, dependence on a man; having herself resolved to 'never be dependent on a man', she was later in thrall to Caradoc, enduring and defending his abusive behaviour. An inveterate self-publicist and flamboyant attention-seeker, she would shut herself away from the world to write, sometimes disappearing for years at a time. Democratic and snobbish, fragile and tough, compassionate and ruthless, the only constant was her irrepressible ambition. A pampered daughter of the Raj, destined solely for marriage, she turned her back on her family to pursue her dream of making a name for herself, with only the vaguest idea of what career to pursue, let alone how to earn a living. Incredibly, she pulled it off. She tore up the rulebook for upper-middle-class girls like her – and she did it with considerable style.

Her earliest ambition, to be an actress, had led to her joining the first cohort of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Later, failing to make her mark in the theatre, she followed that well-trodden path of struggling young actresses of her time and joined the variety theatre chorus line. Soon in search of a livelihood with greater longevity, she began writing stories for the burgeoning new women's magazines of the Edwardian era. Later, she switched to writing for the lucrative market in romance novels.

She had discovered her gift for writing – and how. She wrote as Oliver Sandys, the masculine identity that allowed her to risk the daring and the titillating. She wrote as Countess Hélène Barcynska, an identity that merged patrician cachet with the exotic allure her younger self had dreamed of acquiring. As 'Sandys' and 'Barcynska' – her two distinct 'brands' – she more than made a name for herself: she made two. Both were adored by their devoted readers. The heroine of a Sandys novel would be a spirited working-class girl (usually a chorus girl) who always bounced back from whatever life threw at her. In contrast, the Barcynska heroine was an upper middle-class girl: a ballerina or violinist, or, more commonly, one who had fallen on hard times that had driven her into – yes, that's right – the chorus line. Despite their class differences, her 'Sandys' and 'Barcynska' books alike fizzed with Marguerite's humour and fast-paced storytelling. Both were adored by their devoted readers.

At the peak of her career, in a bid to rekindle her first, unfulfilled ambition to make it as an actress, she abandoned her thriving writing career for Hollywood. She was in her forties. Her dreams of breaking into the youth-worshipping film industry

appeared at best optimistic, at worst deluded. She confounded the odds by landing a supporting role in the silent film *Star Struck*, in which her dream to appear alongside one of her acting idols, Gloria Swanson, came true. For Hollywood, she adopted another name – Marguerite Evans – the surname borrowed from her lover, future husband, and the man with whom she now rests, Caradoc Evans.

Yet Hollywood did not, as she had fully expected, roll out the red carpet for her. Taking stock, she returned to Britain and picked up her writing career where she left off. She would never stop writing again. Even her occasional bouts of depression would not impede her for long. Even as she grew frail and her health declined, as tastes changed and her work fell out of fashion, she never gave up. She wrote for a multitude of reasons. After spending her savings on theatre companies, luxurious cars, clothes and a succession of kept men (Caradoc included), she wrote because her finances demanded it. She wrote for the pleasure it gave her loyal band of readers, who were now growing old with her. She wrote for the thrill of receiving letters from fans, urging her to write her next novel as soon as she could: for the exhilaration of knowing the pleasure a new Sandys or Barcynska would give them. She wrote because writing was her life. Since the age of twenty, when her first husband Armiger Barclay had instilled in her a relentless writing regime, she had lost the ability to stop and rest. As long as there were women who would read her books, Marguerite would go on writing for them.

A few weeks after that visit to her grave, I wrote an article on Marguerite for the Welsh cultural magazine *Planet*. My premise was a question: How could this remarkable woman be so thoroughly erased from history? For this question to make sense to the reader, it needed to be prefaced with a brief summary of Marguerite's life and achievements. It made an almost impossible task; a brief potted biography could not begin to do her justice. Article published, I had naively assumed that my involvement with Marguerite would end there. A few weeks later, a letter arrived in the post, forwarded by *Planet*. It came from a woman in her eighties who told me how pleased she was to see Marguerite Jervis remembered. Her books had meant so much to her, she said, had cheered her up during the war, and had helped her through other difficult times in her life. Later, we arranged to meet at a Welsh Writing in English conference in Gregynog, near Newtown, which we were both attending. There she told me about her large collection of Oliver Sandys and Countess Barcynska books, inviting me to her home in Presteigne to see them. She said she wanted me to have them all. She had assumed – correctly, in hindsight – that the article was part of a larger project: that I intended to continue my research on Marguerite. As I was moving house and in no position to take up her offer, I urged her to donate the books to the National Library of Wales. But before she did, I said I would love to accept her invitation to browse through her collection. Sadly, she passed away soon afterwards, and the visit never took place. Yet to hear first-hand from one of her readers of the delight that Marguerite's books had given her filled me with a renewed conviction that she deserved to be remembered. One day, I told myself, someone would put that right and make her work and life more widely known. It was not until 2014, when I learnt that Honno was publishing an occasional

series of biographies of unjustly forgotten women, that I began to think of Marguerite as a suitable subject for a biography. I was also beginning to realise that if I did not write it, then maybe no one would.

My research for the *Planet* article had previously led me to the sizeable collection of Marguerite's works, along with an archive of her correspondence and press cuttings, at the National Library of Wales. Although, it has to be said, it is unlikely that any of it would have survived if it had not been for her notorious (notorious in Wales, at least) husband. (This realisation is, I suspect, common among biographers of women married to well-known men.) In the wood-lined hush of the National Library's north reading room, I discovered that her publishing career had begun sooner than I imagined; that five years before World War One the young Marguerite was turning out risqué stories for dubious magazines.

Her most famous and successful Sandys novel, *The Pleasure Garden*, was published in 1923. Two years later, it was adapted into a film – the first full-length feature by a twenty-six-year-old Alfred Hitchcock. At the time of its release, it was the book's author 'Oliver Sandys', rather than the film's youthful director, that drew the crowds. Part torrid melodrama, part comedy romance, *The Pleasure Garden* is set in the murky backstage world of a London chorus line. Its themes of male voyeurism, violence against women (which were to become familiar Hitchcock tropes) are all sprung directly from Marguerite's pen. In this, and her many other 'chorus girl' novels, with similarly redolent names – *The Honeypot*, *The Ginger Jar*, *The Champagne Kiss* – Marguerite drew on a world she knew all too well. Among the boy-meets-girl plot that the genre demanded were accounts of starvation wages and sexual exploitation that carried all the startling authenticity of the author's lived experience.

During her 1920s heyday, Marguerite's Sandys and Barcynska books were together averaging sales of more than 200,000 copies a title. When her publishers wanted her to complete at least one Sandys and one Barcynska a year, Marguerite obliged by effectively becoming a one-woman production line, churning out the works of not one, but two prolific authors. Inevitably, such an arduous regime affected the quality of her work. Yet what was surprising was not that some of her work was uneven, but that despite working under such intolerable pressures, so much of it was so vibrant and engaging. Her publishers pushed her (and other women authors like her) to the limit. They viewed romance fiction as a frivolous product, of little value beyond the sales figures of her latest title, with little thought given to her need for rest and recuperation.

Fast forward forty years and we find Marguerite still writing, albeit with considerably smaller sales figures. Her final novel, *Madame Adastra*, a hospital romance written as a patient at Shrewsbury Hospital, was published posthumously in 1964. The novel's protagonist, Felicity, never gave up despite her many setbacks. She made an apt final heroine for the indefatigable Marguerite.

The publication of *Madame Adastra* marked the end of a career that had spanned more than half a century, totalling an astonishing 149 books, many of them bestsellers, with eleven novels adapted for cinema. In order to meet the demands of her loyal following of Brazilian readers, her work was regularly translated into Portuguese. Her books were as loved by her readers as they were despised by many

who had never read them. While some critics made polite noises, there was no one who recognised the huge cultural significance of romance literature, as with, say, George Orwell with boys' comics. Her novels were read and adored by millions of women, yet were considered irrelevant. They were ephemeral: sweet islands of leisure and luxury, heady escapes from housework or shop work. To the maids, the shop assistants, the office and factory girls who read them, a 'Sandys' or 'Barcynska' meant a few hours of indulgent pleasure. Yet even her readers had internalised the message that the books they loved were trash. And the pleasure they derived from them was marred by feelings of guilt or even shame. Romance was a genre that attracted a mix of gender and class-based snobbery like no other.

Marguerite was a virtuoso storyteller. She had to be. Holding the attention of her frequently tired, overworked readers, keeping them turning page after page until the end, demanded all the talents of a Scheherazade: talents that Marguerite possessed in abundance. As Caradoc once said of her, she could 'write like the Angels sing – without effort'. She had come of age reading sensation novels like *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Scottish author Mrs Oliphant's heady mix of the domestic, the historical and supernatural also made its mark on her eclectic subject matter. Like Marguerite, Mrs Oliphant wrote unceasingly to support herself and her family – a habit that later prompted Virginia Woolf to bemoan the fact that she had sold 'her very admirable brain' and 'enslaved her intellectual liberty' to earn her living and educate her children. Although Marguerite never mentioned her by name, the eccentric Marie Corelli, a major influence on generations of romance authors that followed, would have certainly left an impression. Corelli, a bestselling romance author and inveterate performer, was adored by fans but reviled by critics as 'the favourite of the common multitude'. From her, Marguerite would have imbibed an important lesson: that a carefully constructed glamorous image would get a woman writer noticed.

But glamour alone was not nearly enough. She had to work phenomenally hard to keep her readers coming back, producing story after story that would charm and delight, surprise and titillate. Nor did she shy away from the controversial: prostitution, illegitimacy, adultery, miscegenation and, most of all, the indignities endured (from a loveless marriage to a loveless kept woman 'arrangement') by women with no economic independence were among the many 'social' themes in her work. The term 'romance novel' was itself a cosy euphemism for stories that dealt frankly with all of those themes. No wonder Marguerite claimed she wrote the kind of books that women would hide under the cushion. Despite her phenomenal success as an author of a maligned genre, she could not expect any recognition beyond the money she earned and the pleasure it gave her readers. Had she written for audiences other than working-class women, would she have been overlooked in her time, or so quickly forgotten after her death?

These days, I often walk past an elegant town house in the tree-lined Queen's Square, Aberystwyth. This was Marguerite and Caradoc's home during the 1930s, and their first home together in Wales. Her time there had been the happiest and most settled period in her turbulent life. 'Wales is the setting of my soul', she wrote, shortly after moving there, 'Here I found happiness. Complete. Unspoilable'. She

quickly set about stamping her personality on the house; filling their drawing room with antique furniture, statues of Buddha and Russian icons. There she would hold rehearsals for her beloved Aberystwyth-based repertory theatre group, Rogues and Vagabonds. And when the rehearsal was over, she would produce a lavish buffet for the cast. She was, by many accounts, the most generous and considerate of hosts.

To the left of the front door is a plaque for (yes, that's right) Caradoc Evans. To the right there is a patch of bare brickwork. I hope this space will soon be filled by companion piece – a plaque big enough for the names Marguerite Jervis, Oliver Sandys, and Countess Barcynska, to be etched in bold. All three richly deserve it.