

Islands and Roads:  
Hesketh Bell, Jean Rhys, and Dominica's Imperial Road<sup>1</sup>

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*Editor's note: all quotations from "The Imperial Road" in this essay are from Tulsa ms. Version 7. The version published in this issue is Version 4.*

In 1936 Jean Rhys visited Dominica for two months, her only return to the island where she had been born in 1890 and which she had left just short of her seventeenth birthday. In the opening lines of her previously unpublished story, "The Imperial Road," the narrator looks at the Dominican mountains and exclaims on their beauty to a young man standing beside her on the deck of the ship. He politely asks if she's visited Dominica before. "I was born in Roseau," she says—referring to the island's main town. "His expression changed at once. He gave me a strange look, contemptuous, hostile" (p. 1).<sup>2</sup> "The Return of the Native," as another version of this story is actually called, is never the same as the arrival of the traveller. Indeed the Imperial Road is just one of a number of aspects of Dominica in the story which the narrator remembers, or thinks of, differently from the Dominicans she encounters in 1936.

Rhys wrote three fictional versions of her visit to Dominica in 1936. I'll be most concerned with "The Imperial Road," and to a lesser extent with the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which contains a heavily mediated account of the return, when Antoinette takes *her* husband back to an estate that had belonged to her mother. Rhys also wrote a long story, "Temps Perdi," which deals in part with a trip which she and her husband took to the Carib Reserve, home of one of the region's few surviving indigenous communities.<sup>3</sup> We know from letters that both "The Imperial Road" and "Temps Perdi" are lightly fictionalised versions of actual trips. The visit also seems to have encouraged Rhys to go back to earlier written material and to start writing down her memories of the island at the beginning of the twentieth century, material that she would then draw on in her post-war work, when that finally began to appear, a full thirty years after the return, first in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and then in her final two collections of stories, *Tigers Are Better Looking* and *Sleep It Off, Lady*. "The Imperial Road" was due to appear in this last collection, in 1976, but was pulled just before publication. When towards the end of her life Rhys offered many of her private papers and manuscripts for sale, the catalogue listed the unpublished story with the notation: "Miss Rhys has stated that her publishers declined to include this story in *Sleep It Off, Lady*, considering it to be too anti-negro in tone" (quoted in O'Connor 404).

## Back in Dominica

Ella and Leslie Tilden Smith (as Rhys and her husband were called at the time) spent six of their eight weeks on Dominica at a small estate called Hampstead on the northeast coast of the island [figs. 1 and 2]. In order to get there, they had to travel on a launch up the coast from Roseau to the town of Portsmouth, and then by car across a rough track to Hampstead. In the story—and I'll try to hold on to the distinction between event and story, although the story is very closely based on an actual incident—when it is time to leave Hampstead, the narrator convinces her husband, in the story called Lee, that instead of returning to Roseau by the same route they should walk across the island on the old Imperial Road: "I was perfectly certain that it must still exist," she says (p. 11). Everybody else, husband included, is distinctly sceptical, but the narrator insists and gets her way, although they're persuaded to hire two guides. This is the narrator's account:

Everything went splendidly at first. I felt as if I were back in my girlhood, setting out on some wonderful adventure which would certainly end happily and remembered all the old names, Malgré tout, Sweet River, Castle Comfort. On this side the names were Portsmouth, Hampstead and so on, the people Protestants of various sects, the language a sort of English.

Soon the road wasn't a road any longer but a steep, uphill track. It was very stony and then the first catastrophe happened. I stumbled over a sharp stone and when I [got up] I didn't seem able to walk, just limp painfully. (pp. 12-13)

Lee then hires a mule, which the narrator immediately falls off of. The forest thickens and it starts to rain: "The farther we went the more I reproached myself. The whole thing was my fault and Theodore and all the others had been right. There wasn't a vestige left of the Imperial Road" (p. 15). Just as she thinks they are going to be abandoned by their two guides, the trees thin out "and soon we emerged onto a very civilized scene, a close clipped lawn, a white house" (p. 15). The place had, she says, been either bought or rented by an American couple, and the scene it presents is in sharp contrast to anything else in the story: "In a large cool room a man in a spotless white robe was playing the piano and there was a woman, also in a spotless kimono with two long plaits of hair hanging down and with rather a pretty face" (pp. 15-16).

Their driver has come to meet them and so the misadventure ends comfortably enough, with champagne and chicken sandwiches back at their hotel in Roseau. But the mystery of the Imperial Road keeps the narrator awake:

"I've been thinking over things and do you know I'm absolutely certain that that wasn't the Imperial Road at all. It's quite impossible it should have disappeared without leaving any trace. That Martinique man [one of their guides] must have took us wrong."

"You think so?" [her husband says]

“I’m quite sure of it. It was a large wide road. An engineer came out from England specially to build it and it took several years. It just couldn’t be overgrown to that extent.”

...

I lay awake for a long time asking myself if I could conceivably have imagined this ceremony with the administrator in his best uniform, in gold lace, cocked hat and a sword (not [sic] I’m not sure about the sword, but I am about the cocked hat and uniform). The band played, the crowd cheered and he made a little speech declaring the Imperial Road across the island open to all traffic. I couldn’t have imagined it and the Imperial Road couldn’t have disappeared without a trace, it just wasn’t possible. No Imperial Road or a trace of it. Just darkness, cut trees, creepers and it just wasn’t possible. (pp. 17-18)

That’s how the story ends.

### The letter to Alec Waugh

There’s one other discussion of the Imperial Road in Rhys’s writings, more lighthearted, less plangent than the treatment in her story. In 1949 the travel-writer Alec Waugh published an essay called “Typical Dominica,” in which he writes about the Imperial Road. Rhys read “Typical Dominica” in Waugh’s anthology, *Where the Clocks Chime Twice*, and wrote him a long letter, almost all of which is about the Imperial Road.<sup>4</sup>

Like Rhys eleven years earlier, Waugh had been returning from east coast to west of Dominica and had been curious to go on what he knew was the unfinished section of the Imperial Road. According to Waugh, the famous traveller Peter Fleming had recently declared those five miles as “a nice little walk,” which should have forewarned anyone familiar with the laconic understatements about the Amazon jungle that Fleming makes in his *Brazilian Adventure*.<sup>5</sup> Waugh’s summary of his walk was brief and to the point: “It was worse than a duckboard track at Passchendaele through a waste of shell-holes” (Waugh, p. 309).

It took me two and three-quarter hours to do five miles. It was raining all the time. I lost count of the rivers that I waded through and slithered over. Down the sides of the valleys, where it is planned eventually to bridge the footpath, it is so narrow, so overgrown, and with so deep a drop on the other side, that you have to consider each step with the greatest caution or your foot will land on the green roof of a ravine. It is hard to distinguish between a solid root and a broken branch. The planned stretch of the road is either a greasy surface or a weed-covered accumulation of sharp stones. “The road is sliding,” the guide kept saying, and he spoke the truth. Every so often the road had been blocked by landslides. We did not pass a single villager. In the solitude it loved, the *siffleur montagne* emitted its sharp, shrill cry. There was one superb spectacle along the road, an avenue cut straight as a ruled pencil line right through the forest. On either side of it the tall trees towered as it stretched in narrowing perspective towards the succession of mountain ranges that form Roseau’s background. But I would not for the sake of it make that journey twice. I have never felt more personal emotion for an inanimate

object than I did for John Archbold's station-wagon when I saw it waiting for me at the point where the track becomes a road again. . . . I had heard so much talk about that road. I had heard so many people say, "Of course it will be all right once the road is finished." But if that road is completed in my lifetime, I shall be astonished. (pp. 309-10)

Rhys clearly recognised a fellow sufferer: her letter to Waugh keeps returning to the Imperial Road:

What happened, I wonder, to the 1st Imperial Road. That was nearly finished when I was a small child or supposed to be nearly finished. I can remember the opening ceremony. The administrator, whose name was Hasketh Bell, wore a cocked hat and cut a ribbon with silver scissors I think. Perhaps the next man disliked Dominica or the money dried up. . .

But about the Imperial Road. We tried the walk from Hampstead. . .

However, it was an awful walk. It rained all the time. A kind woman lent me a mule half way, and I fell off the first time there. Was a steep downwards bit of road.

This Martinique guide swore. Why a Martinique man? I don't know. But the Dominica one said, "Do not cry Madame." The Dominicans can be very gentle. The country people mean. But the Martinique men are completely cynical. Did you notice?<sup>6</sup>

### Islands and Roads

Roads are the pre-eminent sign of modernity and Rhys's road story can be endowed with the same kind of significance that Marshall Berman gives to Baudelaire's story about the poet who loses his halo crossing a Parisian street, a story Berman reads as one of the primal scenes of modernity (Berman, pp. 155-64). Mountainous islands have a particularly challenging relationship to roads and, since Dominica is virtually all mountains, it stands as an archetype in this respect. During the early colonial period, the British didn't build roads on the smaller Caribbean islands they occupied: they constructed enclaves which were in sea-contact with one another and with England. By contrast, the French built paved roads so well that some of them are still visible in Dominica, nearly 200 years after Dominica ceased to be a French possession. It was only after Emancipation, with the rise of a coloured merchant class in Dominica, that the demand for roads began to grow, a demand which eventually chimed with Joseph Chamberlain's late nineteenth-century new imperialism.

Baudelaire was responding to Haussmann's programme of modernisation and street-building in Paris, a scheme which was designed to allow the modern state access to parts of the city where subversion flourished. Soldiers and policemen travel roads as well as merchants. There is an island equivalent to this. Obviously parts of an island difficult to access from centres of surveillance are awkward for police, but in the West Indies the plantation house itself was usually the centre of surveillance rather than the main town.

However, after Emancipation, even if the plantation owner became a local magistrate, as he usually did, his powers were less autocratic and he might well have had to work rather harder for a living than previously, and not have had as much time for the pleasures of surveillance. So law and order was potentially a problem. Education in the colonies would gradually attempt to inculcate *loyalty* to the metropolitan centre, especially through the figure of Queen Victoria, but local loyalties were also strong, and in the Caribbean, local loyalties have often been inter-island rather than insular: after all, the only other settlement in sight from the Dominican coast is often a village in Martinique or Marie Galante, where there may well be familial and linguistic affiliations. In the absence of good roads, these were the likely contacts for coastal villages to develop, leading inevitably to what, in the language of the state, is called smuggling. It was a “smuggling” incident that led to the so-called Carib War of 1930 in which two Caribs were shot dead by local policemen, an incident Rhys refers to in “Temps Perdi.”

Dominica’s modernisation effectively began in 1887 with the establishment of a Road Board and the appointment of an English engineer to oversee the building of nineteen bridges and a carriage road the length of the island. The bridges he built soon collapsed, and a street he constructed in Roseau flooded badly because of poor drainage. The engineer unwisely tangled with the Road Board resulting in him being held up to public ridicule and needing police protection. A further flood swept away most of the road and the single bridge which he had succeeded in building. The underlying problem was that Dominica’s finances permitted no loans to support development or even to repair its infrastructure, while its cultivation was coming to a standstill and labourers were leaving the island for work in Venezuela and French Guiana.<sup>7</sup> A telling contrast is with Martinique, visited that same year, 1887, by Lafcadio Hearn, who wrote a paean of praise to “the excellent national roads—limestone highways, solid, broad, faultlessly graded—that wind from town to town, from hamlet to hamlet, over mountains, over ravines; ascending by zigzags to heights of twenty-five hundred feet; traversing the primeval forests of the interior; now skirting the dizziest precipices, now descending into the lowest valleys” (Hearn, p. 106). There were 303 miles of these roads: that’s nearly 300 miles more than there were on Dominica at the same time, providing one more reason for some of the prominent coloured merchants to suggest that Dominica would be better off going back to being a French colony.

In August 1895, soon after he became Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain stated his ideological position with respect to the colonies in a major speech to the House of Commons. He deplored the fact that Britain had in many cases neglected its duty. If the people of “this country” were not willing to invest some of their superfluous wealth in the colonies, then it would, Chamberlain stated categorically, have been better never to have gone there in the first

place. South Africa was soon to occupy most of his attention, but Chamberlain's first concern was for the West Indian islands, typical examples of what he called—in a much-quoted phrase—the “undeveloped estates,” that were in need of imperial assistance.<sup>8</sup> “Undeveloped estates” was a more resonant expression than might at first seem apparent, drawing as it does both on that Lockean imperative to make land as productive as possible (and to take it away from those who fail to do so) and on the sense of “estate” as a large capital enterprise, different in size and organisation from the kind of “plot” or “lands” owned or worked by the emancipated black peasant farmers of the West Indies.

For Chamberlain, Dominica became the test case of his new imperial policy:

The case of Dominica is altogether an exceptional one. It is, I believe, one of the very richest islands in the possession of the Crown in the West Indies in the natural productiveness of the soil; at the same time it is an island in which practically nothing has been done, and to this day the very best Crown land in the island, amounting to about 100,000 acres, is absolutely unproductive because there are *no means of communication* [my emphasis]. (*Parliamentary Debates*, XXXVII, p. 1409 (28.ii.1896))

Chamberlain saw the need for a new planting class, which would have to be persuaded to go to Dominica by the opportunities that the Colonial Office could provide. After heated debates in the House of Commons, grants for Dominica were approved, although the island had to accept Crown Colony status, which it did unwillingly after tremendous resistance from the local representatives, who were thereby to lose what little power they had. When the administratorship of Dominica became vacant soon afterwards, Chamberlain appointed Hesketh Bell, a young official recommended to him by his son, Neville, who had met Bell during the Chamberlain family's disastrous business venture in the Bahamas in the early 1890s.<sup>9</sup>

### Hesketh Bell

During his six years as Administrator, from 1899 to 1905, Henry Hesketh Bell became the key figure in Dominica's modernisation: he pioneered hurricane insurance, established a public library, experimented with new crops, set up the steamer service from Roseau to Portsmouth, developed his own plantation, formalised the status of the Carib Reserve, helped establish the banana industry, and opened the Imperial Road. In particular, Bell embodied Chamberlain's imperial aims: the restitution of a British planter class, preferably newly-minted from the metropolis, assisted by modern experimentation in agriculture and by the establishment of a decent set of communications.

Bell was a fine publicist and attracted a number of new venturers on Crown Lands opened up by the Imperial Road, thirty on his own estimation, who together had invested about £40,000 by the end of 1904 (Bell Papers (12.x.1904)). In September 1900, while on leave in London, Bell wrote a long letter to *The Times* under the title "Planting in Dominica," extolling the virtues of the island and seeking young men. He received many replies, three planters returning with him to Dominica later that year: Penrice, Kent, and Bryant.<sup>10</sup> In the first of his recruitment pamphlets, published in 1903, Bell laid down his qualifications for would-be settlers:

Any man fond of an open-air life and interested in agriculture would probably make a successful planter in Dominica. He should also be healthy, active, and temperate. Good temper is required in dealing with the labourers, likewise patience. A man very keen on social pleasures and "functions" will rarely make a good planter. He should stick to his estate so long as it requires attention. . . An intending settler, if young, should endeavour to get a friend to accompany him to Dominica... They will be glad of each other's society when the day's work is done, and can compare notes of progress to their mutual advantage. (*Dominica Notes*, pp. 13-14)

This was, quite openly, a new challenge for young white men, producing a kind of homosocial plantocracy, pretty much doomed to failure by the absence of young white women on the island with whom it might reproduce itself. However, between 1891 and 1911 the number of Europeans residing on Dominica increased from 44 to 399 (Trouillot, *Peasants*, p. 121), a leap for which Bell was largely responsible.

In 1904 Hesketh Bell wrote this description of the Imperial Road:

From Roseau, the chief town and principal seaport on the leeward coast, the "Imperial Road" runs for seventeen miles to a point in the very centre of the island, known as Bassinville. For the first five or six miles of its course, it is practicable for wheeled traffic, while the remainder is what may be termed a first class bridle-road, having such a gradient as to be ultimately fit for wheeled traffic. Starting from sea-level, the road ascends gradually, through a fertile valley, to a governing-point at an altitude of nearly 1800 feet. Here it renders accessible many thousand acres of good land suitable for coffee, rubber, vanilla, oranges, nutmegs, and such other products as thrive best in a climate that can almost be called temperate. . .

From the governing point at 1800 feet, the road descends gradually into the great punch-bowl which comprises the interior of Dominica, and, as it proceeds to a lower level, opens up a great area that is eminently suited for the cultivation of cocoa. Several new settlers have taken up considerable blocks of land along this road. . .

The Imperial Road, for the present, stops at Bassinville, and will be extended when the demand for more land arises. In the meantime, another road, starting from Layou, a good shipping-place on the leeward coast, is being constructed and pushed up the Layou valley towards Bassinville, where it will ultimately connect with the Imperial Road. Several settlers have already taken up land in this direction, and are vigorously planting cocoa and limes. ("The Imperial Road", p. 259)<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, all these settlers failed to master the difficult growing conditions, the virulence of the crop pests, the intermittent devastation of hurricanes (especially that of 1916), and half-hearted support from “Home”. As Bell himself later noted:

It is grievous to have to relate that my scheme for opening up the interior of Dominica resulted in failure. . . . The local Government, hampered by decreasing revenues and the consequent lack of funds, found itself unable, not only to improve the new roads, but even to maintain them properly. The difficulties of transport greatly discouraged and handicapped the planters in the interior and gave them a grievance. A severe disease, which decimated the lime trees, together with a ruinous fall in the price of cocoa, completed the misfortunes of the settlers and exhausted their resources. One by one they gave up the struggle, and there are few who were not obliged either to abandon their plantations or sell them for a song. (*Glimpses*, pp. 94–5)

This may not have been the entire story. A local commission was set up in 1918 to look into the continued discontent with the state of Dominica’s roads. It noted rather sharply that the original problem with the Imperial Road had been that it had taken an illogical route given its purpose of opening up the interior lands known as the Layou Flats. The obvious route, followed by French engineers in the eighteenth century in building what was called the Great Road, was up the Layou valley, gradually attaining the 600–800 foot elevation of the Flats. Unfortunately, because—as the report speculates—a retired coffee-planter from Ceylon had decided to buy a substantial plot of Crown Lands up a different inland valley, Bell’s predecessor had decided to route the Imperial Road that way (a decision confirmed by Bell), taking it up a difficult route to 1840 feet, before descending into the Layou Flats (*Report of the Commission*, p. ix) [see fig. 3]).

Bell’s 1899 “Imperial Grant to Dominica: Scheme for Expenditure”—an eloquent 36-page letter setting out the rationale for the Imperial Road—certainly has this coffee-planter from Ceylon, Mr. Gordon Fowler, as its hero. Fowler’s young coffee plantation was well under way after only eighteen months, with the young coffee trees “wonderfully vigorous,” the “deep green tone” of their leaves showing how well the soil suited them. Fowler had evidently taken something of a risk—perhaps not without some official reassurance—since he had embarked on this large plantation “in a locality which is at present almost entirely unprovided with means of communication” (“Imperial Grant”, p. 9). However, his plantation, Middleham, was only a mile away from the proposed route of the Imperial Road—and Bell’s “Imperial Grant” makes it clear that means of communication will soon be provided for his pioneer. Middleham is ideologically at the centre of Bell’s plan in more than one way. Fowler has already shown the colour of his money and his commitment to the island. It is from Middleham that Bell describes himself as looking down over his new domain: “almost the whole of the centre of Dominica lay spread out before me” (p. 9). Most tellingly, perhaps, there is the



climate: exhilarating mountain air, temperature rarely above 80 degrees, no dampness:

The salubrity of this favoured district is amply evidenced by the appearance of the Manager's children at "Middleham". While those who live on the sea coast, 2000 feet below, are wan and pallid like all little ones in the tropics, Mr. Elliott's boys and girls are rosy and fresh as English children. (p. 11)

This ideal has its counter-image in Bell's pages, as it did on the island itself. In making out a case for a kind of training institution for young planters, Bell outlined what could easily happen to someone arriving with little previous experience:

He is entirely dependent on the opinion of more or less qualified persons as to the suitability of his land for the cultivation of the product he has decided upon, and he frequently loses a large amount of money in buying knowledge. Furthermore he has probably been obliged to locate himself in a somewhat isolated district, and finds himself far removed from any congenial society. If he is a bachelor, solitude will doubtless pall upon him, and in many cases, he will seek a native companion. His habits of life will deteriorate, he may become discouraged by the losses he suffers through inexperience, take to drink, and "go to the Devil" generally. (p. 25)

Set in November 1899, just a few days after Bell wrote this pen-portrait, Jean Rhys's only slightly fictionalised story about Mr. Ramage, "Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers," etches a lasting image of these hopeful but inexperienced planters and offers her third reference to the Imperial Road. As the narrator recalls, Ramage had arrived on the island two years earlier, "a handsome man in tropical kit, white suit, red cummerbund, solar topee" (*Collected Short Stories*, p. 276). He was, he said, looking for peace: "I was told that there were several places going along this new Imperial Road you've got here" (p. 277). He buys an estate called Spanish Castle but quickly drops out of polite society, first by marrying a coloured woman of dubious respectability, then by confronting a neighbour and his wife while wearing nothing but sandals and a leather belt. His estate is untended, his wife disappears, local people stone his house, and the newspaper, the *Dominica Herald and Leewards Island Gazette*, publishes a vitriolic article:

The so-called "Imperial Road" was meant to attract young English-men with capital who would buy and develop properties in the interior. This costly experiment has not been a success, and one of the last of these gentlemen planters has seen himself as the king of the cannibal islands ever since he landed. . ."

The article ends by asking whether black people "must. . . also bear beastly murder and nothing be done about it?" (p. 282). When concerned citizens visit Spanish Castle they find that Ramage has shot himself. His wife, it later emerges, was away visiting relatives on a neighbouring island. Rosalie, the nine-year old protagonist, daughter of the doctor who had befriended Ramage,

is distraught and begins to write the dead man a love letter, which her mother later discovers and throws away.<sup>12</sup>

The real Ramage was a well-known figure in Dominica. He may first have gone to Dominica as an ornithologist, like his better known contemporaries, Frederick Ober and A. H. Verrill: an 1889 article by P. L. Sclater lists the birds found by a Mr. Ramage in Dominica. However, his interests apparently developed in a different direction. In the account of one local author: “His instincts were apparently concentrated upon digging a hole, week after week, without employing assistance by anybody. Month after month he remained at his labour which excited curiosity. He told enquirers that he was digging a private road to China, which meant that he would be obliged to dig right through the earth until he came out at the other side” (Hawys, p. 165).<sup>13</sup> His attempt to dig a hole to reach China stands as a parody of Chamberlain and Bell’s modernising efforts: much digging to no ultimate purpose, and with moral laxity, madness, and death—probably all three—as the final outcome.<sup>14</sup>

In a larger perspective, Bell’s failure—and Chamberlain’s—lay in his attempt to re-establish an estate system deeply anachronistic to the dominant West Indian movement towards peasant proprietorship (Trouillot, *Peasants*, p. 121). Bell’s own much-admired energy and commitment to the well-being of Dominica served ultimately only to veil the fundamentally racist assumptions behind his strategy: that only white men could save Dominica. Rhys’s own parents were doubly associated with this move. Her mother’s family owned Geneva, a genteely fading plantation in the south of the island, a remnant from an earlier historical period, but still—especially in its house—a symbol of privilege and social standing. Rhys’s father, William Rees Williams, a recent arrival from Wales, bought his own estates and seemed to want to relive that life of privilege, high above the town. Unfortunately, Rees Williams was a doctor in that town, and his absence generated complaints amongst his patients and in the local press (cf. Thomas).

### The Story of the Imperial Road

Rhys remembered the *opening* of the Imperial Road no doubt well enough, with the Administrator in his official garb [fig. 4]. And she would have been familiar enough with the first couple of miles of the road, here described in a piece Bell wrote for his official report to the Colonial Office:

The Imperial Road may be considered to start from the Goodwill Bridge at Roseau, and it follows, for the first two and three-quarter miles, the old track along the leeward coast. It passes through two large and valuable sugar estates that are being transformed into lime plantations. This section was reconstructed in a superior manner, and was metalled throughout. It is now an excellent driving road, and a good deal of wheeled traffic passes over it. For a considerable distance it is bordered by immense tamarind trees, and is a favourite afternoon promenade. The construction of this small length of driving road resulted almost immediately in the

importation of a few carriages and a considerable number of bicycles. (Bell, *Dominia. Roads and Land Settlement*, p. 5)

It was this “small length of driving road”—running from Goodwill Bridge to the point just before Canefield where it turns into the interior—that Bell was travelling in his carriage when he passed an embarrassed Gwen Rees Williams, as Jean Rhys then was, on a January afternoon in 1905, an incident Rhys recalls in *Smile Please*:

We had at that time a very energetic administrator called Mr. Hesketh. That was part of his name anyway. . . . He improved the roads out of all knowledge and triumphantly carried through his better idea of an Imperial Road across the island so that the Caribbean and South Atlantic sides were no longer cut off one from the other. . . . He tried to tackle the sewage problem but here even he failed. However he gave several prizes for the best-dressed mask at the yearly carnival and was a great patron of the local cricket club.

One day the rumour started that Mr. Hesketh was going to give a fancy-dress ball for his little niece, who was staying at Government House with her father and mother. The rumour was true, it was to be a fancy-dress dance for children and the invitations were sent out. . . .

As soon as I got to Government House several people congratulated me on my dress. And Mr. Hesketh came up and asked me to dance the first waltz with him. Among his other accomplishments he was a very good dancer indeed and like all good dancers he could make his partner feel she too was an expert. . . . I longed for that waltz to last forever, to skim forever round and round with Mr. Hesketh’s arm about me. I stopped being shy and managed to laugh and talk to him. I waltzed three times with Mr. Hesketh and each time was better than the last and I was happier. I went home, I suppose, somewhere between twelve and one and looking at myself in the glass I knew that night had changed me. I was a different girl, I told myself that I would be just as happy the next day, now I would always be happy.

In the afternoons when I came home from school I often went for a ride. . . . So I was ambling along when I saw in the distance Mr. Hesketh driving a small trap.

The moment I saw him I became very nervous. He was driving towards Roseau, I was riding away from it. We must inevitably meet. He seemed to be coming along very fast, I had no time to think what I should say, to prepare myself for the meeting as it were. Almost at once we seemed to be side by side. He took his hat off, waved it at me and called something. Overcome with shyness I turned my head away and pretended not to see him. Then he was gone and I rode on, knowing that I had behaved in a foolish, bad-mannered way. I tried to console myself by saying that no one had seen us, no one would ever know.

It was some days afterwards that my mother said to me “Why were you so rude to Mr. Hesketh?” I stared at her and said: “Do you mean that he told you?”—“Oh, he made a joke about it,” said my mother. “While we were playing croquet he asked me what he had done to offend you. He said that you met him on the Goodwill road and cut him dead. He was laughing.”

I could only say that I didn’t mean to be rude. “You are a very peculiar child,” said my mother. “There are times when I am very anxious about you. I can’t imagine what will happen if you don’t learn to behave more like other people.”

I didn't answer this, I only told myself that never again would I like Mr. Hesketh or think about him. I was also very miserable. (pp. 89-92)

The incident has all the power of a short story, although there is no reason to doubt its status as memory.<sup>15</sup> The whole affair reads very much like some kind of rite of passage, perhaps a sexual awakening of some sort. Rhys had turned fourteen four months earlier: Bell, just turned forty, was old enough to be her father and, as Administrator, was the most important man in the small world of Dominica. Rhys's father, William Rees Williams, in his capacity as Chairman of the Roseau Town Board, had spoken one of the official addresses of welcome to Bell soon after he arrived in Dominica. When he left his previous appointment in Nassau, Bell had been seen off by a former Dominican President, Spencer Churchill, who was the husband of Jean Rhys's aunt, Edith Maxwell Lockhart (Bell, Papers (18.viii.1899)). This is a tightly-knit white West Indian world in which there are not many people one can play croquet with. Elsewhere in *Smile Please* she writes: "I shut away at the back of my mind any sexual experiences...not knowing that this would cause me to remember them in detail all the rest of my life" (p. 50)—just as she shut Bell out of her mind, only to remember him here and, as we've seen, elsewhere, after her equally embarrassing experience at the other end of that Imperial Road with which he was so indelibly associated in her mind.<sup>16</sup>

Although Rhys would not necessarily have known this, her story about the Imperial Road has a further connection to Hesketh Bell. The clipped lawn and white house, where the narrator and her husband find their car awaiting them, was the estate called Sylvania, rented in the 1930s by a US couple, the Knowltons, but originally cleared and planted by Bell during his Dominican tenure of office. In 1936 the Imperial Road was driveable as far as Bell's old estate, but no further [fig. 5].

### *Wide Sargasso Sea*

*Wide Sargasso Sea*, as one would expect, offers the most complex version of Rhys's return to Dominica, not least because of the way it also writes West Indian history into the margins of *Jane Eyre*. As so often, there are elements of Rhys's own family life in her heroine's—the Rochester figure is a version of Rhys's own father, a second son making his way in the world and marrying into an established Creole family; Antoinette's convent days echo Rhys's own account of school, set back into the early days of Emancipation; the family memory of the attack on Geneva (Coulibri in the novel) is combined with the brief riot on the street where Rhys lived as a child (*Smile Please*, p. 47).<sup>17</sup> There are connections too between the novel and the two stories of return. In the third part of "Temps Perdi" the narrator's unnamed companion is a stranger to the island, to whose opinion the narrator is still sensitive (*Collected*

*Short Stories*, p. 271), although his approving remarks about the Dominican countryside still carry of an echo of the Rochester figure's in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: "Beautiful, open, park-like country. But what an *extreme* green!" (p. 271).<sup>18</sup>

*Wide Sargasso Sea's* version of the history of the old white Creole families of the West Indies is oblique: their decline is encoded in metropolitan betrayal, black hostility, and the take-over by new capital from England. To the extent to which Antoinette embodies some of the old Creole values, in however confused a form, those values are forcefully removed from their home and taken prisoner in a cold and hostile land. The decline in the Lockhart family fortunes was less dramatic, if not entirely dissimilar. In *Smile Please* Rhys recalls that by the turn of the century, "what with one thing and another" (p. 35), the profits were small. Well before the 1936 return, the male heir, Rhys's uncle Acton Don Lockhart, had died (in 1922), followed a year later, by the suicide of his son. By 1936, "[w]here the house had been was an empty space" (p. 37) [fig. 6].

Some of the themes of "The Imperial Road" had already appeared in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. At the beginning of the novel, Antoinette's family has few visitors, her mother suggests, because the road from the capital is bad and road repairing is "a thing of the past" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 5). The sign of indigeneity—of rootedness in an island—is the ability to walk across it, a question of local knowledge and physical adaptation. The Caribs and the black population of Dominica have both. The white planters and their descendants had neither and were relatively immobile—until the roads were built. Occupying a plantation enclave on the island, Antoinette and her mother are effectively imprisoned once their horse has been poisoned. They remain, again to use Antoinette's mother's word, "marooned"—a term whose meaning in this context is almost exactly the opposite of its original meaning of an animal (and later a slave) which has *escaped* confinement.

Antoinette's nightmares are of walking in the forest, hearing heavy footsteps behind her and not being able to move, on the second occasion having a sinister man guiding her towards some steps (pp. 11, 34). Interestingly, however, the passage in *Wide Sargasso Sea* most reminiscent of "The Imperial Road" is the one in which the Rochester figure is lost in the forest and needs to be rescued by Baptiste, one of the servants at Granbois. He has been following a road; not however, an "imperial" road, but a cobbled French road, which leads to a ruined house. Baptiste comes to Rochester's rescue, but denies the existence of the road, just as the Dominicans had denied the existence of the Imperial Road to Rhys. Within the novel, we know that Rochester has seen a road: the native denial is an insular closing of ranks against the outsider. Only outsiders are denied; Rhys has been denied; therefore the experience must, it seems, be transferred to an outsider, an Englishman, although one with whom, interestingly enough, the reader begins, at this point in the novel, to have some real sympathy.

There is one last connection between “The Imperial Road” and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a thread which I’ll follow into the last part of this essay. After the narrator in the story has hurt her foot, the walking party stops at a house to hire a mule. The woman of the house bathes the narrator’s foot, but with evident bad grace, made apparent when she straightens up and says: “I don’t do this for *you*, for I know who you are and for one of your family I would do *nothing*. I do it for your husband for I hear that he’s a good man and kind to all” (pp. 13-14), sentences that echo a line of Daniel Cosway’s letter to Rochester: “I hear you young and handsome, with a kind word for all, black, white, also coloured” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 61). Cosway is arguably buttering Rochester up: the novel hasn’t given much evidence of his kind words to anybody at all. In the story, the directness of the address is quite startling, the more so for being both unexpected and unexplained, the gesture of servility in washing the feet extraordinarily conjoined with what sounds like two centuries of resentment in the woman’s words. It is one of the most shocking moments in Rhys’s fiction.

#### ‘Race’ in the 1970s

It is this hostility on the part of some of the black characters in the story which seems to have unsettled Rhys’s editor, Diana Athill, and led to the withdrawal of the story. In evident response to some discussion of the story with her friend, Francis Wyndham, Rhys wrote:

Am I prejudiced? I don't know. I certainly wasn't. I really longed to be black & prayed for the miracle that would do the trick. . . But I'm sure that I didn't notice or took for granted a lot that was unjust. Or worse. Of course a reaction was to be expected.

All the same a great deal that is written & said about the West Indies is terribly one sided & some is simply untrue.

So one gets annoyed & fed up & drifts into *seeming* prejudiced.<sup>19</sup>

and then: “I will try to make ‘Imperial Road’ into two stories & suppress all prejudice. But I can’t suppress altogether what I felt so strongly, even then.”<sup>20</sup>

Later, Diana Athill wrote about the affair:

It was the querulous tone of “The Imperial Road” which made both Francis [Wyndham] and me tell Jean that we liked it less than her other work. She often used to talk querulously or indignantly, about black people, like any other old exiled member of the Caribbean plantocracy: why had they hated “us” so much? Hadn’t they been better off in her youth when “we” were running things? Look how they had ruined everything since then!. . . She wasn’t surprised when we disliked “The Imperial Road.”

What she never told Rhys, Athill says, is that she thought that Rhys had “lost her grip on style in that story. . . In the story it was the voice of her ordinary,

non-writing self that one heard. Her strength had ebbed” (O’Connor p. 406). Like many of her late stories, “The Imperial Road” is an autobiographical fragment which could as easily have ended up in her memoirs as in a collection of stories; and, indeed, some passages from “The Imperial Road” appear almost word for word in *Smile Please*.<sup>21</sup>

News of the withdrawal of “The Imperial Road” incited Paul Theroux to offer a fictional version of the incident in a story called “Zombies” and then an “imperial” story of his own, “The Imperial Ice House.” Miss Bristow, in “Zombies,” was obviously based on Rhys:

A celebrated writer in the thirties, she had, after a period of obscurity, lived on to see her work rediscovered and treated— those very angry and unhappy books— with a serene reverence. . . She was regarded as a survivor, a voice from the past. And part of her past, the earliest, was a small island in the Caribbean. . . She began to write again. (Theroux, p. 18)

Miss Bristow had been back once to the island of her childhood: “I couldn’t bear it. Everything has changed. I was lost” (p. 21). She writes a story about an icehouse which her publisher finds “anti-Negro” because “it presents the black people in a bad light” (p. 28). Miss Bristow’s response is that the story “is not about race. It is about condition. . . ‘But they did not know that they were dying, like Romans becoming Italians’—the last line says it all” (p. 29). Theroux’s imaginative reconstruction of the sentiments behind the decision not to publish “The Imperial Road” undoubtedly has its own agenda, but it gets a surprising amount right, considering that Theroux hadn’t read the story. Miss Bristow’s summary is both accurate and disingenuous: “The Imperial Road” is about the condition of the declining imperial class—which, in the Caribbean context, is precisely what makes it a story about race.<sup>22</sup>

In the social and political context of the mid-1970s it is perfectly understandable why “The Imperial Road” should have been judged unsuitable for publication. Throughout that decade black Britons had been responding to the civil rights movement in the USA and the strengthening movements for black emancipation in Rhodesia, Portuguese Africa, and South Africa. They had become more keenly aware of cultural deprivation, economic and social disadvantages, and widespread racism; and were making the dominant white population aware too. Wyndham and Athill no doubt read “The Imperial Road” against this background, with its local variant the series of disturbances in Notting Hill and Brixton during the 1960s and early 1970s. The story must have seemed peculiarly out of kilter with the times, just as Rhys’s own views were.

Rhys herself, “marooned” in Devon and by now well into her 80s, would probably have known little of what was going on in London. However, through Phyllis Allfrey, who had been sending her newspapers, she did know something about what was happening in Dominica and, as usual, events in

Dominica were taking a rather different course.<sup>23</sup> Dominica had become an Associated State of the Commonwealth in March 1967 but was still not fully independent (it became so in November 1978). Its political radicalism, especially in the early 1970s, was often associated with strong anti-white sentiment. A US tourist was killed in 1974, as were a Canadian couple who had settled in Dominica. A Rastafarian-style Dread group, largely peaceful, attracted a hysterical response, not least from the Dominica Labour Party government of Patrick John (though Allfrey opposed the draconian legislation—the Prohibited and Unlawful Societies and Associations Act, enacted in November 1974). Allfrey was deeply opposed to the Prime Minister, Edward LeBlanc, who had expelled her from the political party she had helped found, and his successor Patrick John, the corrupt and authoritarian politician who developed links with South Africa and with a well-known gun-runner, and who was later imprisoned for attempting to overthrow the elected government by means of an armed invasion. As Lisa Paravisini-Gebert has pointed out, there was real concern during these years that timber exploitation would ruin Dominica's rain forests, and Allfrey—founder member of the Dominica Conservation Society—involved Rhys in the protection campaign (Paravisini-Gebert, "Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey", pp. 13-14). Some of Rhys's responses to Allfrey's reports on the madness of those years in Dominica probably find their way into "The Imperial Road," events recalled from 1936 and read through the filter of 1976. However, I want also to try to restore some of the specificity of 1936 to the story.

### Imperial Unrest

In their letters about the story, Wyndham and Rhys discuss what it means to be "prejudiced." "Prejudiced" is the language of Rhys's London friends, the language of English liberalism in the 1960s as it hurried to make sure that everyone was treated equally and that offence was never knowingly given. In contrast to this queasiness about race, perfectly comprehensible at the time, Rhys had a deeply troubled but nuanced sense of racial categories: she had grown up with questions of race and was clearly not about to stop discussing those questions now. In particular, she had that strong sense of a distinction between "black" and "coloured," important on Dominica but not usually perceived as relevant in Britain. The young man on the boat at the beginning of the story, who looks hostile, is "coloured," which for the narrator means "mixed race," as she goes on to explain:

for me coloured people were half white or quarter white. Black people were negroes. It seemed that the English way of labelling all races except their own coloured led to a lot of misunderstanding and confusion, for I'd always understood that negroes and coloured people were very different indeed. Coloured people, I'd been brought up to think, were of all shades and sorts; some were beautiful and



very intelligent; some had the worst qualities of both races—they were often trouble-makers and often treacherous. They *hated*.” (2-3)<sup>24</sup>

The coloured character in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Daniel Cosway, is in many ways the hinge on which that novel turns, in literary terms the Iago to Rochester’s Othello, except in this case the supposed betrayal has been before the marriage, supposed evidence of a kind of moral laxity which Rochester is not averse to associating with tropical islands. Boyd—Daniel Cosway’s “proper” name, according to Antoinette, and therefore presumably his mother’s name—is a name that appears in one other place in Rhys’s writing, when Anna Morgan (in *Voyage in the Dark*) remembers reading on an old slave list from the Constanz estate:

Maillotte Boyd, aged 18, mulatto, house servant. The sins of the fathers Hester said are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generations—don’t talk such nonsense to the child Father said—a myth don’t get tangled in myths he said to me...

“All those names written down,” I said. “It’s funny, I’ve never forgotten it.” (p. 45; and cf. Emery)

If it were possible to use *Voyage in the Dark* as a way of reading *Wide Sargasso Sea*, then Daniel Boyd is presumably Maillotte Boyd’s son by Antoinette’s father. Maillotte is the name of Christophine’s friend in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the mother of Tia. If this is Maillotte Boyd, then Tia is half-sister to Daniel, who is half-brother to Antoinette, a set of relationships that might inflect our readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Such readings may be impermissible by the norms of literary criticism. The point, however, is that Rhys’s fictional universe encourages speculation on such matters through the hints and innuendoes it throws up about “outside” relationships, forcing them to remain in a narrative penumbra that corresponds to their status on the island itself: as that exasperated outsider, Rochester, says, when he notes the resemblance between Antoinette and the servant-girl Amélie: “Perhaps they are related, I thought. It’s possible, it’s even probable in this damned place” (p. 105).

The tone of that statement is echoed, at greater length, in the letters Leslie Tilden Smith wrote to his daughter about some of the very real and demanding coloured figures who often crowded into the Paz hotel in Roseau: a set of Jean Rhys’s illegitimate nephews and nieces belonging to her brother Owen:

We were not altogether sorry to leave Roseau. Every beggar in the place—90% of the population—was at my heels—and her illegitimate relatives at Jean’s. The latter perhaps the more trying. Ena, the most presentable, got an extra couple of quid by showing gratitude for her present. (If they knew all the circumstances—of course impossible to explain—and how poor their “claim” is! Owen has got through nearly all of what money there ever was in the family, and Jean has had far less than any of them, while after the old doctor’s death the family has united against her and for him. Why should she do anything?) Mona seems to have been

insistent but colourless, but Oscar was downright beastly. He was rude; he said the money wasn't half enough to be any good; and he suggested giving it back as Jean was so poor. Jean marvellously kept her temper. "No, Oscar," she said, "you can give it to your sister if it's no use to you. And you can go."<sup>25</sup>

Owen's liaisons were firmly within the colonial tradition, certainly within its insular version, and also followed the well-known family example of James Potter Lockhart, Rhys's great-grandfather, founder of two of Dominica's most distinguished families, both called Lockhart, one white, one coloured. In a passage of the "Black Exercise Book" Rhys writes about the ambivalence of her feelings towards this man, the patriarch and slave-owner. She vacillates between pride and shame: "But the end of my thought was always revolt, a sick revolt & I longed to be identified once and for all with the other side which of course was impossible. I couldn't change the colour of my skin" (p. 30). However, one of the things she finds to say in his favour is that "he was good to some of his mistresses presenting them with freedom, money and land. . . . When my mother was left very badly off the descendent of one [of] these who had prospered exceedingly wrote to her offering to lend her any money she needed—she refused the offer but said in a pensive way—"Cast your bread upon the waters for you will find it after weary days" (pp. 30-31)—a Biblical proverb seemingly designed to neutralise Hester's tart remark about the sins of the father in *Voyage in the Dark*.<sup>26</sup>

The story of the coloured Lockharts is difficult to reconstruct. What seems to emerge, however, is in a nutshell a parable of the slow decline of the planter class in Dominica: as the Geneva plantation becomes more and more difficult to work and less and less profitable, and those dependent on its rents fall slowly into genteel poverty, the coloured branch flourishes in trade and establishes itself as a political force. Theodore Francis Lockhart, presumably one of James Potter Lockhart's outside children, sat in the same House of Assembly (1852) as his half-brother Edward, Jean Rhys's grandfather (*Dominica Blue Book 1852*, pp. 74-5). Theodore's son, Alexander Ramsey Lockhart, was a prominent newspaper owner and politician who in 1887 was nominated to the Legislative Assembly along with Jean Rhys's two uncles, Norman and Acton Don Lockhart. In all probability it was Alexander Lockhart who offered to lend money to Rhys's mother, Minna Rees Williams, sometime after her husband's death in 1910.

There is no evidence that the coloured Lockharts made any claims on their white cousins in general, or on Rhys in particular, beyond those that Leslie mentions, but their relative prosperity and political success made them visible in Dominica in 1936, an aspect of her return which Rhys struggled to come to terms with in her writing. The figure of Daniel Cosway is the most obvious "representation" of the demands of the outside children: unpalatable, deniable, insistent. Antoinette denies Daniel's claims at one point, but as a child she'd been happy enough to refer to "my cousin Sandi," until her new English step-

father had “made me shy about my coloured relatives” (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 28).

Jean Rhys returned to a West Indies on the edge of political turmoil. A sugar-workers’ strike in St. Kitts the previous year heralded a period of labour disturbances, with political overtones: this was the decade when the great trade union leaders like Grantley Adams (Barbados), Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley (Jamaica) were coming to prominence. There had been riots in St. Vincent and St. Lucia before the end of 1935. Marcus Garvey’s reputation was at its height: he would visit Dominica in 1937, a visit arranged by a local supporter, the writer J. R. Ralph Casimir (Andre, pp. 22-25). The very month Rhys left England (February), there had appeared a prophetic volume called *Warning from the West Indies* (Macmillan). Predictably, Dominica had its own line in disturbances, not least the “smuggling” incident in the Carib Reserve mentioned earlier.

The most significant political event during Rhys’s childhood in Dominica had been the establishment of Crown Colony government, direct rule by an Administrator appointed from the Colonial Office. The first elections to the local legislature didn’t then take place until 1925, with Dominica becoming the regional centre for the discussion of constitutional change, the need for which was compellingly stated in C. L. R. James’s *The Case for West Indian Self Government*, published in 1932.<sup>27</sup> In that year the elected members of the Dominica legislature resigned *en bloc*, a political gesture that was admired throughout the region. Among them was Randall Lockhart, one of Rhys’s “coloured cousins,” a prominent progressive voice and, as son of Alexander, the equivalent of *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s Sandi.<sup>28</sup> To make up the required numbers in the council, the Administrator nominated various safe pairs of hands, including Norman Keith Lockhart, Rhys’s cousin and manager of the Geneva estate.<sup>29</sup> Soon after his nomination Mitcham House on the Geneva Estate was burned down, destroying the house with which Rhys most associated her childhood and which she celebrated as Coulibri in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Rumour was rife that the house had been torched, but no one was charged and no conclusive evidence was discovered. Norman Lockhart, who lived in the house and managed the estate for its owners, all members of his family, sought compensation. The government made an immediate payment of £350 for personal effects, a move which became the local political hot potato for the next two years, attracting public meetings, resolutions from the locally powerful Dominica Taxpayers Reform Association, and much vituperative discussion in the local press, almost all of it protesting “against this wilful and corrupt misapplication of public funds.” The outgoing Administrator, the exceedingly unpopular W.A. Bowring, wrote in dramatic terms to the Colonial Office: “Dominica has always been bad but it is now surpassing the bounds of safety, and, in my opinion, unless early steps are taken to check and suppress

the seditious, disloyal and anti-Government preachings of the disaffected politicians, there will be very serious trouble which may spread throughout the West Indies. . . I do not think I am being alarmist but bad influences are at work, possibly backed in the beginning by Soviet assistance” (17.vii.33). The local newspaper editorial was typically blunt:

No person could be found so wanting in self-respect as to stand for election in place of the retired members, but Mr. Administrator Bowring, after scouring the highways and byways, ultimately discerned in Mr. N. K. Lockhart and Capt. W. J. R. Stebbings two dupes ready and willing to follow him, like good Robots, blindly, even to the obvious detriment of the community as a whole, and sufficiently brazen-faced to pose as representatives of a people who unequivocally and unanimously repudiated them.

Treachery to one’s own country does not ordinarily endear the traitor to his fellow-countrymen, and it is unquestionable that both Lockhart and Stebbings have made themselves intensely unpopular throughout Dominica.<sup>30</sup>

Lockhart and Stebbings were, in a sense, Romans unaware that they were becoming Italians, but the police reports of the public meetings of the time make it very clear that ‘colour’ was absolutely at the heart of local perceptions: these were seen as white men supporting a white system which was denying representation to non-whites.

That burning of Coulibri in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, such a central event in the novel, probably then carries in its depiction some of the tensions Rhys experienced on her return to the island just four years after her family had proclaimed their commitment to a colonial administration which now had perilously few supporters. And, even more pertinently here, although the narrator of “The Imperial Road” shows no sign of understanding it this way, the black woman’s ‘inexplicable’ hatred for her family has a very recent and very precise explanation.

## Conclusion

Much of what I’ve been discussing in this essay adheres to the pattern whereby an impoverished stranger comes from off the island, usually from “home”, and courts and marries a local woman who, in narrative terms, is seen to represent the island itself. That story is fundamental to Rhys’s work. It’s the story of Thomas Warner, who takes a Carib mistress from Dominica, and whose English son murders his Carib half-brother at the place thereafter named Massacre, an event Antoinette wants not to explain to her husband. It’s the story of Rochester and Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, doubled in *Wide Sargasso Sea* by the earlier arrival of Mr. Mason to marry Antoinette’s mother. It was the story of Rhys’s own parents, her father an impoverished second son,

like Rochester, who supposedly married her mother after she nursed him back to health, the modern version of the colonial story in which the native woman warns her lover of an impending attack.<sup>31</sup> It is the story of Mr. Ramage, in “Pioneers, Oh Pioneers.” And, crucially, it is the story of Rhys herself when she takes Leslie Tilden Smith back to Dominica, where she finally can be the native again, with him as the stranger, only to find how hard it is to occupy the space of a “British native of Dominica” at the exact moment when the bankruptcy of the imperial ideal is becoming more and more apparent throughout the West Indies. To attempt to walk across the island was a desperate assertion of belonging, of being native, of doing something that only Dominicans could do, or would want to do, or would need to do. Yet the attempt is compromised from the start by being dependent on the Imperial Road, that failed dream of colonial modernisation. The non-completion of the road undermines her claim to indigeneity as comprehensively as it demonstrates the failure of the imperial project. Right at the end of her life, Rhys clipped from the *Dominica Star*, the local newspaper that Phyllis Allfrey sent regularly from the island, an article about a twenty-one-year-old girl who’d been lost in the tropical forest for days. The article ended: “WARNING: Visitors should realise that the terrain of Dominica, though a pinprick on the map, is as vast as an African jungle when you get lost. . .” (Angier, p. 651). In some ways this acts as a retrospective justification—it could have happened to anybody, but only if Rhys identifies herself no longer as a native, but as a *visitor*.

The foot-washing scene relates to all this in no easy way, and yet it is clearly the central scene of the story, standing stark and silent as its related affect is displaced and diffused in the narratorial brouhaha about the existence of the Imperial Road. The narrator offers no response to the woman’s harsh words, and no explanation to the reader, although—to the extent to which the story is autobiographical—she would have known why the words were spoken and could have explained to the reader, or even to the woman herself, that she did not identify herself with the small white colonial elite which had, in the figure of her uncle, betrayed one of the early moves towards political independence. For whatever reason, those words couldn’t be spoken—either in fact or in fiction. Her rootedness on the island is allowed to be associated—for better or worse—with Geneva and what it represents. Politically, that position is indefensible, or at least Rhys has no interest in defending it, but neither can she disassociate herself from it. Factually or fictionally, there was a connection to be made, via Randall Lockhart, via the coloured cousins, to the beginnings of anti-colonial struggle on the island. But that was a line Rhys could not cross: her heart was locked into the family past. Her response to that dilemma—which has the merit of a quite brutal honesty about her position—produces, to put a name on it, a kind of primal scene of postcolonial self-abjection: she places herself, through her narrator, as the object of a vilification so complete and so unanswered that it both gives point and power to the story

of “The Imperial Road” and yet was so discomfoting that it ensured that the story remained unpublished for almost exactly twenty-five years after its final redaction.<sup>32</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Short versions of this paper were presented at the conference, *Islands: Histories and Representations*, University of Kent, April 1999, at the conference of the Australian Association of Caribbean Studies at La Trobe University, Melbourne, July 1999, and at lectures at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, ANU in Canberra, the University of Wollongong, and the University of Oregon in Eugene, all during 1999. Warm thanks in particular to Rod Edmond, Vanessa Smith, Sue Thomas, Helen Tiffin, Jacqueline Lo, Paul Sharrad, Cath Ellis, and Judith Raiskin.

<sup>2</sup> I quote from what appears to be the final version of the seven held in the Jean Rhys Papers (hereafter JRP), McFarlin Library Dept. of Special Collections, University of Tulsa: “The Imperial Road,” dated 24<sup>th</sup> March 1974. Quotations from the material in the collection are given with the permission of Francis Wyndham, Rhys’s Executor, and of McFarlin Library Dept. of Special Collections.

<sup>3</sup> I analyse this story at length in a forthcoming book (Hulme, *Remnants of Conquest*).

<sup>4</sup> “Typical Dominica” was first published in shortened form in an English magazine before appearing in full in the English edition of Waugh’s *Where the Clocks Chime Twice* [1952], but not in the US edition—*Where the Clocks Strike Twice* [1951]—which is otherwise, apart from its title, identical. It’s quoted here from his collection, *The Sugar Islands* (1958).

<sup>5</sup> One of the most popular of interwar travel-books, Fleming’s *Brazilian Adventure* was published in 1933.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Campbell, p. 59 (the letter is in the Twentieth Century Archives at Boston University). The letter is tentatively dated “early 1950s” (62). Rhys lived at the return address on the letter to Waugh from early 1952 to late 1953 (Angier, pp. 465-67). It’s not clear whether the letter postdates any of the earlier versions of the story.

<sup>7</sup> See *Report of the Commission...* For background information, see Boromé, Trouillot (*Peasants and Capital*), Honychurch, and Paravisini-Gebert (“Forgotten Outpost”).

<sup>8</sup> “I regard many of our Colonies as being in the condition of undeveloped estates, and estates that can never be developed without Imperial assistance” (*Parliamentary Debates* XXXVI, p.1409 (22.viii.1895)). The speech was reported in *The Times* (24<sup>th</sup> August 1895), as quoted in Garvin and Amery, p. 21. On Chamberlain and the West Indies, see Will, pp. 229-73 and Kubicek, pp. 68-9.

<sup>9</sup> Neville Chamberlain had first brought Bell to his father’s attention after Bell had asked him “to use his influence on my behalf with his father” (Bell, Papers (1.viii.1899)). Neville had become a sisal planter in the Bahamas on Chamberlain’s encouragement, though in the end not a successful one (see Dilks, pp. 55-75). Hesketh Bell’s papers are in the Royal Commonwealth Society Collection at the University of Cambridge Library. Box 2 consists of synopses of his diaries. For a full description of the material, see Simpson, pp. 38-9.

<sup>10</sup> Bell, Papers (25.ix.1900 and 13.xi.1900). A further letter was published under the same title on 5.i.1903. A booklet giving hints to settlers was written in 1903 and a thousand copies distributed to hotels and waiting rooms in England (Bell, *Glimpses*, p. 832; *Dominica: Notes...*, and *Notes on Dominica*).

<sup>11</sup> See also Bell's official report to Chamberlain (*Dominica. Roads...*). It's clear from both documents that Bell's main concern was to open up interior lands for plantation, rather than improve communications across the island.

<sup>12</sup> The story was probably first written in the late 1930s, though not published until it appeared in *The Times* in June 1969 under the title "My Dear Darling Mr. Ramage," seven years before its inclusion in the collection *Sleep It Off, Lady*. At one time Rhys had been working the story into a novel (see Angier, p. 471n).

<sup>13</sup> Ramage's story had been passed on by word of mouth: Hawys arrived on Dominica several decades after Ramage's departure. According to Lennox Honychurch (personal communication), older residents say that the holes he dug are still visible.

<sup>14</sup> Hesketh Bell had to deal with the aftermath: "The Administrator submitted an application from Mrs. Ramage, asking that her husband (a lunatic, native of the United Kingdom) be sent home by the Government at her expense. His Honour informed the Council that he had submitted the matter for the consideration of the Governor" (C.O. 74/37 (25.xi.1901)). (Colonial Office papers are kept at the Public Record Office, Kew, London).

<sup>15</sup> Bell's sister Nell, brother-in-law Jack Scully, and small niece Marjorie (Medjé in Bell's diaries) spent a lot of time on Dominica during Bell's administration. Scully was one of the 'pioneers', who soon found that trying to grow cocoa high in the interior of the island was a sure way to lose money. The children's fancy-dress party to which Rhys refers to seems to have taken place on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1904 (Bell, Papers (29.xii.1904)).

<sup>16</sup> That awkward relationship between older man and young girl is frequent in Rhys's fiction, and is now usually traced back to the encounter with a "Mr. Howard" she wrote about in the "Black Exercise Book" and which, as Teresa O'Connor and others have suggested, leaves its mark on much of Rhys's writing, finding its clearest fictional form in "Goodbye Marcus, Goodbye Rose," where Captain Cardew touches the twelve-year-old Phoebe's breasts in the Botanical Garden and talks to her ceaselessly about the various ways of making love: "He'd explain that love was not kind and gentle, as she had imagined, but violent. Violence, even cruelty, was an essential part of it. He would expand on this, it seemed to be his favourite subject" (*The Collected Short Stories*, p. 287). Phoebe listens, and feels guilty for having listened: "The thought of some vague, irreparable loss saddened her" (p. 289). The earliest account of this incident Rhys gives her age as fourteen: "How old are you? I'm fourteen— Fourteen he said fourteen—quite old enough to have a lover" ("Black Exercise Book", p. 51).

<sup>17</sup> I discuss some of the possible reasons for this in an essay called "The Locked Heart".

<sup>18</sup> Cf. "What an extreme green,' was all I could say," in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (p. 42).

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Jean Rhys to Francis Wyndham, 9.vii.1975 (JRP, Francis Wyndham Addenda). I'd like to thank Francis Wyndham and Diana Athill for their responses to a draft version of this essay. They are of course in no way responsible for my interpretations of their published comments.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Jean Rhys to Francis Wyndham, 17.vii.1975 (JRP, Francis Wyndham Addenda). Part of the original story became "The Bishop's Feast" (*Collected Short Stories*, pp. 291-94).

<sup>21</sup> It appears that the story was originally intended as—or at least seen by her agent as—part of *Smile Please* (Campbell, pp. 60-61).

<sup>22</sup> See Theroux's letter to Teresa O'Connor (26.vi.1986) as quoted in O'Connor, p. 406. "The Imperial Icehouse" (in the same collection) is less convincing as a companion piece, precisely because the violence against the plantation owner is so well motivated by his treatment of his black labourers.

<sup>23</sup> Phyllis Allfrey and Jean Rhys met in England in the 1930s and resumed their friendship in 1973. Phyllis was editor of the *Dominica Herald* in the early 1960s, and then

founder and editor of the *Dominica Star* (1966-81), which she would send to Rhys: see Paravisini-Gebert (*Phyllis Shand Allfrey* pp. 243-46). Olive Senior's poem, "Meditation on Red" has Rhys "Marooned/in the grey" when living in Devon (p. 46).

<sup>24</sup> Rhys used the Dominican term "coloured" quite unselfconsciously. I use "coloured," and the equally awkward alternative, "mixed-race," with conscious discomfort. However, the discomfort is perhaps an index of the importance of this area of inbetweenness.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Leslie Tilden Smith to Phyllis Smyser, 19.iii.1936 (JRP). Ena Williams has confirmed the broad outline of this account (interview with Hulme, December 1990; also cf. Angier, p. 29). Ena Williams is Owen's daughter with Mary Johnson, Oscar and Mona Williams are his children with Teresa Hill, who was a servant at the Rees Williams's smaller estate, Amelia. Rhys's own account has three mistresses and four children (David Plante Papers: "Smile Please"), though she may have been confusing the children with the mistresses and the children's children with the mistresses's children: Ena Williams was 29 in 1936 and had a young daughter, Myrtle (cf. Frickey, p. 5).

<sup>26</sup> And cf. what Antoinette overhears at her mother's marriage to Mr. Mason: "And all those women! She never did anything to stop him—she encouraged him. Presents and smiles for the bastards every Christmas" (*Wide Sargasso Sea*, p. 13).

<sup>27</sup> First published in Nelson, Lancashire, in full, in 1932, as *Captain Cipriani*; then by the Hogarth Press in 1933 as a long pamphlet, *The Case for West Indian Self-Government*. Extracts are reprinted in James (*Future in the Present*, pp. 25-40). On this period in Dominica, see Honychurch, pp. 162-3, and Andre and Christian.

<sup>28</sup> Owen Lockhart's fictionalised family history has his young sister having a passionate affair with a young half-Carib boy, ending in a dramatic joint suicide (Angier, p. 30-3).

<sup>29</sup> Apparently Norman Lockhart was persuaded to do the right thing by his mother. (C.O. 152/438/9). (All references to material relating to this incident are taken from this C. O. file).

<sup>30</sup> Fiat Justitia, in *The Dominica Tribune-Guardian* (23.vi.1933).

<sup>31</sup> See the account of this incident that Rhys wrote into an earlier version of the story published as "Pioneers, Oh, Pioneers" (forthcoming in the next issue of *The Jean Rhys Review*).

<sup>32</sup> The relevance of Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" to the study of Rhys's work is finely brought out by Helen Carr in her reading of *Good Morning, Midnight* (pp. 66-72); and cf. Fletcher and Benjamin.

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