

BIOGRAPHY

Gerald Basil Edwards (1899–1976) was born on the Channel Island of Guernsey. He left the island for good around 1926 and was married in 1930, but the marriage ended just a few years later and had little contact with his four children after that. Guernsey would be the setting of Edwards' only novel, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, which was published posthumously in 1981. He began writing it in his early sixties, intending it to be the first part of a trilogy, but he never completed the second two volumes. He wrote that "the mere thought of having a public image appals me,"* and he made sure that drafts of his work and most of his correspondence were destroyed. Though in later life he spoke of going back to live in Guernsey, the island had become too expensive for a person of his modest means. From 1967 until his death in 1976, he lived in Weymouth, the closest point to Guernsey on the English mainland.

* "appals" [sic] from John Fowles's introduction

THE BOOK OF EBENEZER LE PAGE

by G. B. Edwards

Introduction by John Fowles

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"[A] knowing and beguiling chronicle of life on the English Channel isle of Guernsey. . . This deceptively plain-spoken story of a man's years passing in review before him struck me, when I first read it in 1981, as a beautifully crafted job of writing. Upon rereading it recently, I redoubled my liking and admiration for both Ebenezer and Edwards."

—Ivan Doig, *Christian Science Monitor*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Book of Ebenezer Le Page is a tour-de-force of storytelling that is itself a celebration of the written word. In the character of Ebenezer, G.B. Edwards gives us a man seldom found in literature: a crusty, querulous bachelor who has never left the tiny island of his birth, but who witnesses the span of the twentieth century, and who has extraordinary insight into the depths of the human heart.

Ebenezer has taken it upon himself to write a memoir, and he does so in lively, colloquial dialect. But the tale cannot be told without including the stories of his large and eccentric network of family and neighbors, who scheme, gossip, love, and hate their way through the generations. Here are Ebenezer's ever-warring aunts, La Prissy and La Hetty—married to the Martel brothers and living side-by-side in houses named Timbuctoo and Wallaballoo; here are their sons, the boorish Horace and the misunderstood, tragic Raymond; here, too, are Ebenezer's beloved sister, Tabitha, his gentle friend and soulmate Jim Mahy, and the fire-brand Liza Quéripel whom Ebenezer loves and battles—but who will retain her independence till the end. Ebenezer suffers the deaths of loved ones, the hardships of German occupation during the Second World War, and the encroachment of modern technology and mass tourism into Guernsey. Throughout, he laments the transformation of his beloved home. It is only as he nears the end of his life that Ebenezer finds his spiritual heir, and discovers for whom he has been writing the whole time.

G. B. Edward's posthumous novel is a song sung in praise of the past. Suffused with a deep love of Guernsey and of its people, it is at turns tender and wickedly bawdy and funny.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. "They're just busting to get away from the island; and, when they do get away, they're breaking their hearts to come back. That's why I have never left Guernsey, me. I knew I would only end up where I begun" (p.6). Why doesn't Ebenezer ever venture beyond Guernsey?
2. What explains Ebenezer's deep love for Jim? Could he have been a better friend after Jim's disastrous marriage to Phoebe? Are there homosexual undertones in their relationship?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Stoner

John Williams
(introduction by John McGahern)

Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself

Robert Montgomery Bird
(introduction by Christopher Looby)

Corrigan

Caroline Blackwood
(afterword by Andrew Solomon)

Great Granny Webster

Caroline Blackwood
(introduction by Honor Moore)

Lolly Willowes

Sylvia Townsend Warner
(introduction by Alison Lurie)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea*
John Fowles,
The French Lieutenant's Woman
Alice Munro,
Lives of Girls and Women
Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*
William Faulkner,
The Sound and the Fury
Alistair MacLeod,
No Great Mischief
Halldór Laxness,
Independent People
Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*
Allan Gurganus, *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow*

3. How would you describe the structure of the novel? How would the novel have changed if Edwards had written it as a chronologically linear narrative? What would have been lost? How does the journal form affect the work?

The novel is presented as Ebenezer's own memoir. What does the process of writing down his life do for Ebenezer? Do you think that Edwards is making a broader point about writing and literature?

4. Are Aunt Prissy and Aunt Hetty intended to be believable characters or do they function as caricatures?
5. What kind of bond do Horace and Raymond share? What sets Raymond apart from those around him? Why does Raymond have a crisis of faith?
6. Ebenezer judges Christine harshly, but at one point says: "I have often wondered if, perhaps in her heart of hearts, Christine did love Raymond..." (p. 235). Do you agree with this speculation? Could Ebenezer fully comprehend how great a tragedy marriage was for Christine?
7. What are Ebenezer's views on women? What generalizations does he make about them? How are most women on Guernsey portrayed?
8. Religion is important on Guernsey. How would you describe Ebenezer's personal ideas about religion? Is he a religious man himself?
9. "I remember too well how I thought at times when it comes down to rock bottom, I didn't care tuppence about anything, or anybody, except myself; and that everybody else was the same. If this is true, it is something a man should not know. It may be it was the one lesson we learnt from the Occupation, but it was the wrong lesson" (p. 293). How does this statement illustrate the battle between Ebenezer's conflicting beliefs about human nature?
10. Why do you think Ebenezer never settles down? Why doesn't Liza accept his proposals? Is she being truthful with him when he visits her at the end of the book?
11. After the Second World War, Ebenezer briefly considers marrying Rita Nicolle, but decides against it because it wouldn't have been a love match, but a business arrangement. Years later, whenever he sees her grown son, he wonders if he has been a fool. Why does he feel this way? Do you think that Ebenezer is often able to see both sides of a situation? Do you think he generally behaves with integrity?
12. Why does Ebenezer feel the way he does about the new Guernsey? Why is he so attached to the old way of life?
13. Many publishers initially dismissed *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* as being merely a "provincial novel" because it is set in a small place and narrated by an ordinary man. Discuss how the novel's themes, structure, and language elevate it to something grander and more complex than provincial fiction.