

Jean Rhys

Jean Rhys was the author of the novel 'Wide Sargasso Sea', the prequel to Charlotte Bronte's 'Jane Eyre'. Jean was a creole born on the Caribbean island of Dominica in 1890 and sent to England by her father in 1907.

Jean's Beckenham house

From 1946 to 1950 she lived in a large Victorian house on the corner of Stumps Hill Lane and Southend Road, Beckenham. Here she saw little of her loving but financially inept third husband, Max, who was losing his and his employer's money to post war fraudsters. Her only company were her three cats.

The house was cold, damp and in need of repair and they let the upstairs floors to tenants to help pay the bills.

Left alone for long spells, Jean turned to drink and engaged in furious rows with her tenants and especially with her neighbour, who kept a dog. In 1949, Jean was remanded in Holloway Prison for 5 days after being convicted for assaulting and beating her neighbour. Jean's defence was that the neighbour's dog had killed two of her cats.



Jean hated Beckenham. In two years she appeared eight times before the Bromley Magistrates. After Max was given a two year sentence in Maidstone jail for fraud in 1950, Jean left Beckenham. In 1957 she began work on *Wide Sargasso Sea* which was eventually published in 1966. Her novel won awards and she was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

In 2003, Polly Teale wrote and produced her play 'After Mrs Rochester' for the Shared Experience theatre touring group. In it Polly skilfully draws parallels between the life of Jean Rhys (rebellious, prone to fits of violent temper and feeling misunderstood) and to the mad woman in the attic in *Jane Eyre*. In the preface to her play, Polly writes:

"by the time we meet Mrs Rochester in Jane Eyre, she has become a monster, scarcely recognisable as human. It is not surprising that Jean felt a desire to rewrite Mrs Rochester's story, to tell it from the beginning. To tell it from the inside."

In Beckenham, Jean was not locked in the attic of a large house away other people. But without her husband and any local friends and relatives, Jean would have felt similarly isolated living alone in a very large house. Most of Jean's published novels are autobiographical - disguised accounts of her own experiences - and I sense that her four years living in Beckenham were reflected to some extent in the characterisation of Rochester's wife in *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

What music can reflect the life of Jean Rhys? In the March 2013 concert, Beckenham soprano Jean Low sung a short lullaby to soothe her tortured soul composed by Beckenham composer, Carey Blyton.