

**Rhys Davies, Professional Welshman:
Identities in the Marketplace**

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Introduction

My first interest in Rhys Davies involved the complexity of his identity. As a shop-owner's son in a working-class community, a Welshman writing in London, and a gay man, he was a powerfully liminal figure with potentially powerful things to say about intersections of nation, class, and sexuality. As I looked further and became better acquainted with Davies the man, I began to see not just a Welshman, a Rhondda shop-boy, and a gay man, but a professional writer who was intensely conscious of his relationship to, in Bourdieu's words, the entire field of his cultural production. And it occurred to me (obvious as it seemed afterwards) that Davies (and every other author for that matter) would never have been interesting in any other sense if he had not first been published. I became very interested in the mechanisms of that production and how they might have influenced Davies's writing. In this essay, I will present some of my findings and some of the questions they raise. I begin by emphasizing Davies's awareness and resentment of a literary market that he consistently struggled with, and his retreat into an ideal vision of the artist that he couldn't really maintain in the face of financial need. I then turn to one of Davies's later short stories in which he illustrates his lack of faith in the artist's claims to aesthetic independence. Finally, I consider the implications of this discussion for Davies's representations of Wales.¹

Central to this conception of the author and his identity in the marketplace are the notions of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow. These concepts are most fully developed in Janice Radway's discussion of the emergence of a middlebrow reading audience in early twentieth-century America through such emergent institutions as The Book-of-the-Month Club. Radway explores the controversy over the role of the book clubs as an "extended debate about the role of culture in a modern democracy and mass society."² What was at stake, Radway claims, was "the appropriate relationship between individuals and the entity called 'culture'.³" The selection committees of book clubs selected the fruits of high culture and offered them to a wider audience at a low cost. To the self-proclaimed protectors of so-called "high" culture, the middlebrow represented a new stratum of cultural consumption that threatened the securely dichotomous relationship between high and low. Further, by its

¹ This essay derives from research carried out for my dissertation, Huw Edwin Osborne, "Rhys Davies, Professional Writer: Identity in the Marketplace." Diss. University of Alberta, Edmonton, 2002.

² Janice Radway, "The Scandal of the Middlebrow: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Class Fracture, and Cultural Authority," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89:4 (Fall 1990): 705.

³ Radway, 710.

sheer size and by the scale of its production, the middlebrow threatened to create a kind of standardization of taste and a massification of culture. Even the selectors of The Book-of-the-Month Club were unable to do away with the individual/culture nexus and commitment to taste and aesthetic excellence that dominated the discourse of culture. They capitulated to the terms of their detractors and sought to legitimize their role within them. In general, the debate surrounding the book clubs illustrates “how difficult it was in the early twentieth century to cope with the implications of mass education and literacy for the traditional discourse on culture.”⁴

While the controversy that Radway defines coheres around The Book-of-the-Month Club in early twentieth-century America, her analysis speaks to a more general anxiety that permeated culture industries as whole, in the U.S. and elsewhere. The critical climate in which Davies sought to find a place for himself as a writer was also deeply divided regarding the place and role of art in the modern age. In The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939, John Carey argues that the dramatic rise in literacy in England at the end of the 19th-century created new reading audiences that threatened the hegemony of the cultural elite. The Education Act of 1871 led to an “uncultivated” mass of readers whose reading interests bypassed traditional cultural standards. The popular newspaper in particular created an alternative reading culture that was governed by sales figures rather than the ostensibly sacred standards of taste and distinction cherished by the cultural elite.⁵ The reaction from the cultural elites seeking to preserve the authority of their particular brand of “literacy,” evident, for example, in the criticism of F. R. Leavis and the poetry of T. S. Eliot, was predictably shrill with panic. As Carey argues, “modernist” culture and literature were largely formed by their reaction to the reading masses. Modernism’s rejection of the mass constituted “a defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity.”⁶ Its resistance of realism, its cultivation of irrationality and obscurity, and its commitment to the “difficult,” in Eliot’s phrase, was all part of a process of alienating the masses by placing “art” beyond their reach.⁷ For some, therefore, to write for the masses necessarily meant to lower one’s standards to the level of an uneducated literate multitude. To aspire toward the acquisition of a popular mass audience was to sacrifice one’s claim to the role of artist. The artist catered to the specialized tastes of the few, while the popular writer catered to the demands of the cost-benefit ratio of the mass market. Davies, a relatively unsuccessful author adapting to many forms of publication with different readerships and various relationships to art and the market, negotiated this cultural conflict with a great deal of difficulty.

A complete understanding of how books and authors related to this larger cultural context must be sensitive to the complex networks of discussion, production, dissemination and reception in which books and authors (and in this particular discussion, Davies) circulated. Robert Darnton argues that we need to be sensitive to the entire apparatus of a book’s manifestation in history and culture, and calls for an interest in the entire

⁴ Radway, 719.

⁵ John Carey, The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939 (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 6-7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

“communications circuit.”⁸ This circuit “runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader.”⁹ This approach is very close to Pierre Bourdieu’s claim that we must be sensitive to the entire “field of cultural production” which does not only include “the direct producers of the work in its materiality (artist, writer, etc.) but also the producers of the meaning and value of the work—critics, publishers, gallery directors [anthologists?] and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such.... In short, it is a question of understanding works of art as a *manifestation* of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated.”¹⁰

In the cases of both Darnton and Bourdieu, we are invited to resist the temptation of reading Davies as an entirely autonomous political or artistic agent. Rather, we may consider the implications of addressing the complete network of expressions and actions that create and influence the desires, expectations, values and fantasies of a culture of literary production and consumption. So, a book’s or author’s position in the literary market is never simply a reduction to price or cost of production, but also the manifestation of a range of intersecting influences, from the standards touted in reviews, to the language of advertisements, to the opinions of friends, to the collector’s appraisal, to the level of commitment from publishers, to the appearance of books, and to an author’s own sense of how all these factors work together in relation to his own creative work.

“The Elinor Glyn of the highbrows”: Artist v. Market

When Rhys Davies’s *A Bed of Feathers*, published in 1929 by P. R. Stephensen’s Mandrake Press, was reviewed by *The New Age*, the reviewer, after accusing Davies of having read too much D. H. Lawrence, dismissed him as “the highbrow’s Elinor Glynn.”¹¹ Davies made two references to this review in letters to his friend and sometime publisher and promoter, Charles Lahr. He made the first reference upon reading the *New Age* review, and the second upon receiving Victor Gollancz’s rejection of two of his novels. Gollancz claimed that the novels “would certainly make an appeal to the sort of public which [he did not] want to cultivate.”¹² On receiving this rejection, Davies commented, “That last is a nasty smack in the mouth of the small but select public that seems to get pleasure out of my books! Snubbed by Mr. Gollancz, the publisher of Sarah Salt and Isadora Duncan. Dear, Dear! This is what comes of being the Elinor Glyn of the highbrows.”¹³

In this brief anecdote we see a number of external cultural forces coming together to influence the author’s negotiation of his role as a professional writer. A struggling author who has published in the limited market of special editions, small magazines, and obscure publishers is seeking the security of an established publisher. This search is partly understood in terms set by his reviewers, those arbiters of taste who mediate the reception

⁸ Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of L’Amourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1990), 111.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 37.

¹¹ *The New Age*, July 18, 1929.

¹² Rhys Davies to Charles Lahr, undated, V 36, iii 27-3, Sterling Library, University of London.

¹³ *Ibid.*

of books in culture. One of these reviews effects him deeply enough (and not for the last time) to become part of his own narrative of his career. He is also forced to compare himself to other authors (D. H. Lawrence, Sarah Salt, Isadora Duncan) with different relations to their fields of cultural production. And he communicates all of this to Charles Lahr, a bookseller, publisher, and node for a community of young and ambitious writers. At this stage in his career, Davies is revealed in a very anxious relationship to his identity as a professional writer as it is determined by a range of forces outside the mere act of writing.

The central defining anxiety behind Davies's relationship to his means of production lies in the paradoxical characterization of him as the "Elinor Glynn of the highbrows." Elinor Glynn was a best-selling author of sensational romances who made the transition into Hollywood film writing in the 1920s. She is now most famous for the 1927 film about sex appeal, *It*, adapted by her from one of her novels. By the time the *New Age* reviewer dismisses Davies in her name, she is recognizable as an icon of the sensational and popular mass-market commodity. This reviewer suggests that although Davies may have "IT" when it comes to titillation, he falls sadly short of the expectations of "true literature." And the obvious high cultural alternative to Elinor Glyn is already encoded in the review in the form of D. H. Lawrence. Presumably, Lawrence is the standard that Davies has failed to live up to and Elinor Glyn is the enemy at the gates threatening the standards that the reviewer seeks to reaffirm through his dismissal of Davies. Nor was this an isolated perception of the relationship between Lawrence and Glyn. Aldous Huxley, in a letter to his father in 1915 draws much the same contrast: "What an odd business it was about the suppression of Lawrence's book, *The Rainbow*. It is always the serious books that get sat on—how much better to suppress Mrs. Glyn."¹⁴

But if Davies is so bad, why refer to him as highbrow at all? There must be something beyond *what* he writes that exalts him to such an identification. The simple answer is, I think, also the correct one. The Mandrake Press was a small press established by one of the publishers/editors of a little "highbrow" magazine attached to the Charles Lahr community called *The London Aphrodite*. The Mandrake emerged just a year before *A Bed of Feathers* to produce a special edition of D. H. Lawrence's paintings at the same time that Lawrence was losing faith in mainstream commercial publishers. (It is also not a coincidence that Lawrence and Davies were friends by this time.) The small circulation and cost of 3/6 for one story excluded *A Bed of Feathers* from any taint of commercial success. So its titillating content would have been reserved for the few discerning readers interested in the discrete and specialized market. And so, when the *New Age* reviewer read Davies's Mandrake Press book, he saw Elinor Glyn in highbrow clothing, thereby locating Davies in a conflict between the popular and the highbrow.

This conflict haunted Davies throughout his career, but never more than at this time, at the precise moment when he was trying to make the transition into a wider market. This review came not long after Davies wrote to Charles Lahr in 1928, "I shall *have* to make my next novel more popular in theme. I mustn't get the reputation of being unsaleable."¹⁵ It came not long before he would explain to Robert Gibbings, the president of the Golden

¹⁴ James Sexton, "*Brave New World*, the Feelies, and Elinor Glynn," *English Language Notes*, 35 (September 1997): 36.

¹⁵ Rhys Davies to Charles Lahr, undated, V 36, iii, Sterling Library, University of London.

Cockerel Press (another publisher of special editions), in 1932, “I’m no Christmas author.”¹⁶ In the same vein he complained to an American book dealer in 1935, “I don’t suppose I ever will be a best seller!”¹⁷ and, in 1940, to his friend and fellow writer, George Bullock, “But, alas, I’m beginning to see that it’s not in me to write a best seller.”¹⁸ At the same time and in contrast to these self-conscious lamentations on his inability to sell, Davies made defensive affirmations of his purely “literary” indifference to the market that excluded him. He claimed that his novel *Honey and Bread* had been a success “at least from the literary point of view.”¹⁹ He wrote to a reviewer friend, G. H. Wells, that the cost and production of a special guinea edition of his story, “The Skull,” seemed unnecessary “from [their] ‘literary’ point of view”²⁰, and in 1942, he distinguished between the types of readers he ostensibly catered to in a letter to another friend and reviewer, Raymond Marriott: “My book came out and appears to have pleased persons—literate persons, that is.”²¹ And, despite his dismissal of the “unnecessary” special edition, in a 1931 essay on book collecting, written for the rare book manager of Foyles, Davies, who had three or four special editions behind him and the same number before him and no strong publisher in sight, wrote dismissively of mass market culture: “In a world where the cinema, the two-penny lending library, tinned music and hysterical newspapers are becoming ever more popular, it is a relief to come across a leisurely designed book produced in the tradition, more or less, of the illuminated manuscripts of old.”²²

The central conflict illustrated by characterizing Davies as the “Elinor Glyn of the highbrows,” therefore, is the conflict of the writer who lived precariously by his writing for most of his career, who wanted financial security and the backing of a reputable commercial publisher, but who nonetheless—and partly because of his lack of financial success—cultivated an idea of the artist and the artist’s role that eschewed any taint of commercial motive. At times Davies wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, and at others he longed for the popularity of the best-seller’s audience. When he wrote to Lahr in 1928 describing Charlie Ashleigh as too “terribly commercial,” he acknowledged that he was himself also “a little tainted with that, having been reared and working in that atmosphere.” But Ashleigh, Davies claimed, had “carried it to a nauseating degree.”²³ Davies was trying to draw some rather fine lines here, going so far as to vaguely excuse his own awareness of the market as somehow contingent upon the working-class context of his youth. Regardless of his rationalizations, we may read Davies here as condemning in another what he recognized, and to a certain degree resented, in himself; his dependence upon a market that had so far denied him, and would continue to deny him in the future, both the full cultural sanctification of the serious artist and the popular approval of the bestseller.

¹⁶ Rhys Davies to Robert Gibbings, Dec. 20, 1932, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

¹⁷ July 3 1935, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

¹⁸ Rhys Davies to George Bullock, 1940, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

¹⁹ RD to HWS, July 3 1935, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²⁰ Rhys Davies to G.H. Wells, July 13 1936, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²¹ Rhys Davies to Raymond Marriot, Oct 3 1942 MS 20897 E, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

²² “The Nose,” Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin.

²³ Rhys Davies to Charles Lahr, November 14, 1928, V 36, iii, Sterling Library, University of London.

No More Islands: The Artist in the Market

The examples I've given only scratch the surface of a professional complex in Davies that almost amounted to an obsession. This conflict is evident throughout his career and finds expression in his relationship to his representations of Wales, his negotiation of working-class themes, his queer sexuality, his understanding of the potential physical forms of his work, including theatre and cinema, and the imagined gender and relative cultivation of his audiences. My dissertation explores these questions in greater detail, but for the purposes of this essay I will highlight one 1958 story, "Tears, Idle Tears," in which Davies explores exactly that conflict which has plagued his career and which has been the focus of this essay. The story concerns, Francis, a young scholar loosely modeled on Davies's younger self, and his gradual loss of his illusions regarding his idol, a painter named Ewart. Ewart, whose "professional achievements were beyond dispute,"²⁴ cannot come to terms with the commercialization that fame has imposed upon his art, and devotes his time to a "vindication" of Gauguin, dreaming of a similar escape into artistic isolation. Francis explains as much when Ewart's frustrated and neglected wife praises the wrong kind of success in her husband:

"But he's successful. He's not a beginner. He can sell all his work. He's in the Tate!" Francis, half in irritation, made another attempt.... "Every genuine artist is possessed by a demon—really a god, I suppose. It demands an eternal allegiance but often it takes a sleep, allowing the artist to attend to such matters as getting married or paying income tax. But when wide-awake and at its most possessive the god's demands are ruthless. The artist then wants to flee from everything and, I dare say, everybody. This isn't selfishness in him or egocentricity; it's a need to sacrifice himself entirely to the grueling hard work of serving his master."²⁵

And Ewart's own characterization of the artist's obligation is not too different from Francis's idealized description: "An artist's chief struggle is to keep himself in pure, Jesus Christ condition. That means, I suppose, a condition of terribly knowledgeable innocence, so that he can realize God's lilies of the field as He saw them."²⁶ His greatest complaint of his work is that "They sell too well.... It's insulting how quickly they sell."²⁷ And again: "I could sell this painting at once for a couple of hundred pounds,' he said, disgustedly. 'I've got the smell of success...pain!'"²⁸ Ewart and his work are insulted by their reduction to the capital of his name, and not even Francis's devoted and pure praise can dispel the artist's fear of losing control of his art to the exterior forces of evaluation and acclaim. And from this frustration comes his Gauguin-dream of escaping to an "island"—which, incidentally, echoes Davies recollection of D. H. Lawrence's repudiation of the "'proper' public of the

²⁴ Rhys Davies, "Tears, Idle Tears," *Rhys Davies: Collected Stories* 3 Vols. Edited by Meic Stephens. (Llandysul: Gomer, 2000), 419.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 424.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 420.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 418.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 419.

big publishing houses.”²⁹ To a great extent, “Tears, Idle Tears” is the story of an artist hopelessly defending the purity of his art against his inevitable circulation within the mechanisms of his production and reception.

Ultimately this heroic artist-figure is revealed as a petty, jealous husband and not the “all-seeing artist”³⁰, that Francis supposed him to be, and both Francis’s idealism and Ewart’s power to identify his own artistic destiny are dismissed at the end of the story in the form of a letter from Francis’s friend, who is, appropriately, an art reviewer. Having written to explain the events of his visit, Francis receives a long letter that comprises the final judgment, the final authoritative voice, of the story. The tone of this letter is dismissive and irreverent, beginning, “Tut, tut, what a tornado in a teacup,”³¹ and this final arbitrating voice of the reviewer intervenes between the artist and his sense of ownership over his art and undercuts any notion of the artist’s isolation and purity. In the end, Davies places all of the high talk of art and the noble obligation of the artist within the intervening networks of its reception, dissemination and evaluation. As the reviewer puts it, “No one can make the Gauguin gesture of flight today; there aren’t any islands of escape left, either in the outside world or inside one’s consciousness.”³² Not only has Ewart become little more than a petty and jealous man but his artistic holiness has been put in its proper, unprivileged place.

“You could be famous”: A Genuine Art, a Marketable Wales?

So, how do we understand this Davies, who was by 1958 so critical of the artist’s purity and isolation, in the context of a 1950 interview with Glyn Jones in which he claimed that “every genuine writer finds his own Wales”?³³ These words strongly recall Francis’s “every genuine artist” speech written eight years later, as does Davies’s description of his creative endeavor in the same Glyn Jones interview: “I become completely absorbed. I, as a person, am obliterated, my everyday identity submerged.”³⁴ These are exactly the ideals that fall apart in “Tears, Idle Tears.” What can Davies be up to in invoking the “genuine artist” in his depiction of Wales? Or what, at least, is the effect? I suggest that Davies was at this time trying to distance his representation of Wales from the taint of commercialism and the cries of traitor and turncoat called at the departing backs of writers who wrote books on Wales for an English readership. In 1946, for instance, Davies Aberpennar expressed just this sentiment in *The Welsh Nationalist*:

It is common knowledge that now a Welshman writing in English—so long as he jeers at Nonconformity—stands to gain nothing by concealing his Welshness. On the contrary, to have been born in Wales, or even to be able to boast of a great-grandmother who had a partiality to Welsh rabbit (mispronounced “rarebit”), is a commercial asset and a stepping-stone to fame in the English literary world.³⁵

²⁹ Rhys Davies to Charles Lahr, Sept 2 1929, V36 xv 18-2, Sterling Library, University of London.

³⁰ Davies, “Tears, Idle Tears,” 421.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 440.

³² *Ibid.*, 442.

³³ Rhys Davies, “Every Genuine Writer Finds his Own Wales: Glyn Jones interviews Rhys Davies about the novelist’s craft,” *The Art of Writing III*, 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ Davies Aberpennar, “Anti-Nationalism Among the Anglo-Welsh,” *The Welsh Nationalist*, February 1946, 8.

These “professional Welshman,” as Aberpennar called them, posed a serious threat to the cause of Welsh nationhood, and Rhys Davies, “lost on the ocean of English life” was among the worst of those who served up Wales to English tastes.³⁶

Davies certainly could not have been insensitive to the fact that he was very strongly recognized and touted as “Welshman.” His reviewer’s praised him for his intrinsic Welshness, his publishers advertised him as the native informant, and he himself began his career by changing his name from Vivian Rees Davies to the more identifiably Welsh, Rhys Davies. As one reviewer wrote, “Even if Mr. Rhys Davies’s name was not what it was, it would be obvious that ‘Rings on Her Fingers’ was written by a Welshman. Not only is his setting a Welsh mining town, but there is *throughout the writing* a Celtic imagery and violence, an insistence on the importance of physical passion, and, it must be said, an entire lack of humour and, sometimes, of reason.”³⁷ As a description of Welsh writing this passage is not quite as exhaustive as its writer might like to think. As an example of Davies’s reception it is typical. His writing was often read as *intrinsically* Welsh and he as the native informant. Consider these words on the dust-jacket flap of Davies’s Britain in Pictures book, The Story of Wales (1942): “As he tells the story he fills in the landscape, draws in the character and evokes the very essence of his country and his people for *in his own writing* are apparent those qualities of sensibility, imagination, humour and vigour which are the inheritance of every true Welshman.”³⁸ Though differing somewhat in their perception of the “true Welsh spirit” (one apparently found the Welsh amusing while the other did not), and differing in their relation to Davies (one at the level of reception and the other at the level of production), both imagined Davies and his writing as *intrinsically* Welsh. And Davies was apparently quite willing to market himself in this way—even to allow himself to be fashioned into the representative Welshman through such ventures as The Story of Wales and the 1937 travel guide, My Wales in which he describes, the “individual Welsh spirit, poetic, imaginative, musically rowdy, its vision seldom wandering anywhere beyond Offa’s Dyke.”³⁹ And don’t these words sound suspiciously like the language deployed in the advertisements for his work, and the reviews which state authoritatively that Davies’s writing reveals that “he has Welsh life and character in the marrow of his bones”?⁴⁰

That these productions of the Welsh Davies were intended for an English readership is unavoidably clear in the advertisements for the My Country Series, of which Davies’s My Wales is a part. Of the four books advertised at the back of My Wales (My Ireland, My Scotland, My England, and Davies’s own book) My England stands out as the anomaly. The ad for My Ireland, after explaining that the author’s (Lord Dunsany’s) ancestry goes back to the twelfth century, insists that the book provides “the *complete* character of a people” (italics added). Similarly, A. G. Macdonell “*clearly portrays*” the “character and genius of his own people” (italics added). And Davies himself provides a “*full* description of modern life in that miniature but picturesque and lively land” (italics added). When one reads the ad for My England, however, one wonders if perhaps Edward Shanks does not know his country

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Times Literary Supplement, Aug. 7 1930, 642.

³⁸ From the inside flap; Rhys Davies, The Story of Wales (London: Collins, 1943).

³⁹ Rhys Davies, My Wales (London: Jarrold’s, 1937), 13.

⁴⁰ Times Literary Supplement, Sept 12, 1942.

quite as well as the other writers seem to, for he does not *clearly portray a complete or full* description of anything, but “emphasizes that this work is *his* England. It is England as he sees it” (italics *not* added). These advertisements are sensitive to a readership that would be critical of representations of the Self but quite comfortable with a totalizing representation of the Other.

So our suspicion is naturally roused when we observe that at the same time that Davies was downplaying his Welshness to Glyn Jones in the name of art he was also trying to refashion himself in Heinemann’s lists in the context of a market that he felt had exhausted Welsh subjects. Davies seems far more aware that he is writing *about* Wales than he lets on to Glyn Jones and his idealized claims to artistic transcendence are dubious to say the least. From at least 1946 onwards, Davies deliberately un-Welshed his fiction and his production under Heinemann. Following the success of The Black Venus (1944), a picturesque novel about ancient Welsh customs prevailing against modern notions of decency, Davies wrote to Arnold Gyde of Heinemann, that he didn’t “want to write too much Welsh semi-folk-lore stuff.”⁴¹ Accordingly, although Davies’s next novel, The Dark Daughters (1947), is partially set in Wales, he stubbornly downplays the Welsh content. In a synopsis sent to Gyde, Davies explains that while the house in which much of the action occurs is situated in Wales, it “could be in any country. There is no building of Welsh atmosphere or flavour (except what is intrinsic in the father’s character with its blending of mysticism and materialism). My usual Welsh ‘inverted’ dialogue is not used, since the daughters were born and educated in London and nearly all the other characters are English.”⁴² Heinemann doesn’t seem to have taken Davies very seriously, for when Davies received the proposed blurb for the novel’s jacket he objected to their emphasis upon the Welsh content of the novel: “As I have deliberately not played for Welsh background and have attempted to lift the story from particular space and even—fundamentally—time, I would like the word ‘Welsh’ struck out.”⁴³

Davies consistently tried to “strike-out” his Welshness and the next eight novels deliberately avoid the working-class Welsh communities with which his name had become synonymous. The Painted King (1954) is loosely based upon the life of Ivor Novello whose Welsh mother also finds a place in the novel. However, when Davies sends his description of the novel to Gyde for inclusion in Heinemann’s Spring List, he insists, “regarding the mother, I don’t want it stated definitely that she is Welsh.”⁴⁴ Several years later, when The Perishable Quality (1957) is close to coming out, Davies strongly objects to Heinemann’s dust jacket. Although this novel, more than any of the other later novels, is set partly in South Wales, most of the action takes place in Carmarthen, bohemian London and an abstracted middle-class home, and Davies felt again that the novel was only incidentally Welsh. So, when confronted with a dust jacket displaying the gray and narrow streets and looming industrial vista of his youth, he wrote despairingly to A. Dwyer Evans of Heinemann that he felt the jacket was inappropriate:

⁴¹ Rhys Davies to Arnold Gyde, Nov. 9 1946, Random House Archive and Library.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rhys Davies to Arnold Gyde, Nov. 17 1946, Random House Archive and Library.

⁴⁴ Rhys Davies to Arnold Gyde, Oct. 26 1953, Random House Archive and Library.

Many thanks for sending the jacket, but, with one exception, it fills me with dismay. Its very obvious background suggests the very thing I went to great pains to avoid—squalor and a miners’ “cottage” atmosphere. It’s true I’ve dealt with this in the past but it is out of date now and very hackneyed: some of it *is* in this book—a page or two—but I kept it subdued and marginal and it is of little importance to the book or to the theme implied in the title. This background is false to the book besides being (for me) artistically repulsive, one of the female faces being especially hideous *and* badly drawn.⁴⁵

Evans did not change the jacket, as he thought it was a good “selling wrapper”⁴⁶ and Davies was still being packaged, marketed and sold as Heinemann’s Welsh writer. Certainly reviewers of The Perishable Quality felt comfortable in locating Davies along the same lines advertised by the jacket. The Guardian Journal praised Davies’s “consummate skill and insight into the character of the Welsh people and towns...[and the] touch of poetry which is inseparable from the essence of Welshness.”⁴⁷ Time and Tide claimed that The Perishable Quality “must take its place proudly beside Tomorrow to Fresh Woods [and] The Black Venus,”⁴⁸ two of Davies’s most Welsh novels, rather than the more recent Dark Daughters (1947), Marianne (1951), or The Painted King (1954). Similarly, Despite Davies’s “very great pains” to distance himself from his Welsh themes, The Flint County Herald tells us that Davies has once again “given us a lively and shrewd picture of Welsh life.”⁴⁹ But by far my favorite description of Davies’s apparently imperishably Welsh quality is this one from Truth: “This is a winner, as tangy as a leek, as fresh as a daffodil, as warm as a knob of Dowlais coal.”⁵⁰ Poor Rhys.

While Davies apparently stopped writing of Wales because it was out of date, hackneyed and unmarketable, he was unable to escape the perception that he filled a demand for sentimental Welshness from both publishers and reviewers who felt that he was, in the words of Arnold Gyde, “more at home in Wales.”⁵¹ However, to be fair to his critics, Davies’s new directions in his writing did not stop him from the odd indulgence in the old Welsh flair. The Perishable Quality not only lingers in its opening pages in the familiar mining valleys of Davies’s earlier novels, but returns to a Carmarthen farm, Penllyn, reminiscent of one described in My Wales and the novel includes an account of a poet, Iolo Williams, easily recognizable as a caricature of Dylan Thomas. Girl Waiting in the Shade also retreats into the Welsh countryside to Henllys, a house “retaining...the original quietude of the scarcely changed vale”⁵² where we meet Leyshon, “a type...prevalent around [there]”⁵³ as “unspoiled as [the] valley.”⁵⁴ Even in The Painted King, Madame Annie, the mother who Davies did not want identified definitely as Welsh, wears “a combative Boadicea helmet of

⁴⁵ Rhys Davies to A. Dwy Evans, Feb. 26 1957, Random House Archive and Library.

⁴⁶ A. Dwy Evans to Rhys Davies, March 1 1957, Random House Archive and Library.

⁴⁷ Press cutting for Perishable Quality, July 8th 1957, Random House Archive and Library.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Arnold Gyde to Rhys Davies, Nov. 3 1949 Random House Archive and Library.

⁵² Rhys Davies, Girl Waiting in the Shade (London: Heinemann, 1960), 96.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

parma violets,”⁵⁵ wants to take her choir to an “annual eisteddfod,”⁵⁶ and hails from “the countryside where they sing for love... Wild moors and valleys of rain [where] the people have this love of singing together.”⁵⁷ There was always some trace of the old Davies for reviewers to recognize their Welshman.

It is clear that Davies was in a great deal of conflict regarding his relationship to the market in which he wrote and very self-conscious regarding how he would be received. For the most part he wanted to be taken seriously as an artist, but his dependence upon a market considerably curtailed this ambition. His long association with his Welsh subject matter is a particularly illustrative example. Davies caught on early to what Glyn Roberts announced in the Western Mail in 1936 in an article that praised Davies’s success in publishing with Heinemann in England and Doubleday in America. Roberts claimed that “Englishmen and Americans and their wives and their daughters are interested in Wales, in the detail and pattern of Welsh life... Have you felt the urge to write a novel about your friends and your town? Well, write it, write it—now is your time. You may be famous—you may, to be unsublime but not so ridiculous, either, you make money.”⁵⁸ Davies wanted to make money and wanted fame. However, he also wanted the respect and distinction of the pure artist and eventually resisted his commercialization as a Welshman and otherwise. Rather than the niche market of the Welsh writer, Davies sought the esteem of the highbrow artist. However, the recognizably Welsh character that launched his career proved difficult to cast off in later years.

Conclusion

Davies occupied a very conflicted relationship to art and the market that could not help but influence what and how he wrote. This essay has highlighted rather than resolved this conflict for it is in reality an irresolvable anxiety. It is better to observe Davies in the active negotiation of his literary culture than to attempt to place him in one or the other camp. The expectation from publishers, reviewers and readers that Davies be a representatively Welsh writer, and Davies’s own awareness that Welshness was a cache that he could not afford to ignore, placed his Welsh novels and stories in a very close relationship to the market that he both depended upon and resented. Davies’s Wales, therefore, could never be either a straightforward realistic representation, or the pure production of the “genuine artist.” Quite the contrary, it was a Wales in circulation. It circulated not just within Davies’s conflicted identity, but within the networks of production, dissemination and reception that made up the literary culture that Davies occupied. To a large degree, therefore, Davies was always a professional writer before he was an “Anglo-Welsh” one.

⁵⁵ Rhys Davies, The Painted King (London: Heinemann, 1954), 63.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁸ Western Mail, July 28 1936.