



The road to Manderley

Eighty years after its publication, *Rebecca* continues to enthrall and unsettle. Flora Watkins explores our fascination with Daphne du Maurier's classic novel and why Cornwall was a lifelong inspiration

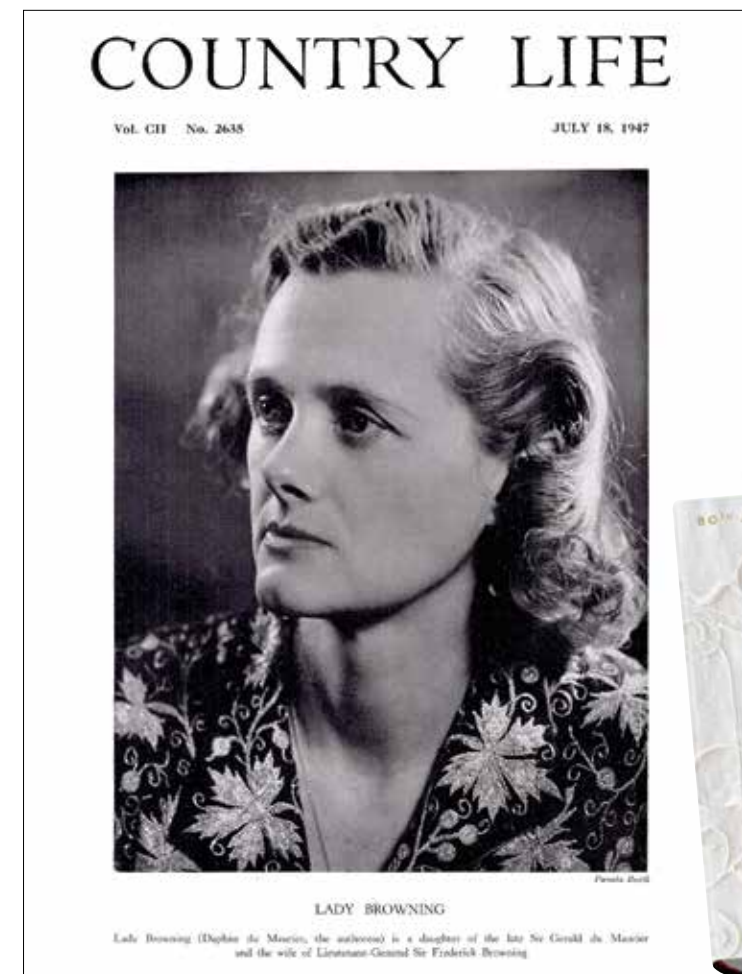
A SINISTER tale about a woman who marries a widower... Psychological and rather macabre,' wrote Daphne du Maurier to her publisher of the novel on which she was about to embark in 1937. On taking delivery of *Rebecca* the following year, Victor Gollancz at once realised that his young author had written the book that would launch her into the literary stratosphere. The novel's 'brilliantly created atmosphere of suspense', of which Gollancz enthused in his letter to booksellers, is struck in that first, haunting line—'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again'—and maintained tautly, expertly, throughout, until the book's sudden ending.

Rebecca sold 45,000 copies in the first month alone and has never gone out of print. It has inspired a sequel (by Susan Hill), a prequel (Sally Beauman) and numerous adaptations for stage and screen (most notably, Alfred Hitchcock's Oscar-winning feature film of 1940). Last year, it was voted the nation's favourite book of the past 225 years in a poll run by WHSmith.

'It's a puzzle,' admits du Maurier's son Kits Browning, leaning back at his desk at Ferryside, the house at Bodinnick-by-Fowey in Cornwall that the du Maurier family has owned since the 1920s and where the author penned her first novel. 'I think the only quick explanation [for the book's success] is that it's a very good story.' His mother, the literary executor discloses, 'simply didn't know why it should have been the favourite of so many people'.

Put simply, *Rebecca* is a story about two women, a man and a house, the latter—Manderley—invoked so intensely that it becomes a character in its own right. The nameless narrator is working as a lady's companion in the south of France when she meets Maxim de Winter, rich, handsome and recently widowed. His sudden proposal takes her back to his West Country estate, where the memory of his dead wife, Rebecca, is kept alive by the forbidding housekeeper, Mrs Danvers. 'Little by little I want to build up the character of the first [wife] in the mind of the second,' wrote du Maurier in her notebook, '... until wife 2 is haunted day and night, then... Crash! Bang! Something happens.'

She described the book as 'a study in jealousy', but the seed out of which *Rebecca*



Facing page: Hitchcock's 1940 film was suitably Gothic, winning the Oscar for cinematography. Left: Daphne du Maurier appeared in *COUNTRY LIFE* on July 18, 1947, as Lady Browning. Below: The 80th-anniversary edition of the novel

‘The seed out of which *Rebecca* grew came from du Maurier's own marriage’

grew came from an incident in her own marriage. Before he met du Maurier, when still a major, the dashing Grenadier Guards officer Lt-Gen Sir Frederick 'Boy' Browning, 'Tommy' to his family, had been engaged to a glamorous woman, Jan Ricardo.

'She was digging around in his desk and found these letters [from Ricardo] that, rather stupidly, he'd left,' explains their eldest daughter, Tessa, the Viscountess Montgomery of Alamein. The letters, signed with a flourish, touched a nerve. Why had Tommy been so attracted to this woman? Did he still think about her? By all accounts,

Ricardo possessed many *Rebecca*-like qualities: she was beautiful, dark and vivacious. Du Maurier, on the other hand, loathed the duties and the socialising expected of an officer's wife—never more so than when her husband was posted to Egypt, as commanding officer of his regiment.

'My grandmother could never quite let go of why this woman fascinated him so much,' muses Rupert Tower, whose mother, Flavia, is the middle sibling. Mr Tower is a Jungian analyst and inherited his grandmother's collection of Jung's work. 'Particularly when she was taken away from Cornwall and was writing *Rebecca* in Alexandria, which she loathed, she felt really adrift,' he continues. 'Somehow, the Jan Ricardo element then became so powerful that it needed to be written into and thought about.'

It may come as a surprise to readers to learn that the writer, in possession of a considerable beauty and glamour herself (her



For Mrs Danvers, the second Mrs de Winter is but a pale imitation of her beloved Rebecca

father was the actor Sir Gerald du Maurier, her grandfather, George, the *Punch* illustrator and author of *Trilby*, identified with the second wife. Meek and overawed, the second Mrs de Winter bewails her gauche-ness, her lank hair and her bitten nails, in comparison with Rebecca, whose very name, 'written in a bold, slanting hand', was 'a symbol of herself, assured and confident'.

'Daphne is, of course, her,' says Mr Browning. 'The second Mrs de Winter bit came from having to cope with Dad's army and all those boring drinks parties, which were anathema to her,' he chuckles. He also sees his mother in Rebecca, however, in her boldness and fearlessness: 'All that being great with horses, and on the boat—they are all things that Daphne was.'

Writing in exile, du Maurier dreamt of her beloved Cornwall and of the abandoned house, Menabilly, where she had trespassed with her sister and with which she had become obsessed. These dreams sustained her through the fierce heat and dust of an Egyptian summer. She wandered in her thoughts, like the second Mrs de Winter,

exquisitely evoking the Cornish landscape and weather: 'Wet earth... the sour tang of moorland peat... the smell of the flood tide.' Menabilly had been owned by the Rashleigh family since Tudor times, but du Maurier was able to rent it from 1943 until 1969, when the new heir wanted to move in. The house also inspired her novels *My Cousin Rachel* and *The King's General* (see box).

'My mother, as a child, remembers seeing her kiss the walls of Mena and whispering softly "My house of secrets",' recalls Mr Tower. 'For her, it was like coming home to a place that reflected her inner nature.' Living at Menabilly satisfied the author's need for space and solitude, earning her a reputation for reclusivity and adding to the mystery and fascination swirling around *Rebecca*.

During the Second World War, Lady Montgomery recalls, American soldiers would 'come up to the house in their Jeeps and ask for her. She'd send me down to say that she'd gone for a walk and wouldn't be back. I had to go out and tell these whoppers!'

Beloved by the public, *Rebecca* hasn't, until relatively recently, enjoyed the critical



All about *Rebecca*

○ Although the setting is, unmistakably, the Menabilly estate near Fowey, Cornwall isn't mentioned in the novel

○ **Manderley itself is modelled on Milton Hall, near Cambridge, which the author had visited as a child**

○ A forbidding housekeeper at Milton provided the inspiration for Mrs Danvers

○ **Maxim was called Henry in the first draft, but du Maurier changed it as it 'sounded dull'**

○ Agatha Christie was among the fans who wrote to the author asking why the narrator had no name

acclaim that it deserves. 'The critics will never forgive you for writing *Rebecca*,' warned du Maurier's great mentor Sir Arthur 'Q' Quiller-Couch. Contemporary reviewers compared it unfavourably with *Jane Eyre*, dismissing the later work as 'romance in the grand tradition' and little more than 'a novelette'.

This is absurd, thinks Dr Laura Varnam, an expert in medieval English at the University of Oxford, who is increasingly supervising student theses on du Maurier. '*Rebecca* is an incredibly sophisticated and intelligent novel,' she stresses. 'It's not only a cracking story, it deals with issues that

‘The “emotional experience” of *Rebecca*, “particularly male-female power-dynamics, speaks to us still”’

are important today.' It also, she muses, 'reads quite differently a second time'—and with age. 'In the current climate [of #metoo], Maxim seems quite dangerous.'

Virago's editorial director, Donna Coonan, agrees that the writer's genius has been overlooked. 'When we started publishing her in 2003, there were a lot [of cover illustrations] of women looking out to sea,' she discloses. 'She'd very much been dismissed as an historical-romance writer—this is the woman who gave us *The Birds* and *Don't Look Now*. Her books are saturated with this disturbing atmosphere.' Indeed, *Frenchman's Creek* was the only romance du Maurier set out to write, calling it 'romance with a big R'. Virago has since brought all of the books, including her historical and family biographies, back into print.

Rebecca will always haunt us, thinks Mr Tower, because 'we all struggle with jealousy'. The 1930s country-house setting may now be a period piece, but the 'emotional

Entering the lion's den: Maxim (Laurence Olivier) brings his bride (Joan Fontaine) home to Manderley as the stony-faced Mrs Danvers (Judith Anderson) looks on

experience' of it, 'particularly the male-female power-dynamics, speaks to us still'.

The influence of *Rebecca* is as pervasive and indelible as her signature, which so haunts the second Mrs de Winter, 'black and strong, the tall and sloping R dwarfing the other letters'. It is there in director Paul Thomas Anderson's recent Oscar-nominated film *Phantom Thread*. Sarah Perry—author of last year's must-read *The Essex Serpent*—declares in her introduction to the new edition of *Rebecca* that 'every novelist since has ground their teeth in envy' at its brilliance. Miss Coonan detects 'a very strong thread' of du Maurier in the current 'grip lit' phenomenon.

A new film is also in the works: Mr Browning reveals that the book has been optioned by Working Title and there is a first draft of a screenplay. He smiles as he recalls his mother's 'extraordinarily blue, twinkly eyes', mischievous sense of humour and talent for mimicry, quite different to the aloof recluse that she has sometimes been portrayed as. 'I think she would be incredibly pleased and proud,' he concludes. 'And thankful—that at last people had taken her seriously.'

Discover du Maurier country

One of the great joys of Daphne du Maurier's novels is that the locations are 'almost touchable', enthuses Ann Willmore, who runs Bookends of Fowey (a haven for fans, 01726 833361; www.bookendsoffowey.com) and the www.dumaurier.org website. These are her recommendations for a literary pilgrimage

● *Rebecca*

Menabilly, also the setting of *The King's General* and *My Cousin Rachel*, is private, but two cottages on the estate are available as holiday lets (01726 808150; www.menabilly.com). Polridmouth Cove (*below*), from where Rebecca sets out on her fateful sail, can be reached on foot, down a wooded farm track



● *Frenchman's Creek*

Dona St Columb's house, Navron, was based on Trelowarren (*below*), the home of du Maurier's great friend Lady Clara Vyvyan. The house is private, but there are several luxury holiday cottages to rent on the estate (01326 221224; www.trelowarren.com). Frenchman's Creek itself, a tributary of the Helford River, can be found on foot, or hire a boat at Helford Passage (01326 250770; www.helford-river-boats.co.uk)



● *Jamaica Inn*

Avoid the gruesome tourist trap on the A30. Instead, head for Brown Willy, the highest point of Bodmin Moor, and strike off on the circular walk. Alternatively, visit St Nonna's Church, where Francis Davey, the sinister vicar of Altarnun, preached to his unsuspecting flock