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REVIEWS

Daryl Leeworthy, *Elaine Morgan: A Life Behind the Screen* (Bridgend: Seren, 2020). Pp. 211. £9.99.

In March 2022, a bronze statue of the writer, broadcaster and evolutionary theorist Elaine Morgan was unveiled in Mountain Ash, the former mining town in the Cynon Valley, where she lived and wrote for many years. It was the second statue of an eminent Welsh woman to be commissioned and erected as a result of the work of Monumental Welsh Women, a group inspired by the extraordinary fact that there was not a *single* public statue in Wales commemorating the achievements of a real Welsh woman.¹ In tribute to Morgan's notably varied interests as a writer, Emma Rodgers's imaginative statue shows her sitting pen in hand on the crest of a wave (a neat reference to her 1982 book *The Aquatic Ape*) which transforms into pages of scripts, articles and books on which are visible, cast in bronze, Morgan's own words. Tucked into the top of the wave is the Bafta Cymru Special Award she was given in 2003 for her 'outstanding contribution'.

The visibility accorded by the statue is extremely welcome, but of equal importance is the process of recovering, interpreting and assessing Morgan's work and situating that in relation to her life and the historical context in which she lived and wrote. Published in 2020 to mark Morgan's centenary, Daryl Leeworthy's biography should be the start of a much wider effort of recovery. As Leeworthy admits, there are frustrations for any biographer attempting to write Morgan's life. The first is that much of Morgan's creative work was in the form of television or radio scripts where recordings have been lost or erased, while much of her early journalism in a variety of publications has been forgotten. The second is the lack of a substantial archive compared with those left by, for instance, her contemporaries Ron Berry, Gwyn Thomas, Dylan Thomas or Menna Gallie, which makes it difficult to trace the connections between Morgan's life and writing. Leeworthy has mitigated this by consulting the archive of her scripts at Swansea University and source material in a variety of other institutions including the BBC Written Archives in Reading, the British Film Institute Archive, Sussex Archives, the Bodleian Library and several others.

Added to the lack of a coherent archive, however, is the fact that as a professional writer Morgan constructed her own versions of her life, which often makes it tricky to disentangle the personal details of her creativity and familial relationships from, as Leeworthy puts it, ‘the directions and misdirections’ (p. 13) she provided in interviews and in her own autobiographical writings. Perhaps the most frustrating of these (or the most fascinating, depending on your point of view), is her insistence on presenting herself as a ‘housewife-dramatist’ (p. 58), whose writing and broadcasting career was due to innate talent and luck rather than sheer hard work and bloody-minded perseverance. Thus when her radically revisionist work of feminist anthropology, *The Descent of Woman*, came out in 1972, she told *The New York Times* that she ‘did her own housework and cooking and had raised her three children by herself’ and added, for good measure, that her major concern with ‘the more radical edges’ of women’s liberation was that ‘a lot are trying to build a movement by hating men’ (p. 142). This is, of course, exactly the kind of provocative comment which would have troubled feminists then and might deter them from engaging with her work now. These factors not only create problems for the biographer but help explain what Leeworthy sees as the comparative neglect of Morgan, particularly by ‘scholars of Welsh writing’ (p. 12), by which I think he means ‘Welsh writing in English’ since Morgan, although a vocal supporter of the Welsh language, wrote primarily in English.

Another complicating factor for a biographer attempting to create a coherent life story is the range and diversity of Morgan’s interests. Her writing career falls roughly into three parts: her early work, built up in the 1950s and 1960s as a journalist and writer of short stories and poetry and then as a hugely successful television dramatist; the publication of her pioneering but controversial books on evolution theory from the early 1970s; and, finally, her high-profile stint as the writer of a column, ‘The Pensioner’, for *The Western Mail*, which gave her a platform to opine on a range of issues – political, social, personal – as they affected Wales. Of these, it was her books on evolution theory – *The Descent of Woman* and *The Aquatic Ape: A Theory of Human Evolution* – which brought her an international reputation. Published two years after Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) as the women’s liberation movement began to gather momentum, *The Descent of Woman* reached number seven on *The New York Times* bestseller list in June 1972 and hit the British bestseller lists in the autumn. The furore over these

books, Leeworthy suggests, has had the unfortunate consequence of overshadowing the creative and adaptive work for television which he believes constitutes Morgan's most 'genuinely pioneering' work. She was, he asserts boldly, 'Wales's most important television writer of the twentieth century' (p. 19). To that end he focuses primarily on her work as a television dramatist, adult educator and political campaigner.

As Leeworthy shows, that work was shaped by the very specific context of the south Wales mining valleys where Morgan grew up and the complex, sometimes contradictory, personal and political affiliations it produced. Born in Hopkinstown in 1920, Elaine Floyd was the only child of Billy Floyd and Olive Neville, both of whom came from English families who had migrated to the coalfields of south Wales to work in the then burgeoning mining industry. (The Floyds came from Gwinear in Cornwall and the Nevilles from East Coker, near Yeovil.) By the 1920s, however, the situation was very different. The south Wales coalfields were badly hit by the decline in the export market for steam coal and ensuing disputes over pay cuts which led to the national strikes of 1920 and 1926. While Morgan herself attributed her political awareness to her experience at Oxford, Leeworthy points out that she could hardly have remained unaffected by the left-wing politics of this period, especially since her father was a member of the South Wales Miners' Federation.

Morgan started writing from a young age and published her first story, 'Kitty in Blunderland', in the *Cardiff Times* when she was 11, earning a guinea. She went to Pontypridd Intermediate Girls School, where she focused on science in the lower forms, switching to English in the sixth form (Leeworthy speculates that this may have had something to do with the perception that it was easier to win a scholarship to university in the arts). In 1939 she went up to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, to read English supported by three scholarships, including one from the Miners' Welfare Fund (the previous recipient had been the novelist Gwyn Thomas). There she seems to have enjoyed herself, being active in student politics, meeting both upcoming writers and politicians and probably falling in love with a young poet named Drummond Allison, who was later killed on active service in 1943. While Morgan later claimed that 'neither of us used the word "love"', Leeworthy points out that Allison wrote poems to her which certainly did use the word. There seems, however, to be less evidence for his assertion that she felt the 'greatest pain' on the news of Allison's death and that he was 'the one for whom she forever yearned' (p. 50).

After graduating, Morgan worked as a tutor-organiser for the WEA in Norfolk and then, in 1945, married Morien Morgan, a French teacher from Ynysybwl, whom she met at a political meeting. From a highly political Labour-supporting family, he had joined the Communist Party as a student and served in Spain where he had spent several months as a prisoner of war. The couple lived in Burnley, Lancashire, where they had two sons, before returning to south Wales when Morien got a job at Abertillery Grammar School. While Elaine Morgan tended to present herself as a full-time housewife and mother during this period, Leeworthy shows that she was equally occupied with teaching and political activities. It was, however, when she found herself living in an isolated farmhouse in Radnorshire with Morien away during the week that she developed her writing career. The sheer variety and volume of writing she produced on spec in this period – scripts for the BBC, entries for competitions in the *New Statesman* or *Spectator*, articles for *The Western Mail*, short stories in women's magazines – is an object lesson in how to build a freelance writing career. An added incentive was provided by a deal with Morien who would agree to having a third child only if she earned one thousand pounds as a 'deposit', which she did within a couple of years of working for the BBC.

From 1950 Morgan was providing scripts for *Woman's Hour* while her first television play, *Mirror, Mirror*, was broadcast in 1955 to a rather poor critical reception. Leeworthy notes that this was not surprising: Morgan did not possess a television at the time so can have known little about the medium. By the mid-1950s, however, Morgan was on contract to the BBC and by the late 1950s she was highly regarded and much in demand. Her first true play, *The Waiting Room: A Play for Women in One Act*, was broadcast on radio in 1958 a few weeks before Shelagh Delaney's breakthrough *A Taste of Honey* was staged. Her first major television series, *A Matter of Degree*, based in part on her own experiences as a young Welsh girl at Oxford, was broadcast in 1960. From the early 1960s onwards, she wrote a number of high-profile and still famous television adaptations of literary classics and biographies: *Mary Barton* (1964), *A Pin to See the Peepshow* (1973), *Anne of Avonlea* (1975), *How Green was My Valley* (1976), *Marie Curie* (1977), *Testament of Youth* (1979), *The Life and Times of Lloyd George* (1981), *Fame is the Spur* (1982) and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1987). She also contributed episodes to *Dr Finlay's Casebook* (1969–75), *The Onedin Line* (1972) and *Maigret* (1982). The chapters on Morgan's television work are the

most engaging and illuminating in this biography. As Leeworthy points out, this was ground-breaking work: given the lack of models at this point, Morgan had to work out her own approach to her source material and how authentic or innovative she could be in her adaptation. His analysis of her radical reworking of Richard Llewelyn's 1939 novel *How Green Was My Valley*, acidly described by Raymond Williams as 'the export version of the Welsh industrial experience'² and filmed with even less verisimilitude by John Hughes in 1941, shows how Morgan brought a far greater honesty and authenticity to her adaptation than the original possessed. Drawing on her own experience of Valleys life and on the politics of her husband's family, she transformed Llewelyn's conservative and sentimental text into a series which was far more real in its depiction of class and gender relations. The consistent threads that run through many of these projects are a focus on women and a commitment to Wales which made her a leading spokesperson on her country.

In contrast, the discussion of Morgan's evolutionary books here is far less detailed, which is a shame since the radicalism of her thinking is arguably more evident in her dissection of what we would now call the gender-blindness of evolutionary thinkers. The catalyst for *The Descent of Woman* (the title was a play on Darwin's 1871 *The Descent of Man*), was Morgan's reading of Desmond Morris's phenomenally popular *The Naked Ape* (1967). Morgan may have lacked a scientific background, but her book seems to me to be an excellent example of feminist (literary) criticism, a forensic analysis of the blind spots in androcentric thinking. As she puts it:

There is a line in an old folk song that runs: 'I called my donkey a horse gone wonky.' Throughout most of the literature dealing with the differences between the sexes there runs a subtle underlying assumption that woman is a man gone wonky; that woman is a distorted version of the original blueprint; that they are the norm and we are the deviation.³

It is precisely the point made by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 when she wrote that, 'Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.'⁴ (Oddly, de Beauvoir does not appear in Morgan's book although Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer and Kate Millet

are chastised as ‘upper or middleclass liberationists’ whose liberation is at the expense of the working-class women’s labour as child-minders.⁵) Morgan’s tone is far more colloquial than de Beauvoir’s, but she nevertheless takes Morris, Robert Ardrey, Konrad Lorenz *et al.* to pieces for what is effectively bad science. She skewers their use of the myth of man as the Mighty Hunter as an explanation for everything from walking erect and living in caves to learning to speak:

Desmond Morris, pondering on the shape of a woman’s breasts, instantly deduced that they evolved because her mate became a mighty hunter, and defends this preposterous proposition with the greatest ingenuity. There’s something about the Tarzan figure which has them all mesmerized.⁶

As Morgan shows, if we approach these problems from the point of view of the female who has to birth, carry, feed and protect a baby we can start to produce a completely different theory of evolution. From this and the work of Professor Alister Hardy, she develops her controversial hypothesis of the aquatic ape, the subject of a TED talk she gave in 2009 now viewed by just under one and a half million viewers. Leeworthy has little to say about this later book but does make an argument for taking her *Falling Apart: The Rise and Decline of Urban Civilisation* (1976) seriously as a ‘proto-environmentalist classic’ (p. 150).

A full chapter, however, is devoted to Morgan’s weekly column, ‘The Pensioner’, in *The Western Mail*, begun in 2003 when she was 82 and running until 2012 shortly before she died in 2013. Adopting a ‘common-sense’ approach which was a variation on her ‘housewife’ persona, Morgan wrote on a range of subjects: the shortcomings of Tony Blair’s New Labour, economics, education, sex, the Iraq War, women’s liberation, social change, Welshness, the anniversary of the 1984–5 miners’ strike and, in 2006, a particularly prescient discussion of the ‘hot-house’ economic growth which led to the financial crises of 2007. The column provides, Leeworthy argues, ‘a significant commentary on the early-twenty-first century from an important voice of the twentieth’ (p. 166).

Morgan’s achievement as a writer is difficult to assess because it encompassed so many genres: journalism, poetry and short stories, plays, scripts, adaptations and what is variously referred to as science-writing (or even pseudo-science), anthropology or evolutionary theory.

Her tone, even in her evolutionary books, tends towards the chatty and provocative rather than the academic. This makes her journalism easy to read but also makes it easier to dismiss her more serious writing as the work of an amateur. Moreover, there is still a tendency for women's achievements to be brushed aside as they age and particularly after their deaths and for the broader women's history in which they played a part to be lost. This is why the work of organisations like Monumental Women Wales and Women's Archive Wales/Archif Menywod Cymru, historians like Angela F. John and literary critics like Jane Aaron is so crucial. To have this biography of Morgan is an important step in reassessing her work. It is, however, a shame that the book has been so poorly edited and proofread: there are numerous typos and a few instances of unclear writing which needed sharpening up, the line spacing suddenly changes at the end of two chapters, endnotes are missing and the index is difficult to use to find basic information. Nevertheless, both biography and statue should stimulate more work on this complex, provocative and fascinating figure.

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Notes

- ¹ The first was the statue of Betty Campbell which stands near Central Station in Cardiff, the third that of Cranogwen in Llangrannog and the fourth and fifth will be those of Lady Rhondda and Elizabeth Andrews.
- ² Raymond Williams, 'The Welsh Industrial Novel', in Daniel Williams (ed.), *Who Speaks for Wales?: Nation, Culture, Identity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 95–111, p. 108.
- ³ Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman* (London: London Souvenir Press, 1985), p. 7.
- ⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 16.
- ⁵ Morgan, *Descent*, pp. 229–31.
- ⁶ Morgan, *Descent*, p. 11.