

Rebecca West and the Flowers of Evil

by [Jillian Becker](#) (May 2021)



In 1960, Rebecca West went to South Africa order to attend a trial that had been going on for some four years and write about it for the *Sunday Times*. One hundred and fifty-six people, including Nelson Mandela, had been arrested and charged with treason. Sixty-six of them had been acquitted by the time Rebecca West went to the old synagogue in Pretoria where the proceedings were dragging on. Ninety, including Mandela, were still on trial.[\[1\]](#)

Rebecca West was as renowned a journalist as she was a

novelist. Her fame resulted to a large extent from her account of the Nuremberg trials of Nazi leaders,[\[2\]](#) and a book titled *The Meaning of Treason*, about British traitors brought to trial after World War Two. Whatever Rebecca West would write about the South African treason trial would carry far, be read with respect, and more than likely influence opinion among the powerful in government, the academies, big business, and the press.

For most of the time she was in South Africa, she stayed at my parents' house, Tall Trees, in Johannesburg. She was happy there, and came to be fond of both her hosts, although after her first meeting with my mother, Lulu Friedman, she wrote of her to a friend that she was "a difficult woman, crabbed, a pianist who would not play but would try to translate Baudelaire, which I didn't think the most necessary of jobs."[\[3\]](#)

"Difficult" is an apt word to describe my mother if, and only if, it is an apt word to describe Lady Macbeth.

Like Lady Macbeth she could "look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it". Persons she wished to befriend would be shown the flower first, the serpent only later. The opposite occurred with Rebecca West, who glimpsed the serpent immediately but thereafter was only shown the flower. She wrote in letters that the Friedmans were "very kind" to her, and that their house, Tall Trees, was an asylum for her.

What she needed asylum from was South Africa's most famous living writer at the time, Sara Gertrude Millin.

Mrs. Millin's most famous book was *God's Stepchildren*, a study of the "Cape coloreds" –people of mixed race who lived mainly in the Cape Province. (I wonder how many people read her now or have even heard of her?) She had met Rebecca West at the airport, and immediately began telling her all about

South Africa. The celebrated visitor was weary after the long flight from London and wanted only to rest. But Mrs. Millin had much to say and went on saying it after she had seen Dame Rebecca right into her hotel room. And she resumed the next day. Finally released, Dame Rebecca vowed to avoid her forever after.

There was no surer place to be safe from Sara Gertrude Millin than with Lulu Friedman. For Sara Gertrude herself had been bitten by the serpent. Her autobiography was titled *The Night Is Long*, and it got back to her that Lulu Friedman was saying of it: "As Mrs. Millin apparently wrote it because she couldn't sleep, it was unkind of her to dedicate it 'to Philip my husband.'" "

Lulu had wit, sharp as a serpent's tooth, mercilessly malicious. My father was as witty, or more so, his sallies often denigrating but seldom venomous. They both esteemed wit very highly. The two of them would invent pun after pun in competition with each other at a dinner party—one of the less bloody arenas of their perpetual rivalry. Their marriage was not a partnership but a contest. She seldom surrendered; he often did. He even let her change his name. It had been shortened from Bernard to Barney by his parents and siblings, but Lulu thought "Barney" was "too Jewish", so before they were married, she shortened it to Barn, and he accepted the change. (His parents did not, nor did his brother or sisters. To them, Barney he remained.)

Rebecca West liked Barn from the moment she met him. In the letter telling a friend that Lulu was "difficult" and "crabbed," she also wrote about him. "I went back to Johannesburg and lived, hiding from Sarah Gertrude, with a Dr. Friedman and his wife. He is a former ear nose and throat specialist, quite first rate, who had given up medicine for politics . . ."

Lulu longed for Rebecca's friendship and did all she

could to charm her. Very soon Rebecca was charmed. She came to like Lulu first because she was grateful for her hospitality, next because she was amused by her wit. They became friends—such fast friends that Rebecca forgave Lulu, without a moment's hesitation, for getting her into serious trouble.

Her report of the treason trial, *In the Cauldron of Africa*, was published after her return to England—and brought fury and reproach raining down upon her. She had mistakenly ascribed certain remarks made in court by one of the three judges to Mr. Justice Kennedy, when they had actually been made by Mr. Justice Bekker. She had also conjectured about the judge's motive in saying what she averred he did, and it all amounted to libel. She and the *Sunday Times* were sued by the judge.

How had such a careful and experienced journalist as Rebecca West come to make the perilous mistake? *She asked Lulu.* Not Barn, who would have known, or at least found out for sure, who had said those things. And Lulu did what Lulu was most likely to do—utter the name that sprang to her lips, probably the only one of the three names she could remember.

The libel action weighed heavily on Rebecca. She wrote to a nephew: "I am indeed still being pursued by the South African judge, and it is likely to work out as the final disaster of my life! I have the clearest recollection of the judge asking a number of questions, and so had Lulu Friedman and her friends, with whom I discussed the matter at luncheon the same day. I actually wrote down the conclusions regarding these questions which were given me by a lawyer. The Judge denies having asked these questions, and has sent a court record transcribed from a tape recording which certainly does not show them! I can call no witnesses. I wouldn't dare put any of them in such danger. It is true that another Judge asked questions along the same lines of argument—but this Judge is denying, and there might be some interminable legal argument over it. He calls for an apology and damages. The

Sunday Times may give him this, but I can't, and it may cost me a fortune to fight it, probably singlehanded. My problem is complicated by the fact that the defence, the people who would naturally be against the Judge and for me, are mostly Communist and won't lift a finger for me. It worries me a lot. It's so hard to work with this hanging over me." [4]

Indeed they would not lift a finger. Everyone in the dock, everyone who had been arrested, was Communist to some degree of heat. They were on trial for having allegedly planned a seditious uprising to establish Communist rule. (I loathed their ideology as much as I loathed apartheid.) The defending lawyers were as patently sympathetic to Communism as they could be without risking arraignment themselves. And Rebecca West, almost alone of the big beasts of the Western intelligentsia, was fervently anti-Communist, and well known to be. She considered it the greatest political evil after the defeat of Nazism; [5] and she "dread[ed] evil with a firm conviction of its existence," the editor of a volume of her letters wrote perceptively in its Introduction. [6]

She who had been a rebel, a feminist, a Fabian in her youth, saw what Communist utopias turned out to be and courageously wrote against them; condemned whatever form Communism took wherever it flowered, in Russia, in Yugoslavia, in Britain—and in America, for which she was fiercely attacked. The response of this warm-hearted, fair-minded, humorous, humane woman was always to attack the attackers, hitting back more fearlessly, more pertinently, more eloquently, and more devastatingly than they could match. [7]

I have found no hint that Rebecca ever blamed Lulu for the anxiety and the feeling of humiliation she endured over the misidentified judge. She wrote to Lulu and Barn from England: "I will get over this case. But it isn't easy to feel that some people are for no reason that you know of possessed by an intention to ruin you; and I also felt I was letting you down in South Africa. I have been deeply grateful for all the

kindness and sympathy you have shown me and I thought of Tall Trees as a warm place in a chilly world.” (A strange thing for me to learn, since for me—and not me alone—it had been a chilly place in a warm climate.)

In a letter to friends, dated February 1961, she ascribed a different cause for her mistake, with no mention of Lulu by name: “In court, at a session of the Treason Trial, I said to a court official, ‘Who is that judge on the right of Mr Justice Rumpof [Rumpff]?’ and pointed at the man I meant. As a good subtle Afrikaner joke, he told me it was Mr Kennedy, whereas Kennedy was sitting on the other side, and this was Bekker. Of course I checked, and for a reason as odd my check went wrong. From then things blew up—but never need have, had it not been for the filthy little snake Harry Hodson, who edits the *Sunday Times*. The little creature panicked, I suppose because he has a new owner, Roy Thompson, and after he had insulted Kennedy (who is not in fact a bad man though an eccentric) with the inevitable result that he filed a case which he originally had no intention of doing, he turned and worked off his feelings savaging me. And throughout this autumn and winter I have had a grisly time dealing with hostility that was also dam foolishness, and that never need have happened, and was happening at enormous expense.”[\[8\]](#)

When judgment came it was against her and the *Sunday Times*, and a sum of money—less than the plaintive originally asked for—was paid in damages, and Rebecca and the editor had to make the apology demanded of them.[\[9\]](#)

Rebecca did not visit South Africa again, but she and Lulu would meet when Lulu came to England. Two or three times I joined them for lunch or tea in London, for the pleasure of Rebecca’s company. Lulu was never so good-humoredly tolerant of the human race—no less contemptuous of it, but more amused than irritated by it—as when she was with Rebecca.

And Lulu and Rebecca corresponded with each other for

the rest of Lulu's life, some seventeen years. Rebecca's letters show that they commiserated over the ingratitude etcetera of their children—Rebecca's son Anthony, Lulu's son Jonathan, and me. She sent Lulu gossip from the literary world; marriages made and unmade, love affairs, desertions. Her health, and the health of her husband was another constant theme. And so was the fate of Lulu's translation of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*—the job Rebecca had once declared not very necessary. She not only recommended various publishers to Lulu, but the work itself to the various publishers.

I know that for a very long time Lulu believed that a recommendation by Rebecca West would ensure a favorable reception of her flowers of evil over which she had labored, on her couch, for some thirty years; a job so vital, she would have it known, that she must never be disturbed in the performance of it. She finally had to accept she'd been mistaken in her faith, though she never accepted the judgment of editors that her versions of the poems were not what she believed they were: beautiful English poems that yet remained true to their French originals. (She liked to say, "Poems in translation are like mistresses: if they are beautiful they are not faithful, and if they are faithful they are not beautiful." To which she'd add that hers were the exception, being both.)

I can't help wondering whether Rebecca ever actually read Lulu's verses celebrating what she and Baudelaire deemed the beauty of evil. I would have expected her, if she did, not to want to recommend them to anybody. If the quality of the verses did not displease her as it did the rejecting editors, the content of them surely would have done. (Two lines for a taste: "Evil I pursue, / A perfect monster is my need!")

I don't know if Lulu cooled towards her famous friend after the disappointment. I think she probably did not, and if she did, she would not have shown it. The letters continued to

be exchanged. I have only seen Rebecca's, carefully preserved by Lulu. Most of them are typed, so Rebecca may have kept carbon copies which would now be archived. Lulu's must have been handwritten; she never typed. I do not know if Rebecca kept Lulu's, and whether or not, if she did, they are among her preserved papers.

On Rebecca's part, the warmth clearly remained. "You can see how much I love you by this flow of gossip," one of her last and longest letters ends. So Lulu must have done her part in keeping the flower of friendship blooming. It seems that Rebecca, of all the people in Lulu's life, was the one who had nothing to fear from the serpent.

[1] 105 of the 156 accused were black, 21 were ethnic Indians, 23 were white—Afrikaners, Britons, Jews—and seven were "coloreds." All were finally acquitted, the last 28 on 29 March 1961. The trial by which Mandela was finally convicted was held from 9 October 1963 to 12 June 1964, at which he and nine other members of the ANC were charged with 221 acts of sabotage to "ferment violent revolution." Mandela was found guilty (which he was) and sentenced to life imprisonment. He was released 11 February 1990.

[2] Rebecca West's account of the Nuremberg trials was published in three parts in a collection of essays titled *A Train of Powder*. It has remained important for both its literary and historical value.

[3] Bonnie Kime Scott, *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, Yale University, 2000, p.355.

[4] Scott, *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, p. 364. Rebecca West did not always date her letters, but this one is dated 10 November 1960.

[\[5\]](#) In Carl Rollyson's biography of Rebecca West (of which there are various titles and editions), he writes (Chapter 28): "Since World War II, Rebecca had poured out a steady stream of articles and reviews, purveying an anti-Communist reading of history that she considered in the best tradition of liberalism, but which estranged her from much of the Left ..." And: "In a series of articles for the *Evening Standard* (28 January – 1 February 1952), Rebecca presented her interpretation of Lenin, Stalin, the aftermath of the two world wars, and why opposing the Communist conspiracy ought to be the paramount political programme of modern life."

[\[6\]](#) Scott, *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, p. xix.

[\[7\]](#) See, for example, her response to a letter she received from Arthur Schlesinger Jr. She told him it was "grossly offensive" and scolded him for having the "impertinence" to rebuke her for opinions she had published on anti-Americanism in Britain, which she held to be "inspired by the Communists." He also accused her of being too soft on Joe McCarthy, an accusation she fiercely repudiated. (Scott, *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, pp.270-275).

[\[8\]](#) Scott, *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, p. 368.

[\[9\]](#) The sum originally demanded in damages was £15,000. Eventually £3,500 was paid, whether only by the publisher, or by the publisher and the author each paying half, I have not discovered. Regrettably, I have not been able to find out what the offending remarks were, from British or South African sources, nor to recover the article in which Rebecca West misattributed them.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary*, *The New Criterion*, *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe), *Encounter*, *The Times* (UK), *The Telegraph Magazine*, and *Standpoint*. She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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