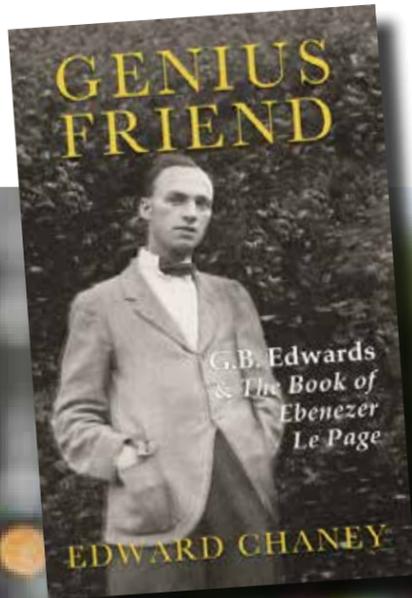


It was a literary success on both sides of the Atlantic but until now we have known little about the Guernsey-born author of *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. That will change next week, when a biography of GB Edwards by his friend Professor Edward Chaney is launched at the Guernsey Literary Festival. It explodes the myth that Edwards based Ebenezer on himself and explains how an elementary school teacher from a small island who had dropped out of Bristol University came to establish himself in a stellar London literary set. Ebenezer fan **Nick Le Messurier** couldn't wait to get his hands on an advance copy...

GUERNSEY
LITERARY
FESTIVAL

Ebenezer's creator



New book
tells the
story

Professor Edward Chaney befriended GB Edwards as a young art student.

WHEN I got my hands on a review copy of *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by GB Edwards in 1981 I was mesmerised from the first page. I couldn't believe that this novel, feted by no less a writer than Nobel Literature winner William Golding, was about Guernsey, the place where I grew up, and about the people I knew.

Edwards had created characters who I recognised, characters my father and mother talked about at the kitchen table, characters to whom I might even have been related. And yet, though *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* was a publishing success, both critically and in terms of sales, though Golding chose it as his book of the year, though the *New Yorker* devoted two pages to 'this lovely book' and *Newsweek* described it as a 'breathtaking novel', we knew very little about the writer, Gerald Edwards. He was born in Guernsey, that was known. He had left for England in 1919 when a young man. He died as something of a recluse in Weymouth before his great work was ever published, that was known. But very little else.

In this new biography of Edwards, *Genius Friend*, Professor Edward Chaney seeks to put this right. It has not been an easy task. Before he died, Edwards destroyed much of his other work and Professor Chaney has painstakingly pieced together his life from years of speaking to people who knew Edwards, from his relatives, from research, from letters and from his personal knowledge of this reclusive man. Professor Chaney was closer to Gerald Edwards than most biographers are to their subjects. As a young art student he befriended Edwards, then living in lodgings in Weymouth. Chaney visited Edwards and they would spend hours talking. They corresponded and Edward Chaney encouraged Edwards to complete his great book.

Edwards was not an easy man to get on with, but he must have been impressed by the young student because he based the character of the rebellious Neville Falla on Chaney and left him the completed manuscript of the book, dedicating it to him and his wife. In a book which follows the main character, Ebenezer, from cradle almost to grave, Neville is a symbol of optimism for the future. Dr Chaney, who is now Professor of Fine and Decorative Arts at Southampton Solent University, approached a number of publishers with Edwards' masterpiece but all rejected the manuscript. When Edwards died of a heart attack just after Christmas in 1976 it looked like the *Book of Ebenezer Le Page* could never see the light of day. But Edward Chaney was persistent. Through a friend in Florence, Chaney persuaded publishers Hamish Hamilton to read the typescript. They liked it. In fact, Hamish Hamilton managing director Christopher Sinclair-Stevenson said it was 'one of the most remarkable scripts I'd ever read. I couldn't think of another book like it.' In October 1979 a contract was signed and John Fowles wrote his introduction. Hamish Hamilton published *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* to great critical acclaim. It was republished by Penguin as a paperback the following year and then by Knopf in America, where it also sold well. The book was subsequently translated into many languages and marketed worldwide.

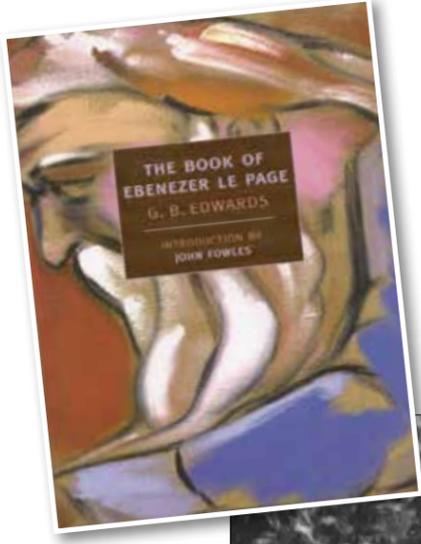
'Before he died, Edwards destroyed much of his other work and Professor Chaney has painstakingly pieced together his life from years of speaking to people who knew Edwards, from his relatives, from research, from letters and from his personal knowledge of this reclusive man'



Gerald in Upwey, Dorset, in the 1970s.

My genius friend Gerald

(and no, he wasn't Ebenezer...)



'Ebenezer is definitely not me under cover, nor my mouthpiece. He says things I know to be untrue'

Gerald Edwards



Gerald and his wife Kathleen.

'You are certainly right about Guernsey not being the same as it used to be... There are too many people living on the island, especially strangers: and more visitors than it can cope with, while having its own life. Of course money is made; but that's not everything. The Guernsey we knew when we were young was more of a place. All the same, there is nowhere else I really want to live now'

Gerald to his cousin, Hilda Dumond

PROFESSOR Edward Chaney's biography of GB Edwards has taken time. It is more than 40 years since the young art student had the good fortune to meet the talented writer Edwards.

In the biography, *Genius Friend: GB Edwards and The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, Chaney does not merely put together details of Gerald Edwards' life but puts Edwards in his place in 20th-century English literature. There has always been a temptation by some to see Edwards as Ebenezer, limited in experience but world-wise and intelligent in a sort of peasant way, telling a story similar to his own. Nothing could be further from the truth. Edwards was for a time at the centre of a London literary movement and was even described by some as the 'new DH Lawrence'.

He was a regular contributor to John Middleton Murry's influential literary magazine *The Adelphi* and it was their mutual friend JS Collis who, in an obituary in *The Spectator*, wrote: 'To Stephen Potter [author and BBC producer] and myself he [Edwards] seemed always a genius. He was the most dynamic person we had ever met.' Edwards maintained intense friendships throughout this period with both Collis and Murry, the latter in turn a close friend of DH Lawrence.

How an elementary school teacher from a small island who had dropped out of Bristol University came to meet these writers and establish himself in the rarefied atmosphere of this literary set is a mystery which Chaney addresses in his biography. But Edwards did just that and he was well respected enough to be commissioned by publishers Cape to write a biography of his great hero, DH Lawrence.

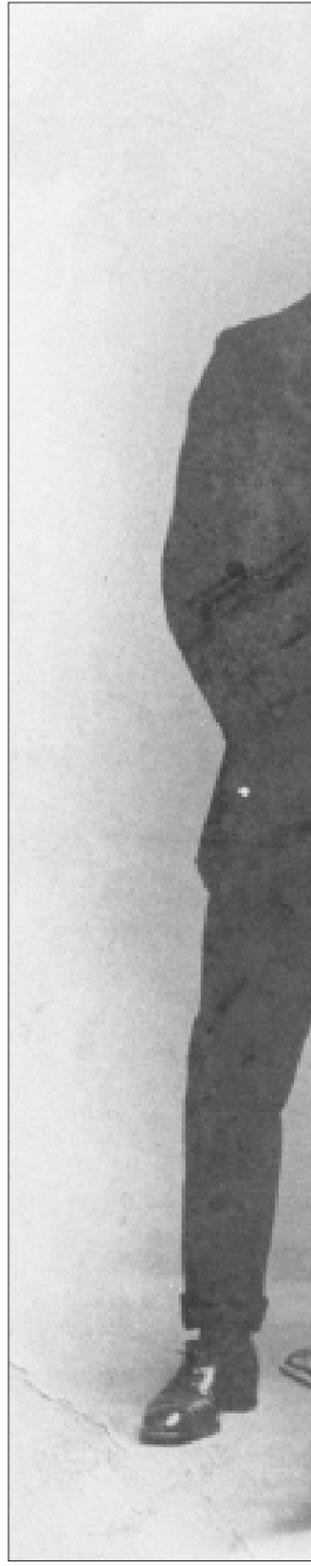
The fact that this was never completed is perhaps another example of Edwards' procrastination, or else his slavery to perfection. He is known to have destroyed some of his work, including a possible sequel to *Ebenezer Le Page*, before his death. However, GB Edwards was always confident of his ability. Ebenezer is often self-deprecating, but Edwards was never so. He may not have called himself a genius to others but it is more than possible that he thought he was – with some justification.

Gerald Basil Edwards was born on 8 July 1899 at Sous les Hougues, Vale, son of 44-year-old quarryman Thomas Edwards and his 30-year-old second wife, Harriet Mauger, whose sister was married to Tom's brother. By 1901 Tom and Harriet Edwards had moved with the 16-year-old Kathleen, one of two daughters by his previous wife, and their one-year-old son Gerald, to the more substantial Hawkesbury in Braye Road. In 1909 Gerald won a scholarship from Hautes Capelles School to the Boys' Intermediate School. He became a pupil teacher at Hautes Capelles as early as 1915, but left after his mother thought he was getting too fond of fellow teacher Miss Waymouth and transferred to Vauvert School. In 1917 he was called up to the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry and served as sergeant-instructor in gunnery, but didn't see action and ended up in Portsmouth.

We know that Gerald went to Bristol University, but dropped out and was an elementary school teacher in the UK by 1923. In the following year, his mother died. She had played a dominant part in his life; it was a relationship which perhaps soured all his relationships with women.



The former homes of Gerald Edwards, Hawkesbury and Sous Les Hougues in Guernsey and



He later wrote to Chaney: 'My adolescence and young manhood increasingly intense fight to tell my mother; and indeed all my women have been a fight to tell but in grief; for I have sympathy against, and sorrow at the need. Like his great hero, DH Lawrence, dominated by his relationship with her. She was much wealthier than Gerald's father, and when she died everything in her will, leaving nothing. Typically, Gerald felt to his father and ripped up the will his mother was trying to dominate her death. The property went to his father, remarried and left it on his second wife. Gerald was the loser here to realise. Those readers who know of Ebenezer Le Page well will know the incident in Raymond's life.'

Female characters do not come to Ebenezer Le Page. Ebenezer's great love Lizzy this has led to the charge of neglect Edwards in some quarters. Edwards' own marriage to Kathleen (she was 22 and he 27) was not only both espoused freedom with Kathleen was rather better than had a number of affairs. They had Adam and Dorcas, and then Kathleen more children by other men –





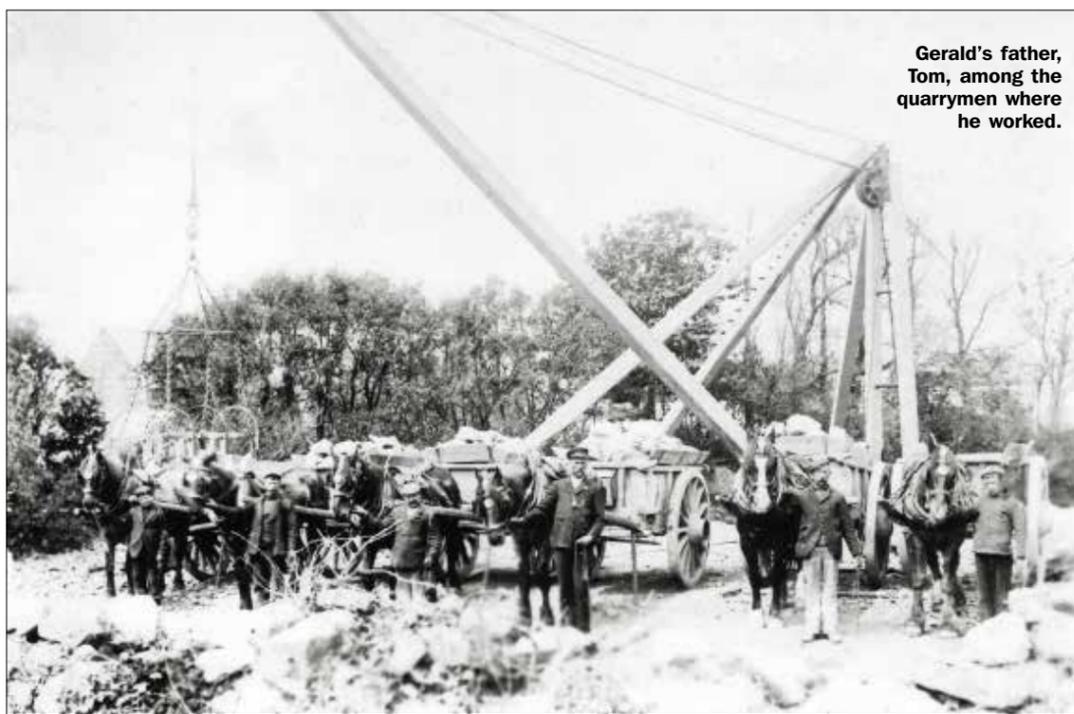
Gerald (seated) with Clarrie Bellot.

'My boyhood, adolescence and young manhood was an increasingly intense fight to the death against my mother; and indeed all my relationships with women have been a fight to the death. I survive, but in grief; for I have sympathy with what I fight against, and sorrow at the necessity'

Gerald Edwards



Gerald's mother, Harriet.



Gerald's father, Tom, among the quarrymen where he worked.

My boyhood, adolescence and young manhood was an increasingly intense fight to the death against my mother; and indeed all my relationships with women have been a fight to the death. I survive, but in grief; for I have sympathy with what I fight against, and sorrow at the necessity.'

...ence, Gerald was ... with his mother. ... her husband, ... died she left Gerald ... her husband ... that this was unfair ... will, believing that ... inate him even after

...er, who then ... death to his new ... re, as he was later ... know The Book ... recall a similar

Raymond's life in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. For a time, they settled in the Sanctuary, a commune in West Sussex, before heading to Switzerland. By the 1930s they were in Devon, where Gerald was a drama teacher at Dartington. The couple parted in the late 1930s and the two children were adopted. Collis said of Kathleen that she had 'such a way with her that I think she always managed to get rich people to take over the children'. However, Gerald did acknowledge his own fault as well, writing in later life: 'One of the deeds I most regret is that of having stood against my children or closed my heart to them...'

It transpires that there are many instances in the book which can be tracked to Gerald Edwards' own life. 'There are slithers of me in quite a number [of characters], not only Ebenezer and Raymond, but also Archie Mauger and Horace, among others,' he wrote.

War was approaching and life was not looking so good for Gerald. In *Genius Friend*, Dr Chaney explains that his great literary friends, Potter and Collis, cooled towards him because he didn't produce the great manuscript he promised. *Genius Friend* charts his life through the war – he worked as a drama organiser employed by Bolton Corporation and took part in the Mass Observation project. He wrote and performed plays. The biography also considers his confused sexuality. One novelist who met Gerald in the Bolton years described him later as a 'very intelligent bloke,

very temperamental. He was gay. At the time I knew him he was having an affair with a young actor'. Edwards knew that he would get no inheritance when his father died in 1946 and got a job working for the Labour Exchange in London. *Genius Friend* tells us that 'Post war, he became increasingly reclusive and disillusioned with people, men and women'. He retired from his civil service post in 1960, moving to Weymouth in 1967. He eventually lived in the lodging house of landlords Bert and Joan Snell, who became his good friends. During those years he visited Guernsey, spending time talking with his cousin Hilda Dumond. They must have talked about their relatives and recounted stories of the people they knew, especially relevant to Edwards when he came to work on his great novel. One of the most fascinating sections of *Genius Friend* is about the friendship between Edward Chaney and Edwards in the 1970s. They met in 1972 and Edwards was already working on a substantial novel called *Sarnia Cherie*, set in Guernsey. This was to become *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. It was an unlikely friendship, an opinionated old man meets an

opinionated young man, but they got on well. Without their friendship, Ebenezer would never have seen the light of day. Dr Chaney's recounting of their meetings and the many extracts from their correspondence give a great insight into the mind of Gerald Edwards, but this biography is not just about his life, it is about his position in 20th-century English literature, his following in the footsteps of DH Lawrence and their interest in the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Also attached as an appendix is some of Edwards' poetry, including the fascinating *La Rocque qui Chante*, which has echoes of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*. At the end, Chaney writes, 'Whilst concluding this memoir, I was tempted to repeat the final paragraph of Fowles's introduction to *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by way of conclusion: Gerald Edwards died after a heart attack, in his small room near Weymouth, on 29 December, 1976. His ashes were scattered at sea. I should like to think that some at least were washed up among the vrac and granite of his long-lost native shore.' In fact, as Chaney points out, at a later date Gerald's ashes were taken across the sea to St Peter Port, and scattered at the entrance to the harbour.

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...athleen Smith in 1926 ... t easy. Although ... within marriage, ... it than he was and ... had two children, ... Kathleen had two ... shades again of



...nd Snelldonia, in Upwey, where he spent his last years.



Edward Chaney's self-portrait, 1969, painted in Upwey at his great-aunt's studio a couple of years before he met Gerald.



● **Genius Friend: GB Edwards and The Book of Ebenezer Le Page, by Edward Chaney, is published by Blue Ormer Publishing.**

A portrait of JS Collis by John Lavery. (National Gallery of Ireland)

Steve Foote fell in love with The Book of Ebenezer Le Page as a young boy and would vividly imagine Ebenezer living just around the coast from his L'Islet home, at Chouet.

He told **Nick Le Messurier** why he not only encouraged Edward Chaney to develop his memoir of GB Edwards' life into a biography, but decided to publish it

'I thought, why not publish it myself?'



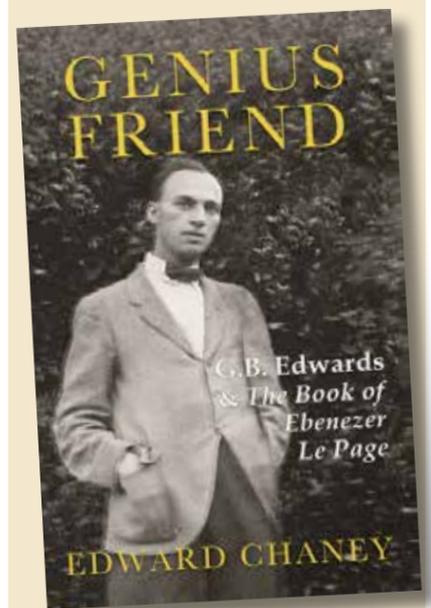
Steve Foote, who encouraged Edward Chaney to complete the final part of his account and memoir of GB Edwards' life. (Picture by Adrian Miller, 10294157)

STEVE FOOTE played a pivotal role in the creation of *Genius Friend*. For it was he who encouraged Edward Chaney to finish the final part of his account and memoir of the writer's life, to develop it into a full-blown biography and to publish it through his own company, Blue Ormer Publishing. In many ways there were parallels with the birth of the original novel. Edward Chaney encouraged Edwards to finish the novel, and it was Steve Foote who, 40 years later, encouraged Chaney to complete the biography, *Genius Friend: GB Edwards and The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. Steve Foote, who was born in Guernsey but now lives in Cookham, Bucks, is the son of the late George Foote. Like many Guernsey people, he fell in love with *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. 'Having grown up at L'Islet I could vividly imagine Ebenezer, living just around the coast at Chouet: fishing, growing tomatoes, tending his ancient monuments, dragging a reluctant pig across the gully to his neighbour's house and sitting on the beach watching the sun go down,' he says. His family has another link with The

Book of Ebenezer Le Page. Three generations of the Foote family, including father George, took acting roles in the local production of the play version of the novel. 'When I joined the Guernsey Society in the late 1990s,' says Steve, 'I discovered that Edward Chaney had given a talk to the society in London a few years earlier about his friendship with Gerald Edwards – and part of this talk had been published in the society's magazine, *The Review*. 'However, the series or articles stopped before reaching the final part of his story, the part which would have covered Gerald's death and how Edward finally found a publisher.' He contacted Edward Chaney who told him that the final part of the story did exist in draft form and he invited Professor Chaney to return to a Society meeting in London in 2007 to share the story with a new audience. 'I persuaded Edward to send me a print-out of the final part of his article so that I could scan it into an up-to-date word processing format.' It was then that Steve Foote realised that not only did the unpublished section contain the most interesting parts of the story, but it was twice the

length of the existing three published sections put together. There was enough for a 90-page booklet, but although the Guernsey Society wanted to see it published, it felt that it was not something it could do. Foote and Chaney were both keen by then to see it published – '...and by then I had realised that, with the advances in printing technology, you didn't need to be a large publishing house to publish a book, so why didn't I publish it myself?' And so Blue Ormer Publishing was launched at the start of last year with the aim of publishing Edward Chaney's memoir. The plan was to 'tidy up' the remaining loose ends, but further information and detailed research brought forward a host of fascinating additional facts on the life and work of Gerald Edwards and the booklet developed into the full 420-page biography which is being launched at the Guernsey Literary Festival. The research also led to the discovery of long-lost relatives of Gerald Edwards,

WIN a copy



FOR your chance to win a copy of *Genius Friend: GB Edwards & The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* by Edward Chaney, call our competition line, 240241, or email newsroom@guernseypress.com, leaving your name, contact details and the answer to this:

Who wrote the foreword for *The book of Ebenezer Le Page*?

Competition closes on Monday 14 September. No cash prize or substitute.

some of whom had no inkling that they were related to a great novelist. The launch of *Genius Friend* has been a labour of love and a steep learning curve for Steve, but it has been worth it. 'I hope this biography will stimulate even more readers to discover this wonderful novel and help those who already love it to appreciate the book and its author even more,' he says.

● **Edward Chaney will be talking to Jenny Kendall-Tobias about the new book as part of the Guernsey Literary Festival on 17 and 20 September. More details on the festival website, guernseyliteraryfestival.com**

● **The Guernsey Press is the Guernsey Literary Festival's media partner.**

'Having grown up at L'Islet, I could vividly imagine Ebenezer, living just around the coast at Chouet: fishing, growing tomatoes, tending his ancient monuments, dragging a reluctant pig across the gully to his neighbour's house and sitting on the beach watching the sun go down'

Steve Foote



Edward Chaney with John Fowles, who wrote the foreword for *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, pictured in 2001.