

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

The author Rumer Godden, who spent the last 20 years of her life in Moniaive, was one of the most prolific authors of the 20th century. **Mary Smith** recounts her fascinating career and meets her daughter, who looks after her literary legacy

Photography by Phil Rigby



Rumer Godden at work in her study in Kashmir in 1943



Rumer used longhand to write her stories in lined notebooks

Fans of author Rumer Godden's work are in for a treat on December 5 when the Robert Burns Centre Film Theatre in Dumfries shows the 1948 romantic movie *Enchantment*, based on her 1945 novel *A Fugue in Time*. After the film there will be a buffet lunch followed by a talk on Rumer's work by broadcaster and journalist Anne Harvey.

'Prolific' seems an inadequate description of Rumer Godden, whose literary output comprises over 20 novels, 25 children's novels, nine works of non-fiction, including two volumes of autobiography, and an account, co-written with her older sister Jon, of their childhood in India. Add poetry – both Rumer's own work and collected anthologies – screenplays, short stories and reviews to the list and it is clear she was both dedicated to her craft and highly disciplined.

"Writing was paramount," says her daughter Jane Murray Flutter, who lives in Moniaive, where Rumer spent the last 20 years of her life, continuing her awe-inspiring work. Jane, who is chairman of the Rumer Godden Literary Trust, which looks after her late mother's literary legacy, adds: "She'd be at her desk first thing and work all morning then go back to it in the evening."

Her last book, *Cromartie versus the God Shiva Acting Through the Government of India*, was published in 1997 when she was 89. She was still writing shortly before her 91st birthday.

Born in Eastbourne on December 10, 1907, Margaret (Peggy) Rumer Godden was only a few months old when the family moved to India, where she spent most of her childhood. Her father, Arthur Godden, was manager of the Brahmaputra River Steam Navigation Company based in Narayanganj, about 12 miles from Dhaka in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). It was where Rumer felt she belonged and in *Two Under the Indian Sun* (1966), the evocative autobiography she and Jon wrote together, she explains: "Children in India are greatly loved and indulged and we never felt that we were foreigners, not India's own; we felt at home, safely held in her large warm embrace, content as we were never to be content in our own country."

The four Godden girls – Jon, Rumer, Nancy and Rose – enjoyed an idyllic childhood in the large house in Narayanganj with its flat roof, ideal for kite flying, and its lovely garden with a huge cork tree in the middle. Rumer, despite not having a formal

education until the age of 12, wanted to be a writer from when she was very young, apparently attempting to write her autobiography when she was eight. All the time, she was observing and squirreling away a vast storehouse of sounds, sights, scents and events to be used in her later writing.

Back in England in 1927, Rumer decided to train as a dancing teacher, enrolling in the Vandyke School in London. She returned to India in 1929 and established a dance school in Darjeeling, one of the summer resorts popular with the British in India, before moving to Calcutta to open the mixed race Peggy Godden School of Dance, thus breaking British community taboos in class-ridden, snobbish Calcutta where it was not done for 'nice girls' to live independently and go out to work.

While she was critical of many aspects of the British way of life in India, particularly the snobbishness and unwillingness to mix with Indians, especially Eurasians, it must have been hurtful to know she was being criticised and gossiped about.

Despite such difficulties, Rumer managed to enjoy the Calcutta social life and had fun, breaking a few hearts before marrying Laurence Foster in St Paul's Cathedral in



Rumer Godden pictured in 1958 with a portrait of her daughters Jane and Paula, and at home in Moniaive, where she died in 1998 aged 91

Calcutta in March 1934. Rumer returned to England to give birth to her first daughter, Jane, in 1935. By now she was taking her writing seriously and had completed two novels, which although accepted by her agents Curtis Brown, failed to find a publisher. Her next, however, *Chinese Puzzle*, about a Chinese man who lived in ancient China and whose spirit inhabits a Pekinese, came out in 1935, the year Jane was born. Her sister, Jon, gave her a gift of a Pekinese puppy. Throughout her life, Rumer loved and kept Pekinese, usually having at least one close to her while she worked.

Chinese Puzzle was followed two years later by *The Lady and the Unicorn* and, in 1939, perhaps her best-known book, *Black Narcissus*, was published. Seventy years on, it has never been out of print. It is the story of a group of British nuns who struggle to maintain the convent they establish in a disused palace near Darjeeling. As with all her books set in India, *Black Narcissus* evokes the beautiful landscape and portrays authentic characters. Its success gave Rumer a belief in herself as a writer.

Rumer's second daughter, Paula, was born in Cornwall in 1938. For a time the family was together but Laurence returned to India alone. It was not until June 1940 that Rumer and her girls returned to India. Laurence joined the army and Rumer, like many army

'Mother was not a conventional woman. During the war years, she started a herb business and sold wild herbs in Srinagar or Calcutta'

wives at the time, moved to Kashmir. Once again, she defied convention by moving out of the capital, Srinagar, to live in a house – Dove House – in a remote area.

"Mother was not a conventional woman. During the war years, the wives and children went to Kashmir while their husbands were in the army but Mother felt claustrophobic in Srinagar," says Jane. "She really became ill with jaundice and typhoid and wanted to get away. She hoped living in Dove House would help her to recover. We were the only white people in the area.

"She started a herb business and sold wild herbs in Srinagar or Calcutta. She didn't actually grow them but paid village children to collect them from the mountainside where they grew wild. She really had very little money. I remember she made our winter

coats out of two army blankets and we ate mainly dhal and rice."

It was while eating dhal that Jane complained of it being gritty and it was discovered that a servant had laced it with powdered glass. Not only had he used glass in Jane's food, it seems he had been administering opium to Rumer's food as well.

As she suspected, action against the man was half-hearted on the part of the authorities and he was let off in court. Rumer had by then left Kashmir – bringing with her a Kashmiri rug which Jane still has. Rumer wrote various accounts of the incident, merging fact and fiction so it is no longer possible to be clear as to exactly what happened.

"The man had a past history of drugging ladies in his previous jobs and he hoped to get financial control of Mother," says Jane.

New writers are often given the advice to write about what they know and in Rumer Godden's case she certainly did. Almost everything from her experiences of life in India found its way into her novels. In *Kingfishers Catch Fire*, she fictionalised the Kashmir incident while in *The River*, her lyrical tribute to India, she explores the loss of childhood innocence. The *Lady and the Unicorn* portrays the plight of



Rumer's daughter Jane Murray Flutter with a selection of her mother's books

◆ Eurasians – socially ostracised by both British and Indian – in a way which did not make her popular with the expatriate community in Calcutta, not least because she drew attention to the caddish behaviour of young Englishmen towards Eurasian girls.

At the end of the war, Rumer and the children returned to Britain in 1945. Her career really began to take off. *Black Narcissus* was made into a successful film by Eric Powell and Emeric Pressburger, though Rumer disliked it. Shot in England, she felt it was phoney and did not show her true intentions. *The Greengage Summer*, a rite of passage novel set in France, was also made into a successful film. The film of *The River* – considered one of her most perfect books – was directed by the iconic director Jean Renoir and was the first film to be shot entirely on location in India.

Dumfries & Galloway Council's film officer, Alice Stilgoe, is a fan. "I love the melodrama of the film *Black Narcissus*," she says, "but I think that the best film of Rumer Godden's work is Jean Renoir's *The River*, an intensely lyrical film adapted from her novel about an English family living in Bengal during the final years of the Raj."

Rumer spent two years working with Renoir on the film, going to Hollywood to write the script. She was also invited to America several times on lecture tours. "I

went once or twice," says Jane, "and it was very interesting. She was more well-known in America before here in Britain."

In the Seventies, Rumer moved to Dumfries & Galloway to be near her daughter, living in a converted steading behind the house where she could work undisturbed.

"She loved the peace and liked the sound of the river," says Jane. "She wrote quite a number of books when she came here, such as *A Peacock Spring*, which was made into a television film and *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy*. It's about a religious order whose nuns go into prisons to help women who are prostitutes. Mother went to Paris to research for the book."

Rumer wrote in longhand in exercise books, which were then given to someone to type. Each of her books had a file in which she collected everything from research material to reviews. Most of her extensive literary archive is in the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center at Boston University, though Jane has retained a nucleus of material, including a few of her mother's notebooks.

Rumer won the 1972 Whitbread Prize for her children's book *The Diddakoi*, which has been republished as *Gypsy Girl*, and in 1993 she was awarded an OBE. The following

year, when she was 85, Rumer returned to India. This time it was for a BBC documentary about her life there. Jane accompanied her on what was often a gruelling trip.

"Mother insisted on two things she needed to make it bearable," she says. "A portaloos and a crate of Grouse whisky." D&G

■ *The Rumer Godden Literary Trust's website is: www.rumergodden.com which lists her books.*

■ *A collection of essays on Rumer Godden's work, some based on a 2007 conference organised by Lucy Le-Guilcher of Cambridge University, others specially commissioned, will be published in April 2010. The book is edited by Lucy Le-Guilcher and Phyllis Lassner and published by Ashgate Publishing Ltd.*

■ *The Rumer Godden book and film event at the Robert Burns Centre Film Theatre is on Saturday, December 5, starting at 11.15am with the screening of *Enchantment*. It will be followed by a buffet lunch and talk by writer and broadcaster Anne Harvey, a freelance broadcaster and presenter of literary programmes.*

Tickets for the full event are £20 (£18 concessions); individual tickets are £12 for lunch including a glass of wine or £6 for the film and talk.