

Controversial author had a life of 'sadness punctuated by joy'

BY HELEN MEYNELL

WITH storylines which wouldn't look out of place on the Jerry Springer Show, the diaries of Derbyshire author Alison Uttley 1932-1971 reveal her sometimes difficult character and her almost incestuous relationship with her only son, John.

The diaries were edited by Professor Denis Judd, historian, biographer and lifelong fan of Alison Uttley. "When I was growing up my dad used to drive buses. He often used to come back with a new Little Grey Rabbit book so I was actually brought up on them. All my people were country people

"I often imagine conversations with her and I think she'd be very stimulating."

DENIS JUDD

and the whole family used to love Little Grey Rabbit and then we found Sam Pig and all the other books."

Denis went on to write her biography, Alison Uttley: Spinner of Tales, as well as a collection of Little Grey Rabbit stories based on some original Margaret Tempest paintings discovered in the late 1980s.

Denis had been told about a collection of 39 diaries which Alison, who grew up at Castle Top Farm, near Cromford, had bequeathed to a publisher and that they contained some "very damaging and difficult material which would harm her reputation".

Denis explains: "At that point, the only member of the family who was alive was her daughter-in-law, Helen, who lived in Guernsey. Helen had a very stormy relationship

with Alison and in fact had disliked her intensely – and the other way round – so she said 'fine, read the diaries'. She wanted the whole truth to come out I think."

The truth turned out to be shocking, but didn't diminish the author in Alison's eyes.

"I don't think a person's private life, their misdemeanours whatever they might be, ruins the art. I think you have to separate the art from the artist."

If anything, it made Alison more human to Denis.

"I think I've tried to say this in my book; the fact that it makes her more like us. She could be extremely charming and wonderful and creative and friendly and helpful but she could also be bloody-minded and selfish and dominating... but we're all the same. We're all a mixture of things."

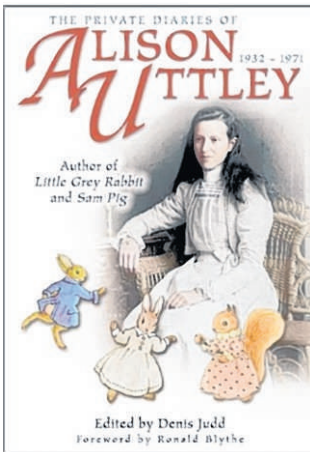
Alison certainly had her share of tribulations. Her husband had returned from the First World War with psychological problems, which took their toll.

When Alison showed him the first draft of her celebrated autobiographical novel, The Country Child, he dismissed it as "rubbish" and threw it across the room.

"It was nothing to do with the value of the book but his own unhappiness," says Denis. "He was often very depressed and was very angry with her, perhaps he found his relationship with her difficult. He killed himself shortly afterwards."

"She feels quite guilty about that in the diary; she goes to his grave and says 'why did you do it?'. I also know that she wondered if she had driven him to it."

Almost all of Alison's relationships were stormy, due, many people believe, to her overpowering character. But perhaps the most shocking revelation in the diaries is



her relationship with her son, after his father's death.

"As he was an adolescent, growing up, John, who was a very good-looking young man, became in a way Alison's substitute husband."

"She persuaded him to send her Valentine's cards. She mentions 'the long lingering kisses of mother and son' and, although I think nothing sexual happened between them in the technical sense, I do think there was an unhealthy obsession with John."

"He connived to some extent because he felt guilty about his father, so they clung together. John eventually broke away from Alison but only when a very strong-minded young woman, Helen, came along and sort of dragged him away."

Tragically, John, too, killed himself two years after his mother's death.

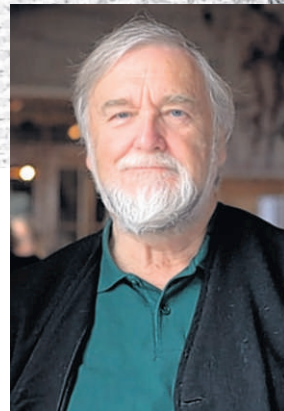
But Alison's life wasn't all tragedy; Denis describes it as "a lot of sadness punctuated by a lot of joy".

She was also a woman ahead of her time. In the Edwardian period, Alison Uttley went to university to read science and became the first woman to graduate in physics from Manchester University.

"She was interested in everything; she's hungry for



Derbyshire author Alison Uttley was a difficult character, as revealed in her diaries, above left. Right, Denis Judd edited the diaries and is due to give a talk about her work in Derby this week.



knowledge and that partly makes her a fascinating person but it also makes her sometimes an overbearing person because she had very strong views on things.

"Conversation with her would be wonderful, very stimulated, but it would shift around; one minute she'd be talking about fairies and ghosts and the next minute she'd be talking about scientific discoveries."

From enjoying her books as a child, Denis has grown to admire her as a person.

"I'm very fond of her. I think she was a wonderful, creative person. I'm quite tough in conversations so I

think I'd have stood up to her but I could see she'd have crushed some people. I often imagine conversations with her and I think she'd be very stimulating."

● Denis Judd will be giving a talk about The Country Child at Derby Theatre on Thursday at 6pm, prior to a performance at 7.30pm. Read more about the show in Qt on Wednesday.

BUY THE BOOK

TITLE: The Private Diaries of Alison Uttley 1932-1971
BY: Denis Judd (editor)
PUBLISHER: Remember When
PRICE: £14.99

International prize for celebrated writer

PHILIP Roth has been announced as the winner of the fourth Man Booker International Prize, chosen from a list of 13 eminent contenders.

The Man Booker International Prize, worth £60,000, is awarded for an achievement in fiction on the world stage. It is presented once every two years to a living author for a body of work published either originally in English or widely available in translation in the English language.

Philip Roth is one of the world's most prolific, celebrated – and controversial – writers. He is best known for his 1969 novel Portnoy's Complaint, and for his late-1990s trilogy comprising the Pulitzer Prize-winning American Pastoral (1997), I Married a Communist (1998), and The Human Stain (2000).

READERS' POEMS

SUMMER IN DERBY

By Sean P. Daly

Sod the weather
I wish it would go away
The weatherman said
It's another cloudy day
I have a friend in
Bournemouth
"It's so sunny down here"
"Six degrees warmer"
"With another hose pipe ban I fear"
Well I live in Derby
Where it's cold and its wet
And maybe a little less wind
Is the best we're going to get
Washed out barbecues
And the heating still on
I hope I get to wear my shorts
Or has summer already gone?
The patio is a paddling pool
I watch it from inside
Here in my glass prison
Where from the elements I hide
I suppose I should move away
And go to a warmer place
But everywhere in England
Is running out of space
Maybe I should move to France
And live in a little gite
And learn to speak the language
Well wouldn't that be sweet?
But it seems so much hassle
Just because of a little rain
So I'll stay here, open a beer
And resign myself to complain.

Easy, flat walking with impressive views over wildlife haven at Carsington

WALKING

WITH DENIS EARDLEY

AN easy walk with many impressive views over Carsington Water, mainly over fields and along quiet country lanes to reach the reservoir.

Although only opened in 1992, Carsington Water seems to fit into the environment as if it had always been a permanent fixture. With more than a million visitors every year, it provides a lot of pleasure for a wide range of people. It is not just humans who are attracted to the reservoir, with an increasing number of

THE WALK: KIRK IRETON

LENGTH: 4.5 miles

START/FINISH: Park in tKirk Ireton, or at Millfields on the southern end of Carsington Water
LOCATION: Off B5023 Duffield to Wirksworth road, second left after Ildridgehay Church

TERRAIN: Mainly flat walking along well marked paths and country lanes

birds visiting every year, and wildlife in general thriving as a result of the conservation programme.

1. Walk down the village

street and turn left by the church along Wirksworth Road, and turn left at a field stile just past the churchyard.

2. Cross the field keeping close to the wire fence on the left, continuing in the same direction over a narrow field and two more fields.

3. In the next field continue in the same direction and go through a gap between some holly bushes, over another stile to join a short path leading to a road.

4. Turn left down the road and in about 50 yards take the footpath on the right almost directly opposite

Harding's Close.

5. After going down a narrow fenced path, angle slightly to the right over the next two fields and then continue straight ahead for a further two fields.

6. Cross a stile and a concrete footbridge, turn right and follow a well-trodden path that gradually moves away from the hedge on the right to a stile leading into Oldfield Lane.

7. Walk down Oldfield Lane and just before reaching Upperfield Farm, turn left at the sign for Millfields.

8. Follow the path round the reservoir eventually reach-

ing a stone building housing a small exhibition – a few yards past this building take the second road on the left (Hays Lane).

9. If you have time, extend the walk to Millfields, about a quarter of a mile, continue by the side of the reservoir, or to Carsington Water Visitor Centre just over a mile further on. Then retrace your steps back to Hays Lane.

10. At the T-junction at the top of Hays Lane, cross the stile on the opposite side of the road and walk straight across the field and a further very narrow field.

11. In the next field, angle

slightly to the right and go through a wide gap in the hedge. Continue across another field aiming for a stile in an opening between holly bushes.

12. Maintain roughly the same direction, ensuring you gradually get closer to the hedge on the right.

13. Go through a stile in the corner of the field, where the hedge bends sharply to the left for a short distance.

14. Turn left down the field, keep close to the hedge, before reaching a stile onto a village road, turning first left, and then right back to the start of the walk.