

Gary's debut novel inspired by local politics - sixties' style

by Annabel Hughes

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THE debut novel of a former journalist, who grew up in Monmouth, gently satirises political life in the South Wales valleys in the late 1960s.

Gary Hicks' novel 'Sheep Town', illustrated with cartoons by Simon Groves, was inspired by his time as district reporter for the Western Mail.

For years a reactionary Labour Party has dominated Treorchan, a grim mining town. But now, in 1966, change is coming with the election to the local council of Errigal Keerogue as sole Liberal representative. He's determined to challenge the comrades' monopoly. They clash on many issues: the sheep that plague the town, the invasion of hippies, the sinister nocturnal activities. Things come to a head with Errigal's declaration of independence, a move that brings both MI5 and the KGB scurrying to the isolated town... Gary says the hero of his book was inspired by Angus Donaldson who, in his days reporting on local politics for the Western Mail, was the sole Liberal councillor on Tredegar Urban District Council battling the Labour establishment.

Gary also remembers "the incredible number of sheep that plagued the town, getting into the gardens and eating people's roses!"

Above all he remembers the local residents as "great people - warm, emotional and witty".

Gary, who was born in Tredegar, sent a copy of the book to Neil Kinnock, who was also born there. The response came back 'Grand yarn, nicely told'!

Gary, who now lives in London, moved on from his days as a district reporter to work for Central Press in London as a Parliamentary lobby correspondent. He later became political editor at the Central Office of Information and then head of information at the Export Credits Guarantee Department - "a job more interesting than it sounds!" - staying on after it was privatised.

During his career Gary travelled widely with prime ministers Harold Wilson, Jim Callaghan and Margaret Thatcher.

He says he noticed on a trip to Moscow in 1975 that Wilson's speech was becoming repetitive, which proved to be an early sign that he was suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

In the early 80s he recalls a round-the-world trip with Mrs Thatcher "spending four or five days in an RAF VC10 plane with about ten hours sleep in total".

Noticing his drooping eyelids, she asked: "What's the matter - are you tired?"

Gary married Cambridge art historian Carola Hicks in 1968. The couple had two children -

son Toby and daughter Colette.

After Carola's death in 2010 he completed the book she had been working on - 'Girl in a Green Gown; the History and Mystery of the Arnolfini Portrait'.

His own previous works are 'Fate's Bookie: How the Lottery Shaped the World' and 'The First Adman: Thomas Bish and the Birth of Modern Advertising'.

Gary regularly visits Monmouth, where his sister Gail Raynor still lives having retired from teaching at the comprehensive school. His late mother, Vera Hicks, taught there before her, his late father, Ken Hicks, was a chief superintendent with Gwent Police.

Sheep Town can be pre-ordered via silverwoodbooks.co.uk and amazon.co.uk



Gary Hicks