Praise for *Cwen*:

'A clever, strange and wonderful book, which brims with mystery. A group of women recount their past and present stories, revealing their visions of the future. *Cwen* by Alice Albinia is a rare book, bold and powerful' Xiaolu Guo

'A wild, original, sure-footed feminist reimagining of the present and the past that brushes up against the mythical. It reminds us, eloquently and passionately, what is or can be possible, and in its depiction of a revolution becomes a revolutionary book itself. Beautiful work' Neel Mukherjee

'From the very first page, Alice Albinia's *Cwen* draws you into a world that is glittering with beauty and aching with promise. A portrait of the British Isles, *Cwen* is also an absorbing saga of women's lives drawn from different parts of the world, skilfully weaving in strands from Bosnia, Pakistan, France. This is a book that speaks of the persistent human need for freedom and community, and of the as-persistent clash of these impulses with power and authority. A story for our times, and a book that will endure' Taran Khan, author of *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul*

'A phenomenal novel showing us that learning to love our female selves is essential for survival. Alice Albinia's diverse cast, from ancient Britain to contemporary Pakistan, step up to support each other, take down patriarchy and create a new collective story' Farhana Yamin, Environmental Lawyer, Woman's Hour Power List: Our Planet

'An unforgettable story with a dazzling cast of characters that will stay with me for a long, long time. As Albinia inverts and recreates our man-made world layer by layer, the novel reminds us of the epic range of human possibility, of who we might have been, and of who we still could be. A breathtaking, beautifully told, profound novel for our times and beyond. I loved it' Mirza Waheed, author of *The Collaborator*

'Swept on the current of so many centuries, this transporting tale lands powerfully at the point where vision and errancy combine in pursuit of what one wants most: a place to truly belong' Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, author of *Harlem is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America*

'Alice Albinia's *Cwen* is a skilful counter-history, a disruptive and compelling reimagining in microcosm of a society designed and controlled by women. Albinia brilliantly weaves together historical material and a narrative of life in contemporary Britain to demonstrate how our history might play out if women took charge. The book leaves me disoriented in the best possible way – a superb achievement' Daniyal Mueenuddin, author of *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*

'A superb book: original, fierce, elegant and full of surprises from beginning to end' Sonia Faleiro, author of *The Good Girls*

Also by Alice Albinia

Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River
Leela's Book

Cwen

Alice Albinia

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Cwen is a thing with a womb and two breasts. A brain and two far-seeing eyes. A clever nose and nimble fingers. The clouds are her children, and the waves, and the shells which the waves spit on to the sand. The islanders opposite, they are her children, too; and the sheep up on her island's high bank; and her chickens, down by the shore. The birds crouch under her stroking hand; she raised them from chicks. Now, if they have a mother, it is her.

There were people here before her, she knows that, for they left a cairn on the hillside just up from the shore. An ancient mound, grass-covered, it is three paces from her spring, bigger than her hut, and shaped like a breast, or a belly-full-of-child. There is a large stone, blocking the way in. Cwen sits there in the early morning, her back against the stone, her body full of spring water, as she waits for the islanders opposite to arrive in their boats, with their offerings of grain, and slices of dried meat, and their questions, all quite predictable, about their harvests and wombs, their neighbours and the gods. In winter, the stone receives the glare of the rising sun. In summer, when the sunrays touch the top of the mound, Cwen sits up there instead, looking out over the other islands, all twelve of them. In this way, she bathes in gold.

Inside the cairn are the histories that remain to guard this island, her spring, and her. Every morning, every evening, she stands on the cliff and looks down at the tide; how the sea rustles in, and is sucked back out. Twice a month, when Moon is at its thinnest and its fullest, its birth and its death, the bay below her cliff empties completely of water, and on those days she walks right out, in her long dress and leather boots, to ease sea creatures from the sand.

She calls herself *Cwen*, and *Cwen* is what the island will be called after she is gone; after her bones and her hair have been dispersed to the sea, and her thoughts to the winds, and the sea creatures whose relatives she ate are eating her. *Cwen*, call the tides; *Cwen*, say

the bubbles of her spring; *Cwen* says the Moon, as the sea aligns and realigns her island's bounds.

———

There is an island beside Britain where sacrifices and rites are performed like those at Samothrace in honour of the goddesses Demeter and her daughter Persephone.

Strabo, *Geography* (Greek), 7 BC

0

Judge

The night Eva went out in her boat, the storm came in off the sea. It span across the islands in a great wailing tumult, blowing chickens into the air in Astrid; pulling washing off the lines in Tarn; darkening and deepening the sea in the harbour; causing the beech trees in the wood to rend their clothes and tear their hair. It lashed the shore with water, great sheets of it, grabbing at the earth, sucking at sand and rock.

Within hours of her leaving, there was little hope. But they went on looking: early in the morning, islanders were out, walking up and down the coast on both sides of the channel, as two creel fishermen searched the island of Cwen. Texts and emails flew back and forth. *Have you heard? Such a tragedy. They tried – the coastguard was out all night.*

When the storm abated, and the deserted main street in Ayrness filled again with people, opinions flared. 'There's still no sign of her boat.' 'What did she think she was doing? What possessed her?' 'It's awful, not knowing.' 'We went to that Christmas party once, at the big house.' 'Do you remember her late husband, the minister?' 'She became a different person after his death.' 'She was flamboyant, wasn't she.' 'She was a bit too much; everything she did was over the top.' 'I liked her. She taught my daughter.' 'What will happen now, to the Islands of Women Study Centre?' 'Not just that – the Archipelago Women's Club. Wasn't she the one supporting Inga at the council?'

To some islanders, Eva's disappearance proved what they had always known; that despite her efforts, she wasn't local. Nobody who'd grown up in the islands would have gone out in that storm. It was a north-easterly; the wind was at forty knots—

Not when she went out; the wind got up suddenly, out of nowhere.

—it could only have been an incomer doing something so stupid. She did other stupid things, too. The sort of people she'd been consorting with recently. Even before she disappeared, there had been murmurings. The nonsense they were feeding the young boys and girls at Ayrness High. The preferential treatment of female entrepreneurs. The secret symbolism of the island flag; how wicked it was, when you really looked at it. The money that became available for the museum to rewrite its exhibits – *Neolithic female what?!* – destabilising millennia of good solid island history. Not to mention the books in the library. They'd even installed women's urinals; behind the abbey, of all places. Somebody must have encouraged Eva in these insane schemes and untenable positions.

In the days after Eva disappeared, women were seen going down to the Islands of Women Study Centre, one by one, and in groups. Not just incomers; islanders, too. They walked there, heads down, coats tight around their bodies, cowrie shells in hand. People love honouring the departed with flowers. But these women left a flotsam of seashells outside Eva's office in the harbour. Shells, being aerodynamic, survive the wind's scouring better than sunset-pink supermarket tulips, or fragile white lilies in crackly plastic.

Eva had set out from England; but who knows where she ended up. Scotland; Norway; Thule. Despite everything, there were women who continued to say that Eva would return to them. *Cwen had taken her; Cwen would give her back.*

Others were less sanguine, given the circumstances.

Some – men – found the sight of all those women with their seashells difficult to take. At the supermarket checkout, in the harbour, on the gangway of the ferries, they began calling one another out. *Did you . . . ? Had you . . . ?* Some of them had known; might just've gleaned it in passing from their daughters or wives. Others denied it. Online, lists of offences were exchanged, magnified. *They were changing the street names! The hospital too. And*

the library. They tried to promote women in fishing, in the fire service, as farmers. Did you hear about Pregnancy Celebration Day? It would've wiped out Chri—

The English coroner made her judgement: 'presumption of death'. Nobody could have survived, out in those seas, for more than a few hours.

The law had recently changed in England, making it possible, in the case of the missing, to settle their estate without waiting the customary seven years. So the will was read, and Eva's sons, the Harcourt-Vane boys, found out about the house, and the money. In Ayrness, there were public denunciations; inflamed meetings in the town hall. Eva's solicitor threw up his hands – he'd done everything by the book. Newspapers printed photographs of Zoe, Eva's granddaughter, fleeing Harcourt House with a cardigan over her head. There were calls for certain community leaders to be fired. A top London immigration lawyer offered to represent Mariam, the Pakistani woman Eva had taken in, pro bono. A crowdfunding page was set up, to have Mariam's quilt returned to her. There were angry interviews on television. It became libellous to suggest to journalists that Sister Lucija from All Our Holy Mothers Convent might have stolen Eva's rare photographic print by the late Bosnian photographer Mevludin. In Westminster, in private, special advisers began looking it up on their phones: the archipelago's whereabouts and relationship to the United Kingdom. As the price of Mevludins went up ninefold on the global art market, questions were put to the prime minister on a succession of Wednesdays. Eventually, the Minister for Women announced she was asserting her power under the Inquiries Act, by sending up a judge to arbitrate between the islands' now-irreconcilable positions.

A public inquiry is not a legal entity, nor is it a court of law. But it is full disclosure: a dissection, in public, of society's function. It can be embarrassing. It can vilify or redeem. It can drag on for weeks, sometimes months or years. It can be random, personal, and imprecise. Few on the islands liked the sound of it; but by then they had no choice.

When Colin Grieves, acting press adviser to the Archipelago Council, made the announcement, his forehead broke into a sweat, his freshly ironed shirt developed damp patches, his arms flew up

and down: his body unable to contain his excitement at having finally caught and pinned to a board the archipelago's most famous butterfly, *Eva insula* (turquoise, iridescent, insouciant), sole cause of his late-life discontent. He spoke at length about Eva. Within a decade of moving to the islands, she had 'become enthused with the zeal of a convert'. Over the ensuing fifteen years, 'everybody who lives in our beautiful archipelago was to suffer, unknowingly, the effects of her social experiment. She set out to promote women in every one of the islands' major institutions, businesses, the very education system itself. She did this with every resource available to her: her late husband's money, her children's inheritance, and by raising funds from unwitting public bodies in the name of the All Islands' College, of which she was deputy principal until her presumed death by drowning, late last year. Over the next several weeks we will be conducting a far-reaching inquiry into her activities, bringing together church leaders, past and present council members, and other pillars of our community, as well as Mrs Harcourt-Vane's own sons. Details of the appointment of the judge to head the inquiry will become available within the—'

The official title was An Inquiry into Unfair Female Advantage in the Islands.

But Eva's women called it *the Grievance.*

Most of Eva's women refused to speak to the press, saying they didn't want to prejudice due process. This was true, because most of them – almost all of them – had been called as witnesses. Also, they were scared. The women whom Eva helped elect to positions of island power; those like Barbara and Lucette who took grants or loans from the Foundation; staff at the museum, college, council – they were all under suspicion. Mx Thompson at Ayrness High was put on unpaid leave. Inga Stenbridge, head of the council, was suspended pending investigation. The Archipelago Women's Club stayed open – female-only private members' clubs are mere historical tit for tat – but any other women working in positions of traditional male power, from the three ferrywomen to the director of the museum, editor of the paper, and Jen, head of the Islands of Women Study Centre, were visited by a solicitor from the inquiry.

As if to call her back, the schoolchildren, with their disgraced

teacher, painted a huge mural of Eva: smiling, arms outstretched, rainbows in her hair, a garland of flowers around her neck. After it was defaced (dick in mouth), some women began backsliding. Late at night, hurt by the shocked whispers – the even more shocking online comments – there were women who felt ashamed for stepping out of line. They wondered whether Inga's female takeover of the council had been necessary, actually; felt guilty about the many good solid male start-ups that must've suffered because of Eva's rampant ideology. Maybe Eva had gone too far? Maybe *they* had? But all they'd done was act on instructions from Eva. Not even instructions. More like hints. Because, whatever Eva intended always remained a bit inscrutable. Plus, she never did understand the island way, coming as she did from outside. Typical incomer's error. Islanders never rock the boat. Some things have been this way forever.

And so it might have ended, had it not been for Cwen.

Cwen is a tiny speck of an island. At the time of the inquiry, it was uninhabited save for a flock of hardy black sheep. But it has always been alive and resplendent with its years of use as a sacred site. The island's skyline was permanently altered by a grass mound, constructed four and a half thousand years ago with untold hours of human labour. Cwen's iconic swollen belly catches the eye almost every day, if you live in Ayrness, or drive that way along the coast. Perhaps because it is so very near the mainland – only five minutes by outboard-motor dinghy; twenty minutes or so, if you row – islanders see Cwen all the time, in all its phases. How the island changes with the passing clouds and coming storms. The obscene lightning. The multitude of rainbows.

By the time the inquiry was announced, threatening everything, Inga had been convening regular women's meetings on Cwen for at least a year. After the judge opened proceedings, Inga put out an open call to all women of the archipelago. Together, the assembled women came up with a strategy for *community healing*. They decided that whatever the conclusions of the inquiry, on the day that judgement was handed down, the schools and college would empty of women, the female-run businesses and leaders whom Eva had supported would put down their tools, and all would meet to give each other succour. In the hour before the judge began summing

up, the women would set out from Harcourt House, to march on Ayrness. Island women. The nuns from Papa Astrid. Tara, Inga, Jen. Stella with her fiddle. The women would walk across the public footpath, over the field, and along the coast road, as the sun rose higher over the sea. Zoe, with her Eva-hair, would march in front. The women would smile and laugh, singing one of the ancient epics Eva loved. There would be energetic squalls of rain but the sun would come out through the clouds, filling the air, and the fields, and the sea, with its gold. When they arrived on the outskirts of Ayrness, armed with nothing but their chant, other women would join them, and island men, too. Waiting for them in town would be women's groups from all over Britain and beyond – Lerwick, Lyon, Lima. As the numbers swelled, they would march on the library, on the inquiry, to show those people, the television crews, the judge, the men, the force they were. Zoe would take the microphone from Inga and speak directly to the crowds of everything her grandmother had taught her, of the sacred women-shaped spaces that ancient people built – the regenerative principles they were steeped in. She would ask them if they could imagine a world like this. And the crowd would roar its approval.

That was Inga's plan.

Of course, everybody knows how hard it is to countenance the idea of women-only gatherings, women-only groups. The mere sight of women assembling en masse makes certain people, women as well as men, feel uneasy. *Queasy.* Everyone's felt this way, at some point. There's something deeply disgusting about female gatherings. Women just shouldn't express solidarity with each other.

The first people to express that sick feeling were the men from over the water, who came for the inquiry. They gathered on the streets of the islands, calling Eva's women names. When it came on the evening news, Eva's women found it funny. They were even a little bit pleased with the attention. But in the wake of the angry men came more television cameras, and journalists, taking pictures and asking questions. Interviews with island men were published. *Poor Jim's going to have an aneurysm*, Jen texted Inga after seeing James Mills, the geography teacher from Ayrness High, complaining to the BBC of 'covert and extreme deviations from the national

curriculum'. The all-male rallies got bigger. By week three of the inquiry, the national dailies were covering it. There were headlines such as FEMALE TAKEOVER OF ISLANDS' LEADERSHIP; or UNFAIR FEMALE BIAS IN BRITAIN'S FORGOTTEN ISLANDS; and even, FEMALE EDUCATORS CAVORT TOGETHER NAKED. Then the protests turned violent. Janice Handsworth, fifty-two, mother of three, came home with a bruised face and bloody nose. Barbara Anderson, seventy-seven years old, grandmother of six, was shoved against the wall of the abbey as hands grabbed her breasts and crotch. Things might have ended for the worse had the police not arrived in the form of DCI Ruth Brock.

The official line was that the violent men were incomers, ferrylubbers, over on the boat for some opportunistic women-bashing; but the women knew they were also being turned on by their own kith and kin. Some of the men who waved banners and shouted slogans were their neighbours, colleagues, brothers; expressing very well, on the whole, their indignation at having been hoodwinked into accepting, even lapping up, those well-ordered years of female rule. Euan F—, who had fainted in biology when Mx Thompson dissected a mouse (and was then made to stand on a chair as the girls circled around him, chanting, *Gender stereotypes are social constructs*), was holding up a banner with the words WOMEN ARE SEXIST TOO blocked out in fluorescent yellow. James Mills himself, who had won Ayrness High's anonymous online poll for Creepiest Male, was caught on camera with fist thrust in air. The television reporter from BBC Scotland called it 'an unprecedented scene of public male fury'.

And still the women didn't know what had happened to Eva.

The archipelago where Eva staged her coup is shaped like the constellation Cassiopeia. Together, the islands make up a wave-crest reflection of that starry Ethiopian queen who was punished for boasting of her beauty by being spreadeagled in the sky: a nightly reminder of the barbaric status quo. Eva liked to look upon the islands as places where myths assume new meanings, where Cassiopeia's feet are unshackled from their stocks, where she is free to run and dance in the heavens.

Of course, it is natural for islanders, with their clean air, to love

the stars. In the islands, stars hustle, demand attention, are noisy in their beauty. Sometimes they cascade down like women's hair.

Eva liked to hint how, if the moon and sun draw the tides through the seas, an equally epic – if distinct – force draws the blood down through women's wombs. That, in the islands, everything is connected: sky, water, blood, land. She boasted openly of the islands' beauty, the historic fierceness of their storms, the salt toughness of their kith. She saw these things as female, intrinsically. She seemed never to have been concerned that those who boast, often end up, Cassiopeia-like, upended. Nor that almost everyone finds womb-blood disgusting.

Until the inquiry, the archipelago was barely known south of Berwick, north of the A1. Off the east coast, beyond the mainland, beyond your ken. To travel there across the water is actually to have an illusory mental fog descend. To arrive by sea is literally to be cast into a spume of bluey-grey: out of which, after the passing of one hour, some jagged shapes of land emerge. *This is the main island, with the harbour towns of Lerston and Ayrness, the capital.* The smoother, smaller sugar lump to the right is Astrid, the speck to its right is Papay, and well beyond that is the crab cake which is Tarn. The serrations to the left are Dounsay, Skellar, and the skerries. Straight ahead, at the dead centre of the main island, is a Neolithic stone circle. To the east, on a spit of land with the harbour of Ayrness on one side, and woods and sea on the other, is Harcourt House. And just across from the Harcourt woods and beach, is Cwen.

The inquiry was held in Ayrness, at the All Islands' College, in the Harcourt Memorial Library, a monument to Eva's husband's family's largesse. It was there that the judge sat, beneath the large windows overlooking Ayrness Bay. Every day, Eva's women waited at the back of the courtroom created by the council, listening as islanders stood up to defend or attack her work. They watched the changing expressions of the sea beyond: the water, hurrying in its businesslike way across the bay; the luscious streams of darkened silk that moved across the sixteen leaded panes behind the judge's august head, where the archipelago's forebears are depicted in a kaleidoscope of coloured glass, beginning with Saint Victus, including a Viking warlord, and ending with Zoe's great-great-great-grandfather, Henry Harcourt, the kelp, soap and glass

baron himself. They grew accustomed to counting off the ferries, noting the promptness of the Astrid–Ayrness service, skippered by Joanna Havant (taught by Eva), and the tardiness of the 4.10, which, in the care of old Sid Cobb, carried schoolchildren back to Tarn. They listened nervously as the inquiry examined various claims and counter-claims: how and why council rules were changed to stipulate fifty-one per cent female representation; who was responsible for the blatant feminist slant to the island paper; whether any of the hundred other female-friendly projects amounted to illegal discrimination or corruption.

Silence, said the judge, more than once. But that solemn place of learning was changed forever by angry voices and innumerable images of the seated judge, the solicitors, the witness in question – giving evidence beneath the soon-to-be decommissioned portrait of Eva Levi's late husband, the islands' former political representative, Harry Harcourt-Vane.

1: Why did Eva do it?
&
2: Who knew what and when?

These are the questions the inquiry circled back to, again and again.

STELLA: She detested her husband's politics? And what his party was doing to Britain, especially to the north? She wanted a place where things could happen differently? Like, *outside the patriarchal frame*?

JEN: Although personal frustrations contributed, I hope you will see that her motivations were wider. Although she didn't set out a blueprint at the beginning of what she intended, the implication is clear in her various pronouncements, and if you'll let me finish I just want to stress that—

CAMILLE: She felt she had failed as a mother. Her sons, you understand, grew up to become their father.

MARIAM: Very nice lady, very good, very kind.

LUCIJA: Bosnia was more important than you think. She was formed by her work there, by her love affair. It was in my own Yugoslavia that Eva realised – as she had not done growing up in England – how much the politics of a country affects its people.

NINA: I wasn't ever comfortable with who she was and what she stood for, OK.

RUTH: I had no idea, the whole time. We never discussed it. We never discussed anything, except Zoe.

INGA: In her mitigation, she was granted this privilege suddenly; she didn't grow up expecting it, as men have done for centuries. Therefore, I am pleased to say, that when privilege came her way, she didn't waste it.

ALICE: She discovered her mission midway through her life, and it drove her. I don't think she stopped to question the notion, once it became apparent. That was always how she spoke of it, each time I interviewed her. She knew we were running out of time.

TARA: When she was younger, she went to hear Greer speak. That was before she left London. She saw herself as one of those canaries Greer writes about. She wrote in her notebook that it made her feel guilty and pathetic and weak, listening to a catalogue of all the mistakes she had made as a woman.

A canary. Poor Eva.

ZOE: It had always been difficult between my two families. My grandmother, Eva, in the big house. My mother didn't like it. But even she came round to Eva in the end. After Eva disappeared, unfortunately.

In the evenings, or early mornings, when Zoe and Eva lay together in her big airy bedroom, reading picture books, then chapter books, then the morning papers and weekly magazines, the love flowed between them, swirling and unstoppable. It was the calmest and strongest of loves, grandmother–granddaughter, no worries, none of that deep anxiety of mothers, creative, happy, trusting. Eva would talk, Zoe would listen, occasionally turning her eyes to the black-and-white photograph of the Sarajevo women which hung there – *Jewish women*, Eva would say, *like you and me.* Zoe listened to everything her grandmother told her, about what had always been, and what had been suppressed, about what should happen, and what might come in the way. Eva wanted her to see for herself how high the stakes, how wide the scope, how tiny the chance.

Then Zoe would take her time answering back.

Cwen thought she was going to be left alone, for a thousand years. Now she knows this isn't so, and mostly she is interested in having her isolation ended. She has lain very still. She has let the birds make their nests in her hollows. She has felt the lobsters burrow into her thighs, and crabs scuttle landward between her fingers and toes. She has waited through rain and hailstorms, snow and sun, and those effervescent love-children of the weather, called *rainbows*. She has felt Sun warm her skin, and her touch dry seawater saltwhite in her hair. She has lain here, alone, for absolutely fucking aeons.

Now, though, people are coming. She knows there are things she can give them. There is still so much they do not know.

When called upon to speak, Cwen always said things as they came to her. Even for her, it was sometimes hard to tell whether they were utterings from her own mind or direct dictation by the goddess. She absorbed things through her skin, out there on her island. She saw what the birds were up to, watched the fish beneath the water, and when the northern geese arrived too soon, or the gorse flowered late, or lobsters were thrown up on to the shore, she warned the islanders opposite; reminded them what to do.

The goddess has many names now: Bridgit, Mary, Freya. In Cwen's day, she was *Anu*. Nowadays, when they are wrapped up together in the warm black womb of the mound, Cwen and the histories are Anu. Before, when the islanders opposite brought offerings, the flowers were for Anu, and the metal was for Spring. But Cwen got the food, and the sheepskin to sleep on. It was only wise to keep the goddess's mouthpiece warm through the winter.

It was Cwen's father who taught her how to snare animals and catch birds with a string – the rabbit-breathing, fox-walking, bird-weaving. He taught her the best way to dig a furrow for potatoes, and the only way to make a poultice for milk-fever. How to extract medicines and poisons, which are often the same thing, differently

administered. What would grow on the island, and what could be scooped out of its waters. The blue fallen stars, with their long stinging tentacles.

She asked to be taught, along with her brothers, but he would have shown her anyway.

Later, he said, of the islanders opposite, When they come over, you must always give them something. Even if you know they don't need it. If you aren't sure which thing, give them both; and never forget the prayers.

He put his new metal divining rods into her hands, before he died, and his piece of amber the size of a hen egg, and all the herbs and roots he had collected for three times as long as she had been alive. He had been taught by his father, who had been taught by his mother, and so on. It was still not clear whom Cwen was to teach. This was the last thing on his mind as he died.

Cwen blows on the water, making the waves erase a bit of her island. The waters creep higher. She feels them. She feels this too: that she is waiting. She is waiting for someone.

This small island in the Britannic Ocean, called Sena, is inhabited by nine virgin prophetesses . . . who stir up the seas and the winds by their magic charms . . . and know and predict the future.

Pomponius Mela, *Description of the World* (Latin), AD 43