

— STW Society Newsletter
No 2.

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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BOOK NEWS

In the United States, a selection from forty years of correspondence between Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, plus a volume of Warner's previous uncollected stories, has been published by Counterpoint. At present, both books are solely available in the States so we hope that an enterprising English publisher will soon step forward. Meanwhile, it seems the only way of obtaining either title in the U.K. is over the internet from the Amazon website at www.amazon.co.uk.

AGM


The first Annual General Meeting of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society will be held, by kind permission of the Curator, in the library of the Dorset County Museum, High West Street, Dorchester at 2pm on Saturday, March 24th 2001. All members are warmly invited to attend.


SUBSCRIPTIONS


Subscriptions are due at the beginning of each year as follows: UK members £10, overseas members \$20. Please check your payments and send any unpaid subscriptions to: Judith Bond, Treasurer, 26 Portwey Close, Weymouth, Dorset, DT4 8RF. Cheques should be made payable to the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society.


STW ON THE NET

Several critical appraisals on particular aspects of Warner's writings are currently posted on the following websites which may be of interest to members:

 Ghastly Confidences: War and Transgressive Sexuality in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *A Love Match* by Christine Daley from the City University of New York at <http://www.womenwriters.net/editorials/alovematch.htm>

 Dreams Made Flesh: Sexual Difference and Narratives of Revolution in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Summer Will Show* by Thomas Forster, Assistant Professor of English at Indiana University, at http://direct.press.jhu.edu/demo/modern_fiction_studies/41.3foster.htm

 Silent Subversions: The Fiction of Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978) by Christina Rauch, University of Konstanz, at http://opcit.org/1.0/winter99/c_rauch/rauch_text.htm

 The Society's own website is online at
<http://freepages.pavilion.net/users/tartarus/warner1.htm>

An instant classic in the literature of friendship

Sylvia Townsend Warner published 153 stories in the *New Yorker* and for forty years, until her death, she and her *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell exchanged more than 1,300 letters. Their formal relationship quickly grew into an enduring, loving friendship, and their letters back and forth became the most significant and longest-lasting correspondence of their lives. As Maxwell told the editor of these letters, "Sylvia needed to write for an audience, a specific person, in order to bring out her pleasure in enchanting," and Maxwell was that person, both as editor and as correspondent. Warner brought out the best in Maxwell too: "I suspect that of all the writers I edited, I was most influenced by Sylvia. I think that what you are infinitely charmed by you can't help unconsciously imitating." In these letters they wrote about everything that amused, moved, and perplexed them: personal relationships, money, health, food, rejections, books and book reviews, cats and dogs, children, and, of course, writing. Gratitude and love are on every page. Not to mention pleasure and delight. The letters are passionate, lively, provocative, enormous fun, and serious, too: expect the most delicious of goosebumps. If everything written is either poetry or prose, the letters between Warner and Maxwell suggest that in the care of experts the written word can simultaneously be both. *The Elements of Lavishness*, published at the turn of the year, becomes an instant classic in the literature of friendship.

Several months before the volume was published, Maxwell died on July 31st, 2000, just eight days after his wife, the painter, Emily Maxwell. They were married for 55 years and had two daughters, Katharine and Emily.

In his day, the slightly built Maxwell was the very image of the vintage *New Yorker* staffer: learned, but self-effacing; gracious, but not effusive; dignified, but not stuffy -- the kind of man who would laugh out loud at a Marx Brothers movie. Perhaps inevitably, his reputation as the revered editor of such *New Yorker* writers J.D. Salinger, John Updike and John Cheever (with whom he enjoyed an especially close, intense relationship) somewhat over-shadowed his other career as the author of seven novels, three short-story collections, a memoir, a collection of essays and a book of fables. Recently, the Harvill Press embarked on a reissue programme of his novels and short stories which met with enthusiastic reviews and an delighted audience. In his book reviews, Maxwell chose not to write about fiction but about real life: "what people said and did and wrote," biographies, journals, volumes of correspondence. In *The Outermost Dream: Essays and Reviews*, his discussions of Colette, Eudora Welty, Forster, Woolf, and Sylvia Townsend Warner sparkle with a cherishing affection. So generous is he to his subjects that whole pages of his book are devoted to quotations. "One does not admire things enough," he quotes from one of Warner's characters, "and worst of all one allows whole days to slip by without one pausing to see an object . . . exactly as it is." Maxwell was an

admirer, not a critic, and his gracious sensibility was a sparkling gift. Not long before he died Maxwell said in an interview: "I never knew that dying could be so entertaining. People tell you such amazing things when they know you won't be around for long."



Book Review

The Element of Lavishness, Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell, 1938-1978, Edited by Michael Steinman, 356 pages. Published by Counterpoint (U.S.), \$27.50

The Music at Long Verney. Twenty Stories by Sylvia Townsend Warner. Edited by Michael Steinman. Foreword by William Maxwell. 192 pages. Published by Counterpoint (U.S.), \$24.00

Previously published volumes of Sylvia Townsend Warner's letters have varied considerably in quality. One of the most enjoyable of all her books is the *Letters*, edited by William Maxwell and published in 1982. In these letters to various recipients Warner could be witty, spontaneous and penetrating, and because that volume selects from correspondence with so many people it is ideal to dip into. The book is a treat, a fruit pavlova, but in contrast 1998's *I'll Stand by You* is a dry, heavy pudding. In this volume Warner's correspondence with Valentine Ackland is painful enough to read in terms of content, but is made all the more hard-going by its lack of variety. This new volume, *The Element of Lavishness*, is once again correspondence with one person, William Maxwell, her friend and editor at *The New Yorker*. Once again it demands to be read seriously as a record of a relationship. This raises the possibility that the book might again lack variety, and for admirers of Sylvia Townsend Warner there is the possibility that William Maxwell might not be able to hold up his end of the bargain. However, Michael Steinman has been able to select from well over a thousand letters, and one imagines that he was probably spoilt for choice. Warner is as entertaining as one would hope, and Maxwell proves to be just as interesting. The title, *The Element of Lavishness*, comes from a comment made by Maxwell that they were expending their talents on ephemeral letters to each other: in reality both were writing with one eye on future publication. If there is any artificiality because of this then it is more than made up for by the enjoyment they obviously had in writing the letters and receiving them.

The Music at Long Verney collects together twenty of Warner's short stories, few of which have been published in book-form before. The majority are from *The New Yorker*, the source for most of her story collections during her lifetime, and also for many of the stories in the posthumous collections edited by Susannah Pinney. It seems surprising then that there are still enough available for Mr Steinman to collect, but throughout Warner's career odd stories were overlooked.

One of the reasons for this is that many of them are comparatively weak; Warner dismissed her stories in *The New Yorker* as pot-boilers, which is rather a harsh self-criticism, but there are a number here which deserve the term. The stories set in Mr Edom's antiques shop are particularly sentimental, formulaic and weak. However, there are jewels here that should never have been neglected, such as "The Inside Out", in which children attempt to establish their territories after a house move. And apparently unremarkable stories such as "Tebic" have their quirky charm, proving that even when she was uninspired, Sylvia Townsend Warner could not help but be entertaining.

Both of these volumes from Counterpoint in the USA are beautifully produced and it is to be hoped that they will also be made available in Britain. Both books are recommended reading, and Michael Steinman is to be congratulated on his work.

Ray Russell

 Excerpts

Warner to Maxwell, May 30, 1947:

If you had heard the cry of distress that broke from me when I read that you are leaving *The New Yorker* on July 1 you would have begun to know what a good editor you are. If it were not that you were going to finish another novel I don't think I could be magnanimous enough to send you my best wishes for a happy retirement. As it is I ache in every limb with the strain of being so selfless. Indeed and seriously, I am sorrier than I can say.

Maxwell to Warner, June 13, 1947:

And now, lest you forget that the relationship between editor and writer can be as wearing as anything in the Old Testament, I have to tell you that the decision is against "The Finches of Abracadabra." As you know, Mr. Ross loves the Finch stories, but this one seemed a little too allusive for the readers of this magazine, many of whom, I'm afraid, are under the impression that English literature began with Scott Fitzgerald and reached its peak with Thomas Wolfe.

I'm glad you think I am a good editor even though a still small voice tells me that there is no such thing for writers of quality and that they should be left strictly to their own devices. I'm glad also that life in England is not as Spartan as the papers would lead us to believe. I would have been perfectly miserable in Sparta, and I can't help suspecting that the Spartans were also. Otherwise they would have left the Athenians alone.

Warner to Maxwell, December 3, 1948:

Your book (*Time Will Darken It*) came, and I certainly did not think of it as a boomerang. I began to read it, and soon saw that it was the kind of a book I like (how grateful I was to

you for that calm opening—there is nothing I dislike more than opening pages that give me the feeling I have arrived, late and alone, at a party where everybody is rather drunk); but by the time I'd finished it I had the admiring sensation that something had hit me—a very well contained and well delivered blow.

Warner to Maxwell, April 29, 1950:

I have an earlier letter of yours on my desk—a very kind one—that has waited a long time to be answered. I meant to answer it from Paris, where you read the reviews of *Time Will Darken It* and realised that nobody had understood your beautiful book—in Paris, of all places. Buy no reviewers ever understand one's books; and if they praise them, they understand them even less. Praising reviewers are like those shopwomen who thrust a hat on one's head, a hat that is like the opening of the Judgement scroll in which all one's sins are briefly and dispassionately entered, and then stand back and say that it is exactly the hat that Modom needs to bring out her face. I have never yet had a praising review that did not send me slinking and howling under my breath to kneel in some dark corner and pray that the Horn would sound for me and the Worms come for me, that very same night. The horn doesn't and the worms don't, and somehow one recovers one's natural powers of oblivion, and goes on writing.



Scenes From A Village In Wartime

Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Ladies Shooting Class

In 1942, Sylvia Townsend Warner was living in Frome Vauchurch, Dorset. Though a separate parish, Frome Vauchurch merges into its larger neighbour, Maiden Newton. During the war, Sylvia took an active part in that village's Civil Defence activities, and so was invited to join the Ladies Shooting Class.

Sylvia provides her own account of this episode in an undated note, probably written in 1973.

'In the summer of 1942 we were told to prepare for a possible invasion of the Dorset Coast. Official recommendations to civilians (evacuation of *bouches inutiles*, care of wounded and prisoners, burying the dead, etc.) were on non-combatant lines.

Colonel Barnes of the Maiden Newton Home Guards unofficially started a 'Ladies' Shooting Class'. We learned how to load, aim and shoot, and how to throw hand-grenades. Meanwhile we were employed in cleaning and refilling machine-gun belts.

This was an unproclaimed move towards forming a local Resistance Group. I suppose it was frowned upon by Authority: we were disbanded – except for machine gun belts – by the end of the summer.'

This activity – typical it might be said, of squireless, stolidly independent Maiden Newton – had one other outcome. It formed the basis of Sylvia's short story 'England, Home, and Beauty' published in the *New Yorker*, October 10, 1942.

In this unlikely-seeming tale, John Sillery and Major Puncheon of the village Home Guard hold Ladies Shooting Classes for the local women. A machine gun is already waiting for them as, fresh from throwing hand grenades, they enter the room. It resembles 'a pet alligator'. The women take to this dangerous beast with an enthusiasm, that alarms their male mentors. They soon learn to load bullets into the machine-gun belts 'with dexterity and thinking how like pins they were'. The two men had been half-expecting that the ladies would chose milking as their contribution to the war effort. But milking is a peacetime skill they have already acquired. What they would really prefer is that bigger monster, a Stet gun...

The story slyly chronicles the temporary suspension of the sex war for the sake of the greater conflict. The women take to their new opportunities with zest and vigour. In the real-life episode, 'Authority' intervenes. In the fiction, Mr Sillery and Major Puncheon look set to put an end to the classes themselves: matters are not turning out as they expected. A roundly-comical wartime incident has been quietly given point by the writer.

[With thanks to Dorset Record Office]
Judith Stinton



The True Heart

Miss Townsend Warner has here taken a subject widely differing from those of Lolly Willowes and Mr Fortune's Maggot. The True Heart is a love-story, narrating the loves of Sukey Bond and Eric Seaborn. Miss Townsend Warner has her own individual view of things, and among many scenes that show her at her best the courtship of Eric and Sukey in the Essex Marshes and Sukey's interview with Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace particuarly stand out.

From the dustjacket of the First Edition to *The True Heart*, Chatto & Windus (U.K.), 1929

Miss Warner has lavished on the love story of Sukey Bond and Eric Seaborn all the tenderness and subtle irony of her art. She has brought to life the staid Victorian era and made it dance to the music of her prose. In the tribulations of Sukey she has struck a deeper human note than in Lolly or even in Mr Fortune. The result is a distilling of irony, pathos and humor into a heady brew of magic and merriment.

From the dustjacket of the First Edition to *The True Heart*, Viking Press (U.S.), 1929

Two Poems by Mary Casey

Mary Casey (1915-1980) was the daughter of Lucy Penny, the youngest of the eleven Powys siblings. Sylvia Warner and Valentine Ackland were occasional visitors at Lucy's cottage in Mappowder where they also met Mary who lived with her husband, Gerard, in the cottage next door. It was, however, Mary Casey's particular friendship with Valentine that touched the springs of her poetic genius for it was only after meeting Valentine in 1966 that she began in earnest to write poetry. The two poems featured below are from the posthumously published *The Clear Shadow* (Rigby & Lewis, 1992). A selection from Mary Casey's Journals *A Net In Water* (The Powys Press, 1994) is also available.

OVER THE RIVER

for Sylvia

all the year I waited for a token
now three days from the end
when every window square is birdless
blurred cracked if not totally broken
gray with aged ironies
that will not quicken

when I disobey the Zen
that declares there is no mirror
and polish the heartless glass
my dormant attention is woken
by the passing between two
as of fish and frog footmen

winter cold hands something spoken
before the form was changed
to remind me before the year dies
everything which was there before
is there now in love seagull rook dove
O across the quilt of plover one swallow

NARINA'S TROGON

for Valentine

in the branch-arched shade
where the gold suns fade
in the emerald caves
in the fanes of leaves
moons of malachite
ichor in airy
veins virid and fil-
igreed vivid and
crimson freaked
leaf-green narina
sapphire shimmering
living in leaf-roofed
rhythms of trees

touch of finger-twig
start of heart and thin
tissue skin gives wing
to a scarlet plume
a feather of sea-
green wing of the bird
so frail is the air-
y weft of the
rose-breasted passion-
ate hawk the leaf-green
narina of shade
of gold-fired suns
and high-acred desire

Sylvia Townsend Warner
THE FLINT ANCHOR

There is no one quite like Sylvia Townsend Warner. She has her own way of looking at the world and a breadth of vision as open as the East Anglian sea and sky she writes about here.

In the early nineteenth century, Anchor House in Loseby, Norfolk, is the home of John Barnard, a house made of the dark flint of the area, as is the soul of the man himself. A man of lofty morality, he fears 'nothing but God', an emotion which sours his life and that of his family - wife Julia, sipping rum all day, and wimpish children, the Wilberforces and Euphemias of the time. But then there is his pretty daughter Mary, a serio-comic creation of the first order, who raises the pursuit of self-interest to a high art. Around them bustle those instigators of teas, dinners, walks, visits, attendances at church - not to mention the surprising fishermen of the village: disturbers of all those who live behind the sharp walls of the House of Flint.

Warner is not a romantic: she has a keen eye for the malevolence and flaws of the soul, yet she absorbs us totally in the personalities and daily concerns of her characters, unheroic though they be. Every novel Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote was entirely different from its predecessor in subject, period and story, but all of them are the work of a great English stylist, and all are diverting, funny and very, very clever. This little-known novel is a lost treasure.



Members might be interested to know that a certain number of copies of *I'LL STAND BY YOU Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland* (Pimlico, £15.00) were recently remaindered and can be obtained in certain remainder outlets for £6.99 or less. Anyone wishing to take advantage of this offer and unable to locate a copy themselves can obtain a list of suppliers from the address below.

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