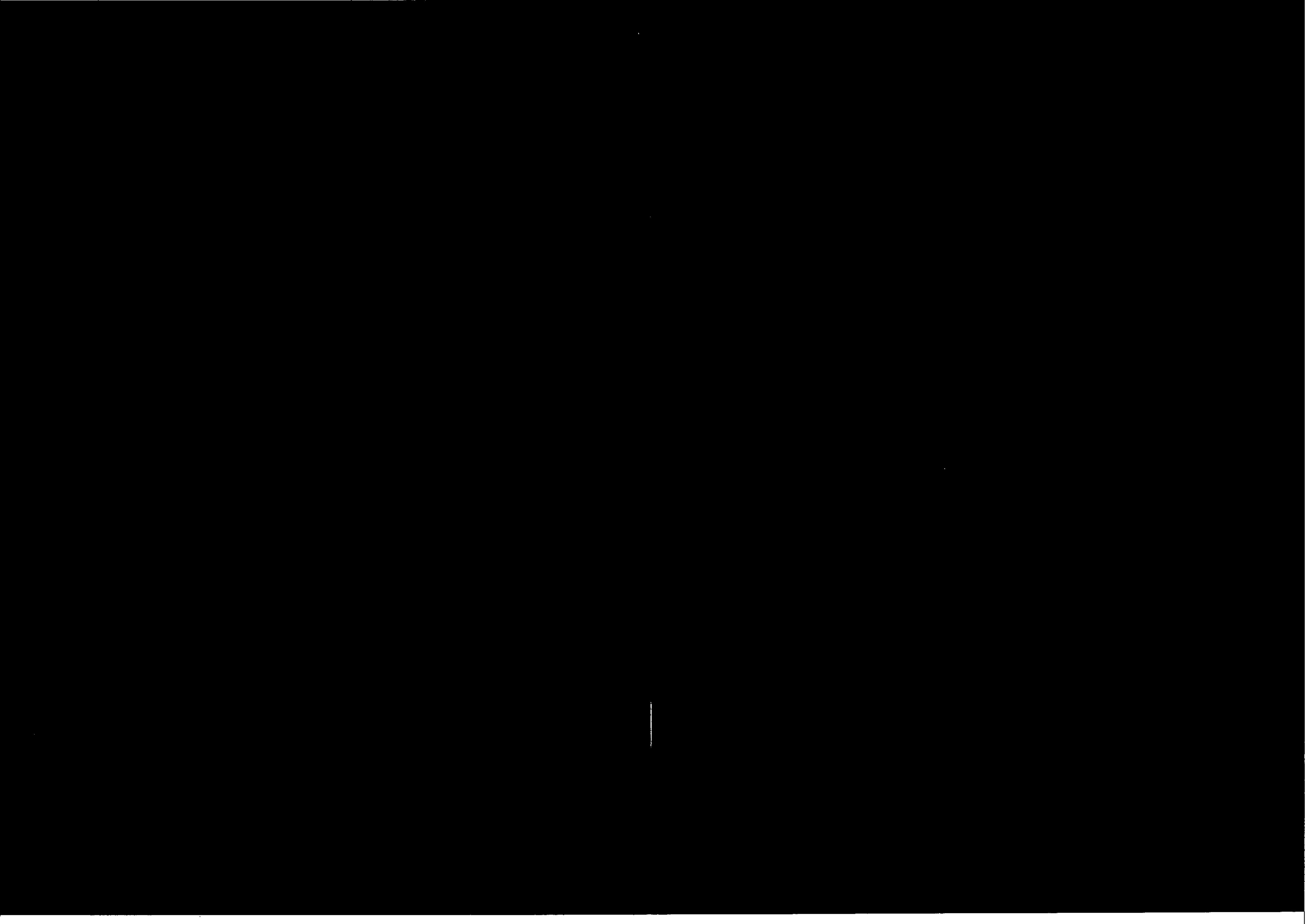

NEWSLETTER NUMBER TWENTY SEVEN

This newsletter is being composed during a truly hot July – a real summer issue. We had glorious (and unpredicted) good weather for our weekend, too. There's an account of the weekend, with recipes, below.

The newsletter also contains an obituary of one of our members, Richard Garnett, who died recently. And thanks for help in the making of this issue go to Jenny Wildblood, Peter Tolhurst, Judith Bond and – yet again – Jay Barksdale and the New York Public Libraries.

Sylvia Townsend Warner Weekend, June 28-30 2013

The weekend began on the Friday evening when eleven members (including two welcome new faces) met at 6 North Square in Dorchester for food and conversation, catching up over the year and further enlivened by wine ordered for us by Jay Barksdale, who was unable to atttend in person this year.

Saturday's AGM was a productive one, with members making many constructive and practical suggestions. Then, in tribute to our late member Richard Garnett, Helen Sutherland read from his selection of the Sylvia Townsend Warner/David Garnett Letters.

Lunch was at Panini's on the fringes of Dorchester's new Brewery Square development which seems (unlike the ever-expanding Poundbury project) to be growing into a lively centre. After the meal we drove to Dagger's Gate and went on a literary walk to Lulworth Cove, led by Stephen Mottram. Our group was joined by Roger, an interested non-member, who arrived just in time for a reading of Sylvia's 'The Lonely Traveller' with which the walk began. He later contributed his own reading, of Rupert Brooke's 'Pine-Trees and the Sky: Evening' written in Lulworth on July 8th 1907.

We paused at Newlands Farm, holiday home to Bertrand Russell and to the bevy of aristocratic lovelies with whom he dallied before the War. (Unfortunately the farm is being extensively gentrified at the moment. Any sign of rakishness has long gone.) We then walked down the meandering hill to Holy Trinity Church, West Lulworth, which was built in 1869-70. The old

church, which had stood to the north, was recreated in George Birmingham's *Bindon Parva.* In the novel, the vicar gives communion to a row of invisible parishioners in an apparently empty church. (This seems to prefigure some of the stories of Theodore Powys.)

Down on the beach Stephen read Keats's sonnet 'Bright Star' composed as he left England for the last time in 1820, and Thomas Hardy's poem 'At Lulworth Cove a Century Back' which commerated the event one hundred years later, in September 1920.

Up on the cliff above the Cove, Stephen read from Hardy's short story 'A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four', in which a shepherd boy sees Napoleon Bonaparte and his general, who have landed briefly in the Cove on an exploratory mission, planning for a much-dreaded invasion which was never to be.

(Which leaves me with the reflection that there is obviously something in the air of Lulworth Cove which inspires authors to date precisely everything they write there...)

Tea followed the readings, in the sunny pub garden, after which we walked back along the hillside and through the caravan site above Durdle Dor.

Back in Dorchester, we were soon meeting up again for an evening at the house of our president, Eileen Johnson, where Jenny Wildblood cooked her much-anticipated meal, based on descriptions of recipes in Sylvia's writings. (Jenny has provided the recipes below.) This was a friendly and well-enjoyed event.

It still wasn't raining on Sunday morning when members gathered outside the Old Vicarage in Chaldon Herring, for a walk around Sin (the Vicarage) and Death (the churchyard). We cautiously circled the Victorian Gothic building, which in the 1930s was the gloomy 'home' for girls with learning difficulties. Concerned intervention by Sylvia, Valentine Ackland and Llewelyn Powys resulted in a libel case which cost them dear. The gardens are now unevocatively manicured, and equipped with a tennis court.

In the churchyard we visited the monument to the Reverend Joseph Staines Cope, provider of much copy to Sylvia, and the graves of Sarah Wilcox, Miss Lucy Green, Katie Powys, our late patron Janet Machen and – of course – Sylvia and Valentine.

As always, lunch followed at the Sailor's Return, and we were able to sit outside in the sun. It had been another successful weekend and a very talkative one!

Judith Stinton

A Sylvia Supper

by Jenny Wildblood

As with the previous meal I cooked for the Society, it's hard to share the recipes with you for the simple reason that there weren't any. I assembled the menu mostly from hints and quick references in the diaries and letters, so had to imagine how Sylvia might have made them. The exceptions are the courgette recipe which she described exactly to David Garnett, and the chicken curry with gooseberries. The ingredients for this – shallots, chicken, gooseberries, spices and tomatoes – are clearly laid out for us but to be honest they just sounded too bizarre – gooseberries? Fine, but with *tomatoes*? In a *curry*? However I think now that she was right and I was wrong – see the tale of the rhubarb and lentil soup below.

Soups (which are, of course, Chaos)

Cold lettuce and sorrel soup.

This was served to Peter Pears when he visited after Benjamin Britten's death. There are lots of recipes about, so I won't bother making one up here. If you don't already make it please do – it sounds unlikely but is delicious.

Lentil and rhubarb soup.

As with my previous meal for the Society, I just made my normal lentil soup and added rhubarb. I was particularly pleased this time because I had fresh rhubarb available – last time it came out of a tin, but don't tell anyone. Once the rhubarb was added I tasted the result, which was frankly horrible - so acidic I couldn't see how we could eat it. The solution was plenty of tomato paste (see above) and a large spoonful of damson jam.

Meat

Chicken and gooseberry curry

Sadly, I haven't had a good year for gooseberries so this recipe was a standard issue chicken curry with tinned gooseberries added, with the result that I didn't have to add the tomatoes. It is unfortunate that because of some health and safety nonsense about nicotine poisoning I will never be able to make snuff curry, but I compensated by adding the essentially British sultanas which were part of the curry recipe in *One thing leading to another*.

Veg

Stewed courgettes

See letter to David Garnett, 27 July 1974 from *Sylvia and David*. I use considerably less oil than stock in my version.

Brussels sprouts with sippets

As it was June I couldn't make this with sprouts, but instead used shredded and cooked spring cabbage. Cut triangles of brown bread, brush one side with oil and grill. Spread the other side with a half-and-half mixture of grain mustard and honey. Grill again, and use to top the cabbage (or Brussels if you wait until winter).

Carrots in chestnut sauce

Cookery books and the internet are full of chestnut sauce recipes but none pairing this with carrots. Sylvia's combination is delicious. Most chestnut sauce recipes use whole chestnuts mashed into an ordinary roux, but Sylvia used chestnut flour, and so therefore did I. If I were you I'd go with the whole chestnuts as the flour is very hard to work with – another clue to how good Sylvia's grasp of cookery techniques was.

Pudding

Blackcurrant ice cream

Sylvia and Valentine had a regular fall-back pud that used blackcurrant jam as the basis for an ice cream. Thanks to an accident involving misreading my scales I currently have a very good supply of this jam that hasn't set, so was able to serve shop-bought vanilla jam with blackcurrant sauce.

Many thanks again to Eileen for hosting the meal, to everyone who washed up and otherwise helped, everyone who ate the food and to Poppy the cat for putting up with lots of humans eating food and not sharing it with her.

Obituary
Richard Garnett, 1923 – 2013

(An edited version of the obituary by Nicholas Barker, *Independent*, June 5 1913.)

Richard Garnett came from a distinguished literary lineage and in a long life followed both his father David's career as a writer, and his grandfather Edward's as a publisher's editor, with equal distinction. His greatest achievements lay in two very different publications. One was the life of his grandmother: *Constance Garnett – a Heroic Life* (1991). Garnett, who remembered her in her lonely last years, could enter into her life with familiar understanding, and set her translations of great Russian novels – too easily taken for granted – as a truly heroic achievement.

The other was *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer. This vast work made exceptional demands on Garnett's design skill. Coleridge's manuscripts were revised, crossed out and rewritten, his own and others' books covered with notes, printed texts altered in later editions. The editors' apparatus had to account for every change. The project was finally completed in 34 volumes in 2001 under the imprint of Princeton University Press.

Editors and designers of books get little credit for their work. Garnett neither expected nor demanded it, but hundreds of books and their authors benefited from his work, as did thousands of readers. Sylvia Townsend Warner readers have benefited from his edition of the *Warner/Garnett Letters* (1994).

Richard was the elder son of David Garnett and Ray Marshall, born in his maternal grandfather's Bloomsbury house while his father sat on the stairs reading Tristram Shandy. After the success of his novel *Lady Into Fox* he bought Hilton Hall, a 17th-century house of and magical beauty, which remained a central feature of his son's life, and latterly his home. In 2006 he kindly invited the Society to visit this family home, its many Bloomsbury treasures conveniently sign-posted with yellow 'post-it' notes.

A country childhood of bird-nesting and rabbit-poaching, punctuated by early schooling at Cambridge, came to an end in 1932, when he was sent to Beacon Hill, the progressive school founded by Bertrand Russell and his second wife Dora. Before he arrived, however, Russell had left Dora, and his memories of Beacon Hill, though vivid, were not happy, chief being distrust of authority. Beltane at Wimbledon, his next school, was more congenial; he made weekend visits to his grandmother, Constance, at her house The Cearne, in Kent. Always good with his hands, he learned roofing and plumbing when the school was evacuated to a rundown mansion in Wiltshire.

In 1940 he was admitted to King's College, Cambridge, to read mathematics, but after a year he was called up and spent the next five years in the RAF, crewing motor-boats as support for flying-boats, round the coast of Britain and then Sierra Leone. He returned to King's in 1946, graduating in English two years later. After a brief apprenticeship in printing at the Shenval Press, in 1949 he joined Rupert Hart-Davis Ltd, the small publishing firm of which his father was one of the founding directors.
The firm had been launched in 1946 by Rupert Hart-Davis, and the office was above a shop in Connaught Street. In 1947 it had its first bestseller, Stephen Potter's *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship*; in 1950 came the second, *Elephant Bill*; its success allowed a move to the more commodious 36 Soho Square.
Garnett was now the firm's production manager, and soon an expert editor as well. Heinrich Harrer's *Seven Years in Tibet*, another bestseller, and the three-volume autobiography of Lady Diana Cooper (Hart-Davis's aunt), exercised both skills. Laurence Whistler's books spurred him to become a glass-engraver. His nautical experience came to the fore with the Mariner's Library of sea classics, and he took charge of the sailing list of Adlard Coles when it merged with Hart-Davis.
But the heart of the firm lay not in these but in scholarly but readable books such as Leon Edel's five-volume life of Henry James, Allan Wade's *Letters of WB Yeats* and Peter Fleming's imperial sagas. All of these achieved their reputation thanks to the joint expertise of Garnett and Hart-Davis. Not for nothing did one of their admiring beneficiaries call the firm "the university of Soho Square".
But commercial success did not follow. Three times the firm had to be bailed out. Control passed first to Heinemann, then Harcourt Brace and finally to Granada. Hart-Davis himself left in 1963; three years later the firm was merged with MacGibbon & Kee and finally Garnett was sacked. As he left, a water-pipe burst in the attic, leaving him to say "Après moi le déluge".
Fortunately, Macmillan was in need of just his talents, to supervise copy-editing and proof-correction. He soon became indispensable, and took over the direction of the new edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music*. It was the first major reference work to be compiled for computer-typesetting, which made exceptional editorial and organisational demands. Garnett surmounted them all, and the new edition of 1980 was a great commercial success, spawning subsets on opera and women composers, and then an even larger *Grove Dictionary of Art* (1996).
But having grown up in the midst of the Bloomsbury group (as a small child, he was scared by Virginia Woolf's lifelike imitation of a wolf), his heart lay in more creative writing. For Hart-Davis he wrote three books for children, beginning with *The Silver Kingdom* (1956), illustrated by his wife Jane, and based on his own experience of submarine archaeology; *The White Dragon* (1963), about a great Fenland frost, became a Puffin paperback. Gerald Durrell's books owed much to his editing, which verged on authorial, as did the natural history books of Bernard Heuvelmans.
At Macmillan he became expert at drawing out Harold Macmillan's memoirs, but his favourite authors were Marie Rambert, whose autobiography *Quicksilver* (1972) owed much to his skill with a tape-recorder, the Duchess of Devonshire, who dedicated *Wait for Me!* (2010) to him, and, most of all, Joyce Grenfell, whose *Joyce by Herself and Her Friends* (1980) he edited with her husband Reggie Grenfell.

MARY JACOBS MEMORIAL PRIZE, 2013

The winner of the first Mary Jacobs Memorial Prize is Dr Jane Feaver, for her essay 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Rhapsodic Pastoral'. There were four entries for the competition, and the judges, Gillian Beer, Ren Dreya and Judith Stinton, agreed unanimously that this was the best essay, and one they all much enjoyed. It will appear in this year's edition of the STW Journal.

Entries – essays on any aspect of the life and work of Sylvia Townsend Warner – are invited for the 2014 Prize. The prize for the winning entry is £200, publication in the Society's Journal and one year's free membership of the Society. Essays should be no more than 4000 words and sent to the Journal Editor Helen.Sutherland@glasgow.ac.uk

The deadline for entries will be 31st March 2014.
For further details see the Society's website: www.townsendwarner.com

'Masterpieces: Art and East Anglia'

The exhibition 'Masterpieces: Art and East Anglia' will run at the Sainsbury Centre from mid September for five months to celebrate fifty years of the University of East Anglia. It will include Eric Gill's drawing of Valentine Ackland and work by John Craske, the artist she discovered. The exhibition will be accompanied by a book. Julia Blackburn is writing the essay on

Craske's 'Panorama of the Norfolk Coast' from the Shell Museum. Peter Tolhurst's contribution was prompted by Gill's drawing:

The young poet Valentine Ackland, 'tall, slender as a willow-wand, sweet scented as a spray of Cape Jessamine', was part of a fashionable bohemian set in 1920s London. She sat for artists including Eric Gill whose striking nude suggests both her bisexual nature and the allure of her 'weasel grace'. The following year (1927) Ackland arrived in Norfolk via the lesbian brothels of Paris, like some exotic migrant. From her mother's house at Winterton she stumbled upon the unlikely talent of John Craske, a retired fisherman who had taken to painting between prolonged bouts of ill health. Ackland found his Hemsby cottage covered in seascapes and, struck by the directness of his style, 'like a man giving witness under oath to a wild story', she left clutching The James Edward. In London her lover, the gallery owner Dorothy Warren, sent her back to buy more Craskes for an exhibition.
Later that year, in flight from a disastrous marriage to one Dick Turpin – he too was gay – Ackland retreated to Dorset and the home of the writer T F Powys. Here she met the poet and novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner who was to become her life-long companion. They were soon together out on the dunes or in The Three Mariners at Winterton, the strangest place Warner had ever seen, 'violent and feuding, where everyone was related and known by nickname, like characters in the Icelandic Sagas'.
In time, Norfolk came to exert a powerful influence on Warner's writing; the Isle of Flegg is the setting for her favourite novel *The Corner That Held Them* (1948), a chronicle of life in the medieval nunnery of Oby, and she drew on memories of their last holiday, at Great Eye Folly, Salthouse in the winter of 1950-51, for *The Flint Anchor* (1954). In the novel the idea for Miss Basham's shell collection was taken from Glandford Shell Museum where Craske's most ambitious 'wool painting', Panorama of the Norfolk Coast is now displayed. Warner's poem 'John Craske's Country' is a celebration of her love for Ackland and an epitaph for the artist they so admired:

You cannot love here as you can love inland
Where love grows easy as a pig or a south-wall fruit.
Love on the coast is something you must dispute
With a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt water between.

You cannot build here as you can build inland
With a thatch roof sprawling or with smart gables.
Here we build box-ways out of brick or flint cobbles
For a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt water between.

You cannot eat here as you can eat inland.
A man can't do with less than six herrings for breakfast
And something stronger than tea if he is to hold fast
Against a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt water between.

And you cannot grieve here as you can grieve inland
Where the dead lie sweetly labelled like jams in the grocer's store.
You must blink at the sea till your face is scarlet and your eyes sore
With a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt water between.
Peter Tolhurst

Where the Light Falls

Katherine Keenum, a member of the Society in the USA, has written a fascinating novel *Where the Light Falls*. She says 'I don't put myself in the same league as Sylvia Townsend Warner as a writer, but I hope I learned from her something of what language can achieve.'

In *Where the Light Falls*, Jeanette Palmer is expelled from Vassar College in New York and goes to Paris to study painting in that city's lively teaching studios during the Belle Epoque. Introduced by a great society hostess to troubled Edward Murer, she must resolve conflicting demands made by her artist friends, her own ambition, and love.

"Katherine Keenum could have been an art historian. She describes individual paintings vividly and has captured the entire milieu in which painters learned and practiced their art in the Paris of the 1870s. A funny yet thought-provoking scene of the main character, Jeanette, swimming with her friends made me think of pictures by Anders Zorn and Thomas Eakins while over and over again scenes in Paris called to mind works by the Impressionists, Sargent, and Béraud. As a novelist, Keenum practices her own art to tell an engrossing story with complex, compelling characters. I'll never forget Jeanette, Edward, or Cousin Effie and neither will other readers."—**Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis**, Professor (Emerita), Department of the History of Art and Architecture, Boston University, Associate in Research, Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies, Harvard University.

Judith Bond has also read and thoroughly enjoyed this book. 'A brilliant read, with such real characters, hard to put down. I recommend it highly to everyone who enjoys good writing and a fascinating story.'

Find out more at www.katherinekeenum.com/index.htm

Sylvia Townsend Warner

by Oliver Warner

Literary reputation is of two sorts: one – possibly the rarer – is the result of immediate recognition of an early work of startling merit, and the other is the culmination of a slow, steady interest which may spread back over long years of work. Of the two, that of Miss Sylvia Townsend belongs to the first, though it was not the publication of what was actually her first book which brought her fame.

About four years ago a square book of poems bound in blue cloth slipped into the world. It was called "The Espalier" and was by a woman known to an elect few as an authority on Tudor music. Her poems, praised by acuter critics, scarcely extended her public, for it is notorious that nothing is more difficult to circulated than a book of poems by a new author, even when in includes (as did "The Espalier," in "Blue Eyes") a veritable classic of impudence. The work revealed delicacy, learning, a kittenish sport among rhythms, and a graceful, almost irresponsible wit; it was, too that of a writer who – though in the highest sense of the word a serious artist – refused to regard herself with solemnity.

Then came a novel, "Lolly Willowes." This was something quite new in modern fiction. It reached the heart by way of the head, and by a peculiar grace of prose writing which "The Espalier" naturally could not foreshadow. Original in technique, its moral too was original – that a maiden aunt can do many more exciting things than act as a beloved pincushion an exhausting number of relations. Satan knew strange paths, sinister yet alluring, for those who left the security of other peoples' homes to live along in the village of Great Mop. The book was a triumph, but like all triumphs it left an aftermath of doubt. Could it be repeated?

In 1927 appeared "Mr. Fortune's Maggot." Not so appealing in idea or so fresh in design and structure as "Lolly Willows," it was artistically an even better book. Its very conventionality of setting provided difficulties of treatment which only a daring writer would have resolved with such complete conviction and grace. Mr. Fortune was a missionary who marooned himself on a Pacific island and had a faithful and charming servant called Lueli. Lueli's gods were not Mr. Fortune's, and indeed so happy were he and his fellow islanders that only Mr. Fortune could have failed to realize that pathetic hopelessness of his quest for converts. Yet of this very blindness, and of Lueli's devotion, Miss Townsend Warner made a perfect story; more than a story, a philosophy. It was a subtle book, of a delicacy as fragile as a spider's web. It remains her most lovely and her least understood work. Its very simplicity is a source of mistrust in the reader, for, like Mr. Fortune, he seeks a moral, and it is part of Miss Townsend Warner's grace that she leaves the moral of this story to her reader's imagination.

Her next book, "time Importuned," was again one of poetry. Here were displayed once more the graces which delighted in "The Espalier"; but the collection seemed to an even greater degree a personal notebook, an illumination of her fancy. Among the loveliest work it contained were a series of epitaphs which should better known than ther are. Here is one:

"I, Richard Kent, beneath these stone

Sheltered my old and trembling bones;

But my best manhood, quick and brace,

Lies buried in another grave."

Her last book of prose, "The True Heart," broke entirely new ground however, for it showed her to be a writer who could extend her range beyond the delicate and improbably without losing one particle of the qualities which adorned her earlier works. In Sukey Bond, the poor orphan girl so passionately loving and so constant, she created a tragic heroine in little. The book showed, too, her ability to depict comedy. Is there anything more deliciously incongruous in modern fiction than Sukey's interview with Queen Victoria?

It is a curious fact about Miss Townsend Warner's plots that "ways and means" do not seem to matter. The plot is *not* the thing: its results are. "The True Heart" is a book which marks a transitional stage in her prose work, leaning as it does away from the mischievous-fantastical to a more

accepted vision of life. It opens up an exciting field of speculation as to her future.

At present she stands alone among women writers. She is, in her prose, content to tell a story as perfectly as she can. She has few direct imitators, and she is among that small number who have given a fresh vitality to the modern novel. Nor has this brief survey taken an account of her short stories, whose appearance – now fortunately less rare – lead one to expect high echivement [sic] in this field. What her full significance will be, it is too early to foresee. It is conceivable, for instance, that her life of Theodore Francis Powys, an excerpt from which appeared last year, may, when completed, reveal something quite new in biography, for Miss Warner is a true "original." She can touch nothing without delicately transforming it. And it is not without relevance that she proceeded from the study of music to the art of writing, for all her work has a peculiar harmony which does approach, as it is said that all art should, to the condition of music. It is to the ear and to the brain that she first appeals. She is perhaps a writer for the few, but "the few" is nowadays a relative term and includes all who desire from writers not only that they should please, but that in their themes and their use of words they should be fastidious.

Her personality is as striking as her work. She is a paradox. A poet of an authentic rural tradition, she lives in an early-Victorian London house in whose tiny garden the works of nature appear almost as miracles. Essentially a rebel, her knowledge of the domestic crafts – of herbs and cookery, of wines and all which gladdens man's heart – is a thing to be wondered at. In outlook essentially English, her work has always enjoyed the widest vogue in America, "Lolly Willowes" being among the very first "Books of the Month," and her recent visit as guest critic of the *New York Herald-Tribune* confirming her in the affection of American people. Essentially sociable, and generous to excess, she is an authority upon all manner of Satanic and magic arts; the blandishments of the Evil One are known to her, and the secrets of dire poisons. But she is a lover of the occult with a difference. She is a sceptic, a Pyrrhonian, as are almost all the intelligent among her contemporaries; and in place of the traditional cat, a beautiful, infinitely majestic black chow is her accomplice. Together they walk, but in broad daylight, and their haunt is Kensington Gardens. Should you see them, remember your peril.

From: *The Bookman*, October, 1929, LXXVII, no. 457, p. 8

The Wise Woman of Dorset

A review by Richard Howard of Sylvia Townend Warner's *Letters*, edited by William Maxwell, and her *Collected Poems*, edited by Claire Harman, which appeared in the *Nation*, March 19 1983. It reflects the state of Warner studies in the days shortly after her death.

She has no critical cachet whatsoever, this writer. Her fifteen volumes of fiction are not examined in studies of the modern English novel – even *Mr. Fortune's Maggot* (1927) fails to appear in bibliographies of gay writing, though it is, with Stein's *Things As They Are*, the most passionate homosexual novel I know. She is not "taught", and I have never heard her mentioned on those occasions when poets are "ranked". Women's studies have neglected her, too, though her status among the serenely Sapphic householders is irreproachable: whenever she and Valentine Ackland were separated, William Maxwell tells us in his tactful but explicit introduction, they wrote to each other at the beginning and end of every day, and "these letters, love letters, were preserved. After Ackland's death, Warner put them in the proper sequence and had them transcribed and wrote an introduction and connecting narratives, all with the idea that they should some day be published". That day has not yet come, and we must wait as well for the untranscribed journal which runs, Maxwell says – though *brims* is surely the word – through forty notebooks. The letters published are but a selection, but even this chastened showing gives us enough to declare her among the finest letter writers in the language, one who must be included in the three-centuries-long strand linking (to mention only women, who for obvious reasons prevail in this genre) Dorothy Osborne to Virginia Woolf.

Born in 1893 and educated at home by intellectual parents, Warner believed herself to be first of all a musician; had it not been for the outbreak of the First World War, she would have gone to Vienna to study with Schonberg. As it was, she became a musicologist and worked for many years on that monumental effort of English musical scholarship, *Tudor Church Music* (1922-29). At the other end of her 84-year life, she became both a translator (of Proust's critical writings, her preface to which is among the indispensable texts on that author) and a biographer (of T.H.White, a labour which involved her with Arthurian romance and, perhaps, stimulated her to that late flowering, *Kingdoms of Elfin*, crystalline tales as authorative as Dinesen's, and as alien).

Meanwhile, without paying much attention to the literary scene – though she was close to David Garnett and T. F. Powys, was a niece of Arthur Machen and was represented in Yeats's *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* – she wrote her poems and fictions. I suspect the point of the poetry would be considerably sharpened if we did not know the prose to be so masterful and so attractive: it is difficult to believe that even this great quantity of verse is more than a second string to her bow. But this is not the case; Warner is a poet of great and consistent achievement.Our difficulty is with the *mode* of the verse rather than the amount. She is not a modernist, and her fashion is not our fashion; ease, profusion, recurrent pattern and confidence in natural presences are *démodé* among us, and what we admire in Crabbe and Edward Thomas, in Hardy and de la Mare, we find suspect in a writer still active (til 1978!) among us, a writer who would rather be interesting than excruciating, who prefers centres to edges, meetings to sunderings, who chooses not so much to anatomise a state as to fix a vision. It is just because Warner is so willingly observant of the household bonds of life that she so often rises above them, sustained and even stimulated by her old-fashioned methods, as I am happy to call them:

Sea-winds blew there,

Sea-birds flew there,

Nothing grew there

Save the inherent tares of barren ground;

Grasses shrivelled and stiff,

And frantic thistles scattering their seed.

Claw-rooted was each necessitous weed

And salt to the taste,

For the blown rack groped over the waste,

And evermore the sea with a trampling sound

Beleaguered the cliff. ("Peeping Tom")

Charms, hex signs, incantations and runes – the poems are the deliberate mutterings of the Wise Woman of Dorset, and they keep faith with the 8-year-old who sat on the stairs, as Warner recalls in one letter, reading aloud spells for raising the Devil from Mackay's *Popular Delusions* to her black cat and "feeling a black hope that they would work".

Perhaps the best ingress into this somewhat daunting body of work is her "Seven Conjectural Readings", lyrical monologues in which figures from myth and history who bear an oblique relation to the story give us *their* version – John Donne's wife, Madame de Sévigné's son-in-law. Here is the end of "Lady Macbeth's Daughter":

The castle walls are slighted down,

The pretty martlets all are flown,

My beads were scattered in the fray,

The king's son stole my relic away.

Barefoot I trudge through mire and sleet

To gather nettles for my meat

And the poor's curses rattle after

Poor me, that am my father's and my mother's daughter.

Another triumph is "Five British Water Colours" (1947), in which landscapes from Thomas the Rhymer's heath to Dickens's hearth become the sacred places, the secret plots which generate a thousand years of English country life.

What makes the poems and the letters part of the same energy, the same perception, is Warner's trust that myth and autobiography may be observed in one and the same life, her own for instance. The letters give off the same shadowy sense one has about Hardy's life – that it is accompanied by an incomprehensible nightmare we can know only by allusion and reflection. Hardy's Emma and Warner's Valentine are both impossible enigmas – Valentine leads Sylvia into the Communist Party in 1934, leaves her for another, returns to their life together, tries but fails to drag her into the Catholic Church in the 1940s – yet none of this is directly recounted. What we must read these letters for, beyond the divination of a life story and the skeleton of a Great Romance, is the rapturous quotidian: the sound of owls in the garden ("they expressed themselves in brief tinny exclamations, very much as if they were striking small cheap triangles"), Byron, a conversation with Peggy Ashcroft about Isabella in *Measure for Measure, The New*

Yorker's prudery. It is not miscellany, though; it is order, for those letters are the crystallisation of a trained mind, of a hand and eye that have learned to work together. The last letter, written when she was 84, characteristically insists on an artist's gift for observation (in this case Van Eyck's) rather than on his adherence to mere symbol: "The dog may be an emblem of fidelity, but, I think, it is just an expression of a dog's (lady's dog) habit for being in the foreground. Just such a dog walks past on the opposite bank every morning, taking its gentleman for a constitutional. The *gentleman* is an expression of fidelity. His sneeze rings out over the drenched meadow."

I cannot agree with Maxwell that to have indexed the letters would have been "like indexing life itself". This is not charm, this is not chaos, but a commanding intuition of *how to live*, and even in collecting samples for this review, I am bewildered where I might have been tidy. Warner is the kind of authority one wants to be able to cite without having to leaf through hundreds of pages. Take this precious observation of G.B.S. for instance: "I remember a dress rehearsal of *Heartbreak House* when Shaw bounded onto the stage and became a young girl. He was infinitely better at it than the actress, even when she had studied him, he far out-girled her. He had a tirra-lirra twirl of the waist that I went home and practised by the hour. I couldn't do it either." That goes under "S" in the index I am making for these life-enhancing letters, unless it goes under "G".

Alliance of Literary Societies

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