

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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NEWSLETTER NUMBER THIRTY-TWO

in which appear T. F. Powys, William Byrd, T. H. White, George Townsend Warner, Samuel Menashe, Jonathan Law, E. K. Robertson Scott, and Le Weekend.

Thanks go to Richard Searle, Judith Stinton, Peter Swaab and Peter Tolhurst for contributions to this issue.

Subscriptions : If you haven't yet paid for 2015, please send your subscription to Jenny Wildblood.

Eileen Johnson retires from the post of Chairperson of the Society this year. Statements of interest are invited from members interested in joining an active committee. Please contact society@townsendwarner.com by 15 May, 2016.

Contributions for future issues, suggestions and corrections are most welcome.

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Just as her heroine Lolly Willowes had discovered the Chilterns, so Sylvia Townsend Warner discovered the Essex Marshes – by buying a map. The place-names delighted her, and she made several visits, one of them with David Garnett. Out of these visits came her novel, *The True Heart*.

**The Landscape of *The True Heart*
Essex Marshes Weekend 10 – 12 June, 2016**

Friday 10 June – 7.00pm: Meet for an evening meal at Bella's Italian Bistro, 80 High Street, Burnham-on-Crouch, which has excellent reviews on Tripadvisor. Menu choices must be made 2/3 days before our visit. Menus can be viewed on their website: www.bellas-bistro.com. Please let Richard Searle know in time, at richardsearle486@btinternet.com or mobile 0771 285 7704.

Saturday 11 June – 9.45am: Meet at the site of the Battle of Maldon, subject of an Anglo-Saxon poem. This is by the causeway where we cross to Northey Island (low tide is at 10am). Northey is one of the last accessible islands of the Essex Archipelago.

1.00pm: Lunch at the Cricketers, East End Road, Bradwell on Sea. Please let Richard know if you are coming.

*At Bradwell in the marshes
There is an inn.
Few are the travellers
Have rested therein.*

Lunch is followed by a walk along the Roman Road to the Saxon chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall, on the headland, for a group tour. We then proceed to nearby Tillingham, where there is a Peculiar Peoples chapel, now a private house. (Zeph in *The True Heart* was a Peculiar. Their meetings *took place in a parlour and finished with singing and seed cake.*) Tillingham village is clustered around the main street with an historic centre that has become a conservation area.

4.00pm: Tea at the Cap and Feathers, 8 South Street, Tillingham. (The pub has a separate tea/coffee shop.)

7.30pm: Supper at the Rose Inn, Burnham Road, Southminster (excellent reviews on Tripadvisor). Again, please let Richard know if you are coming.

Sunday 12 June – 10.00am: Coffee at Mrs Sippy's Coffee Shop, Mildmay House, Foundry Lane, Burnham-on-Crouch. Ample free parking.

11.00: Meet Ken Worpole at the Side Hall, Burnham-on-Crouch Village Hall, Arcadia Road, two streets away from Mrs Sippy's.

Ken Worpole is the author of books on architecture, landscape and public policy. For the last ten years he's been researching and documenting the changing landscape of Essex, its history and current state, particularly the marshes and islands. He has written on Sylvia's appreciation of this landscape, and on the Peculiar People (Newsletter 28).

12.45am: Lunch at the Huntsman and Hounds, Althorne, which is about 3 miles from Burnham-on-Crouch (excellent reviews on Tripadvisor). Please let Richard know if you are coming.

Places to stay: Burnham-on-Crouch and Southminster are both on the line from London Liverpool Street. Maldon has no railway, but looks to be a pleasant place to stay.

***Quiet Revolutions* – Amanda Chambers**

Using oxide printing techniques on clay, hand thrown pieces and video projections, *Quiet Revolutions* explores the life and work of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland. * Amanda Chambers is a multi-disciplinary artist based at BV Studios in Bristol. Her work is primarily concerned with our proximity to the past and the exploration of its residual traces found in objects, places and spaces. It seeks to establish a connection through intervention and in doing so, explores how history may become inherited, personalised, and present. Further themes of authenticity, reverence and the legacy of historic subjects and their narratives are examined. * For more information and images of these intriguing works, see amandachambers.co.uk

The Countryman

Entering its 21st year in the Spring of 1947, the magazine received congratulations from its readers. Sylvia wrote that "THE COUNTRYMAN has attained its majority. It was never young, but it had a wise head, and I hope it may never be so old that it won't keep its young shoulders".

Earlier, in April 1940, editor E. K. Robertson Scott asked contributors "Who prop, in these bad days, my mind?"

Valentine replied, "From a sermon by John Donne at Whitehall, April 20, 1620: 'In all Kingdoms that border upon other Kingdoms, particular men, who by dwelling in those skirts and borders, may make their profit of spoile, delight in hostility & have adversenesses & detestation of peace: but it is not so within: they who till the earth, & breed up cattell, & imploy their industry upon God's creatures, according to God's ordinances, feel the benefit & apprehend the sweetness, & pray for the continuance of peace". Sylvia, more succinct, wrote: "Clarity of purpose, clarity of statement. The use of the rubbish-burner."

Writers were asked for the April-May-June 1941 issue "What, in your view, stands in most need of improvement having regard to present and post-War conditions of the rural school?"

Sylvia : The country schoolmaster needs a school secretary who will carry out all the organizational paper work (ranging from health papers to indents for coal) which at present gets between him and his function of teaching. School managers, one at least, preferably two, should be extra-local. The balance and politics of rural life are such that local school managers, whether of the King Log or King Stork variety, often get, and retain, their position for reasons that have nothing to do with interest in education. One school manager and one mother should be included. There is another vital point. There should be facilities (perhaps semi-obligatory) whereby teachers themselves can keep up their education. (And, perhaps, they might have more to start off with.) No one can teach reliably who is not also a steady learner. Finally, and crucially, the greatest handicap to rural education is the indifference of parents. While the mass of parents considers the school as a kind of bag into which children can be dropped for the day, education can't come alive.

T. F. Powys : Teach joy. Cast out all modern ways to the Devil. Let the children seek happiness alone. Open each little village school again *as a shelter*. In fine weather let the children learn in the fields. Teach them slowly, joyfully as the grass grows and the trees blossom. Let them learn by thinking, by doing, by seeing. Bring back to them the Blessed Mary, Jesus, Pan, Cybele the Mother of the Gods. Bring back Divine Nature. Raise again the poetry of religion from the ground. Open for the children the best book – God.

Early Spring

The Far East

Gently Falling snow. A June-blue sky
Plum blossom.
Mud out of doors. Unshod feet in a clean cold house.
Boom, boom, boom, the temple bell.

England

Flight of bullfinches. Fallen snow.
Drift of snowdrops in green grass.
Turbulent stream. Kingfisher flash.
Scent of violets by the old box hedge.

E. K. Robertson Scott
The Countryman, Spring 1947

April

A rinsing shower,
A washed blue sky
A cherry's flower,
A cuckoo-cry
A beech-leaf's down,
A daffodil –
April.

Justin Richardson
The Countryman

A City Set on a Hill

As I stand in the street,
Waiting to feel the cripple in my back
Subside again into his fitful sleep,
I see too many others go by.

All down the street
Of this small country town they limp or drag,
Some dreadfully stumbling, some who creep
Ashamed – as if they suddenly

Had seen a similar street
Peopled with citizens sound and beautiful,
But climbing a hill too smooth and steep
For such as they, or I.

Valentine Ackland
The Countryman, Summer 1954

The Genesis of T H White: A Biography

Peter Tolhurst

Two things are clear from the 2014 publishing sensation *H is for Hawk* (Jonathan Cape). One is that Helen Macdonald's moving account of her struggle to train a hawk and cope with the death of her father is destined to become a classic of nature writing. The other is that while trawling through the literature of falconry her reading of TH White's 'tortured masterpiece' *The Goshawk* will have introduced many of her readers to White's biographer Sylvia Townsend Warner. Although they never met White had been an admirer of Warner's work, especially *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, and in 1963 had sent her a copy of his poems inscribed rather creepily 'From an unknown worshipper'. In January of the following year Sylvia recorded in her diary 'T H White is dead, alas! – a friend I never managed to have' and two months later received a letter from Michael Howard at Jonathan Cape, White's publisher, enquiring whether she would be interested in writing a life of 'this tragic and exasperating' man.

Although Howard thought Sylvia would be 'sympathetic to his character' Helen Macdonald's assertion that the choice of Warner was, at least in part, because she was gay, is too simplistic – there were other more persuasive reasons why Warner was ideally suited to the task. At the age of 70 her reputation as a writer of distinction was already secure and, according to John Updike, she had 'the spiritual digestion of a goat.' Certainly her years of research on the Tudor Church Music project would have equipped her well to tackle the mountain of source material – diaries, letters, notebooks etc. – that awaited White's biographer in his Alderney House. Aware that White's literary agent had 'a very inferior flashy protégé' in mind for the job, Warner was quickly championed by several of White's friends. While John Verney claimed, in his foreword to the biography, to have recommended Sylvia to Michael Howard the opinion of David Garnett, a close friend of both White and Warner, was probably key to Howard's decision – the White/Garnett letters were published in 1968, the year after Warner's biography.

Sylvia spent the next three years immersed in White's life attempting to fashion a coherent portrait of this complex and troubled individual from the sheer volume of material she had inherited. At times it threatened to overwhelm her; some of it was painful reading, especially the flagellation diaries hidden away in a yellow trunk that Howard had left in the Dorchester Museum for her to consult. Eventually she emerged with – 'a strange love story between an old woman and a dead man' and, having posted off the finished ms, wrote in her diary 'Goodbye, my poor Timothy!' recalling the envoi at the end of *Mr Fortune's Maggot*. Published to great acclaim in 1967 it was clear that the decision to engage Warner had been a stroke of genius. Writing in the *New York Times* Walter Allen considered White's biography '... a small masterpiece which may well be read long after the writing of its subject has been forgotten', but Sylvia was not quite finished with her Timothy. Ten years later she agreed to write the prologue to White's *The Book of Merlin*, the last unpublished part of *The Sword in the Stone*.

T. H. White
1906 – 1964
Author
Who
From a Troubled Heart
Delighted Others
Loving and Praising
This Life

Gravestone inscription, written by Sylvia

Discoveries of Sylvia

Each Sunday in the Book Review of *The New York Times*, an author is asked some several questions. In the January 31st issue, Heather Macdonald replied thus to “What’s the last great book you read?”

I’ve read a few this year, but the one I’ll be pressing into people’s hands forever is “Lolly Willowses,” the 1926 novel by Sylvia Townsend Warner. It tells the story of a woman who rejects the life that society has fixed for her in favor of freedom and the most unexpected alliances. It completely blindsided me: Starting as a straightforward, albeit beautifully written family saga, it tips suddenly into extraordinary, lucid wildness.

The Guardian of 25 January reports that “IJones decided to stop 'lurking and occasionally posting replies' and post about their current read, *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of William Maxwell and Sylvia Townsend Warner, 1938-1978*. Welcome!”

Oh, this book is marvellous! I’d forgotten how much I love collections of literary letters (*The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O’Connor* was my previous gold bar, but this one may have toppled it.) I’m a life-long fan of Maxwell, but was only vaguely familiar with Warner. Over 40 years the correspondence between Maxwell and Warner grows from the formal, editor/writer relationship, to a true and lasting love between these two, though they only met in person a handful of times. At times Maxwell appears almost besotted with Warner (though he is equally adoring of his wife Emily and their daughters.) I learned of Warner’s politics, her relationship with her partner Valentine Aukland [sic], her friends and foes in London literary circles of the 40’s and 50’s, and she emerges as a fascinating character. It doesn’t hurt that there are frequent references to cats, both Maxwell’s and Warner’s. It took me two library renewals before I could brace myself to read the last six pages – Maxwell’s eulogy at Warner’s funeral.

William Byrd
Richard Searle

In this electronic age it is possible to hear the music from any era through live and studio recordings. Additionally, dedicated groups of players and singers abound giving regular concerts and recitals. Thus the secular and church music of William Byrd, that innovative master of Elizabethan polyphony, can now be enjoyed and appreciated in all its splendour: but it wasn’t always the case. Until the 19th century only a small number of his works were known and occasionally performed; the greater part of his musical output had been forgotten and neglected for the three hundred years since his death in 1623.

During the time Sylvia Townsend Warner was making her highly significant contribution to the magnum opus *Tudor Church Music*¹, which devoted three of its ten volumes to William Byrd’s music, opportunity to celebrate the tercentenary of his death on 4 July, 1623, was irresistible. During the months preceding the anniversary the musical world became caught up in the excitement of Byrdfest. Musicians were urged to play and choirs were encouraged to sing his music, to glorify Byrd as never before, and they did so.

In this endeavour, Warner contributed the article reproduced below, to the *British Music Bulletin*,² exhorting the members of the British Music Society, whose publication it was, to form groups and choirs with the express purpose of performing Byrd’s madrigals the following year, to bring them and their composer to a wider public.

BYRD TERCENTENARY FESTIVAL, JULY 1923

[William Byrd, b. 1543, d. 1623]

In the opinion of many thoughtful people the centenary habit is becoming somewhat of a nuisance. Not long ago an apprehensive critic pointed out that if this sort of thing is to be done with any show of impartiality, we shall be doing it twice a day. There is much to be said for the process of drawing attention to forgotten merit by a little judicious blowing-up of the ashes, but if this be done too often even the most docile public may grow jaded and refuse to attend.

Admitting this danger, it may seem inconsistent to advocate a proposal to celebrate the Tercentenary of the death of William Byrd. But there are unusually good grounds for this celebration. For one thing, this is the first time any attempt has been made to organise a wide hearing for the works of the most representative musician of our greatest musical epoch. For another, the time now seems ripe for such an attempt. A period of three hundred years has had to elapse before fashion and fortune have allowed the English-speaking peoples to offer more than lip-service to one of their greatest names.

But at last there appears to be sufficient evidence of a genuine revival of sympathy for English sixteenth century music to justify an endeavour to stimulate and direct it. Last, and I think most important of all, musical appreciation allows for a degree of organisation which may seem a little otiose and interfering in the matter of the other Arts. There seems no reason to suppose that a band of enthusiasts, all pledged to read Shelley's poetry or to consider the Copernican system at a given moment, would gain more from doing it thus than they would from doing it whenever they wished to. And a similar band bent upon inspecting simultaneously a picture by some painter whom they had agreed to honour would certainly have a less good view of it than if they went to look at it severally. Sculpture might present them with fewer inconveniences, but even then their respective impressions might be liable to a charge of one-sidedness, unless, of course, they agreed beforehand to walk slowly round it without jostling. But, those considerations apart, a musical celebration is not open to the serious objection that organisation is a super-imposed factor upon appreciation.

Music is a communal art. It calls for co-operation between its performers, between the performers and the composer, and between the performers and the hearers. The ideal musical co-operation is that of chamber music, where the number of performers is sufficient to create the feeling of mutual association and subservience to a whole without the swamping of individualities in a massed compliance. No music is better fitted for this kind of co-operation than the polyphonic music of the sixteenth century. The term 'chamber music' has now come to bear an exclusively instrumental significance. But such forms of vocal music as the madrigal and the motet have as good a right to be classed as chamber music as the string quartet, and are to the full as exciting and delightful in performance. Nor, and this is to be insisted upon, is their repertory any less various or distinguished. Moreover, an evening of madrigal singing is in most places as easily arranged as an evening of string playing. A bass is handier to transport than a double bass. Phenomenally fine voices are not required for this kind of singing: enthusiasm and confidence are a better dower for it and in most cases very little practice in singing is enough to beget these qualities.

If every Branch of the British Music Society would, in this coming winter, organise (if it has not one already) a madrigal society (if there are a great many people anxious to join, then better, several madrigal societies), and if those societies would sing the music of Byrd and his contemporaries, not only would the success of the Byrd Festival next summer be assured, but a new element would be added to our life as a musical nation. And that a national element, which for all the renaissance of English music, has been too long ignored. For here is repertory, at long last made accessible, needing no more for presentation than a small body of singers, most of it presenting no difficulties but what a little intrepidity and tact will overcome, absolutely national in idiom and yet various enough to suit all moods and places, and still freshly gilded with the light of a golden age. No composer is so representative of that age as William Byrd, and no

composer so deserving of a festival has had to wait so long for one. The nature of his music should stamp his festival (so his promoters hope) with a special significance. It should be a festival in which the appreciators are also as far as possible active participants. If this happens, if in all sorts and conditions of musical life people will not only hear about Byrd and listen to Byrd, but sing and play Byrd for themselves the festival will be a success. Not otherwise. One or two perfect performances will not be enough. What is wanted is a great many performances, even if they are imperfect. The seed must be sown in a wide field, not in a conservatory, if it is to bear anything like its right fruit. The Committee of the Byrd Festival are already indebted to the Committee of the British Music Society for their offer of assistance in organisation. They would like to be further indebted to as many members of the British Music Society as possible, and they ask all sympathisers to take an active part in getting up local performances in the manner suggested. If advice be wanted as to how to sing it, the gramophone records of the English Singers will show them madrigal singing in perfection.

SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER

¹ Buck, P. et al. Eds, *Tudor Church Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

² Warner, S.T. 'Byrd Tercentenary Festival', *British Music Society Bulletin*, Vol.4, No. 9, 1922, pp 153-4

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The Music Division of The New York Public Library owns three songs in manuscript by Paul Nordoff and Valentine Ackland. The texts are "Beneath This Roof-Tree", "Whether a Dove or a Seagull", and, uncollected, "Lullaby for 1940's Children". At the end is the notation "These three songs were written for Valentine at [Maylars?] March, 1940". They seem to be set for medium voice as the range is B3 to G5. Although Mr. Nordoff's hand is quite legible as composer's scripts go, some years ago I had them professionally set. Contact me for more information.

Lullaby for 1940's Children

Grey steel shutters close your eyes,
Sirens wake you when you rise;
Sleep, pretty wantons soon to die,
And guns will sound a lullaby.
Bash them, crash them, lullaby.

Fear is heavy, therefore sleep you,
Ends our fear when we shall weep you;
Sleep, pretty wantons soon to die,
The falling bombs sound a lullaby.
Blasting, lasting lullabys, lullaby.

Two Poems

Before Sylvia established her short-story relationship with her 'gentleman friend', i.e., *The New Yorker*, that magazine published her poetry. These two are not collected.

5 August 1939 – *Underground Wireless*

Said Mrs. James Howard Munroe,
“Do you know
That underneath the Soviet Pavilion
There's more than a million
Wolves caged up behind iron gates?
They were brought over in air-conditioned crates.

“People visiting the Fair
Are unaware
That there are ravening wolves right beneath,
Yowling and gnashing their teeth
And having their strength kept up with a special diet.
It's the soundproof ceilings that keep it quiet.

“But you go any night
To Maple Grove Cemetery, and you'll hear them all right,
Because sound
Can't be kept from travelling underground,
And the gravestones make it louder, especially if wet.
Same as the amplifier on a radio set.

In Brooklyn and Queens
People are asking what it all means
And when the creatures will be let loose to penetrate
Connecticut and New York State.
Don't tell me those red Moscow cannibals
Brought their wolves along just out of kindness to animals.

*“Grover Whalen knows it
But doesn't like to expose it!*

Grover Aloysius Whalen (1886-1962) was a prominent politician, businessman and public relations figure in New York City during the 1930s and '40s. In 1935 he became president of the New York World Fair Corporation, which opened in 1939.

2 August 1941 – *A Visit*

Old Linnet Manor the house was called.
If apple trees and cellar stones were set
On the same day, the house was surely old;
But sound and sweet and solid yet.

It was a westward-facing house.
At the day's end I'd see the windows shine
As though it watched me nearing under the boughs;
And I was glad that it was mine.

One July afternoon I found
Three summer strangers sweating at my door.
I offered them a drink, as I was bound,
Seeing them sweltered and footsore.

Water, said they. From my cool well
What I drew up was water, but transformed
Somehow to wine as they began to swill.
Drunken as lords, they swarmed

Indoors and outdoor, high and low;
One leaning from an attic window sent
Down tidings to a beam, and from below
One pointed out a pediment.

Here was a thing unique, and here
The replica of something famous they knew
Elsewhere. Blithe as three apes turned auctioneer,
They ransacked my dwelling through.

Dealers? Not they. They named no sum,
Nor do men such uncheapening praises speak
Who have a mind to buy. It seemed they'd come
Purely from love of the antique.

As lovers they left, saying I was
The owner of a jewel beyond price.
I saw them off and turned back to my house,
But could not look it in the face.

The thought pressed in. Of two things, one:
My house, like any wife, had worn a mask,
Or I too dull a clod such graces to own.
Who lives there now I do not ask.

Samuel Menashe

Samuel Menashe (1925-2001), a New York City poet, met Sylvia as his career began in the early 1960s. He was in need of some professional help which Sylvia generously gave. In the 2005 *Journal* Peter Tolhurst writes of this relationship and reproduces more than a dozen of her letters and poems. Below is his letter between hers of 26:iv:1971 and 16:v:1971.

(apt. 15) 75 Thompson Street
New York, NY 10012
May 11, 1971

Dear Miss Warner,

I wish you could be comforted. Normally one of you had to endure the death of the other. It is in two senses that you mourn for your friend. – you mourn in her stead. She was spared your present suffering. Is it not better that you suffer instead of her? It distresses me that you are “alone and a ghost since”. Myself, I find that although I am haunted by the dead I am not less alive than I was after my mother's death. Two images come to mind. If you think of the wheel of a water mill and the dark current that turns it – that swift current is death, swifter than it ever was and the wheel is the wheel of life, turned furiously by it. Part of the wheel is always in the water. Life is inseparable from death – just as flame is inseparable from the darkness in to which it endlessly ceases [?]. I remember that a year or two after my mother's death I was talking to a friend and I caught myself saying “I was thirty-six years old when she died and I will have to die again.”

But we are alive now and I am glad you are alive. You are a source of life to me – I am thinking of “the Corner that held Them”, of “the Green Torso”, of the Englishman who died on that bridge in Dublin, having seen the land of his dreams.

The official publication date of the book is April 19. I hope it will not disappear unreviewed. If Louise Bogan were alive, I could have expected a review in The New Yorker. Ten years ago you were kind enough to endorse the book Victor Gollancz published and every since your support of my work has been constant. Do you think you can help me again?

May you be comforted,

Yours
Samuel

Sylvia Townsend Warner, Samuel Menashe, eBay and Me Peter Swaab

Admiring both Sylvia Townsend Warner and Samuel Menashe, I was pleased to discover from the 2005 *STW Journal* that they admired each other. And I was both pleased and excited when the letter below came up for sale on eBay in November 2007.

27: x: 1968

Dear Richard Meyer,

Here is a poet you should approach for Genesis – Grasp. (I had his address so carefully filed away that I have only just found it, or I would have told you of him before)

SAMUEL MENASHE
(Apt 15) 75 THOMPSON STREET
N.Y. N.Y. 10012

He is such a fine craftsman that his craftsmanship is imperceptible. His brief poems – often only four lines – are like snow-crystals, except that they don't melt away. Do get in touch with him.

With best wishes

Sylvia Townsend Warner

I bid for it, fairly vigorously, but somebody else outbid me – a reader of this newsletter perhaps? [It was your newsletter editor.] But I had transcribed the letter and copied it in a brief letter to Menashe, thinking that anybody would like to hear such words about themselves. He wrote back in his fine sloping handwriting, enclosing a transcript of one of his poems inscribed to me and urging me to phone, as he found writing by hand taxing and difficult. And so with some trepidation I phoned, a little daunted by the rabbinical gravity of some of his poems. But he was an altogether charming and chatty phone interlocutor, with a habit of pausing in the conversation to recite from memory one of his poems. I found this thrilling and startling when we first spoke, and always enjoyable even when the first surprise wore off; the poems were clearly woven into the fabric of his everyday thoughts and life. He read with extraordinary slowness and emphasis, with a faith that each word meant plenty. Youtube has a number of recordings of his readings; I recommend especially this one from October 2007 – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5nmWHB3Sf0>.

We continued to phone every now and then over the next few years, and I sent him a copy of my father's war diaries, *Field of Fire*, knowing that both he and Samuel had endured the Ardennes campaign of 1944. There were plans to bring him over to give a reading at University College London, where I teach, but glitches of timing and health

got in the way. And I had a plan to go to New York to interview him, and in particular to interview him about his friendship with Sylvia Townsend Warner; but alas I never made it happen. Samuel died in 2011, having lived long enough to take deep pleasure in the late recognition of his poetry; there was a Library of America volume of his *New and Selected Poems* in 2005, and a UK reprint by Bloodaxe in 2009 with a few new poems and a DVD interview with the poet in the New York apartment he often wrote about:

Ghost I house
In this old flat –
Your outpost –
My aftermath

Like Sylvia, whose 1978 preface to *Mr Fortune's Maggot* ends with the touching words 'my world was now nicely and neatly over', Samuel foresaw his own death with peaceful courage. The final poem in the Bloodaxe edition is titled 'Leavetaking':

Dusk of the year
Nightfalling leaves
More than we knew
Abounded on trees
We now see through

* * * * *

Genesis – Grasp was a quarterly magazine of American poetry (1968 – 1972) founded by Richard Meyers, who was later better-known as the punk rock musician Richard Hell. There are two boxes of archival materials, which includes at least one letter from Sylvia, at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas.

The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner

Judith Stinton kindly brings our attention to a newly published article, *Surprised by Joy*, by Jonathan Law. It appears in the Winter 2015 issue of *Slightly Foxed*, a quarterly magazine of literature (foxedquarterly.com) and the first several paragraphs are reproduced below. An expanded version, in two parts, is online at *The Dabbler: the Culture Blog for Connoisseurs of Everything* – thedabbler.co.uk

It's always strange to think how easily you might not have met that someone: a bus that arrived on time, or a last drink at the bar, and it might all have been quite different. Our meetings with books can be equally subject to fluke. I was in the queue at Barter Books in Alnwick, a clutch of holiday reading under my arm, when for no reason at all I picked up a green Virago paperback: *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*. The name rang only muffled bells, but through some chance the pages opened

on a bit about Yeovil in Somerset, that town in which I failed to grow up. The book went into the bag with rest. And thank goodness it did: there are books that become an essential part of your life; that travel on with you; that you know you will never exhaust. For me, this is one – and one that I nearly missed.

Of course, that the book exists at all is itself a sort of fluke. As anyone with the diary habit knows, a journal begins by accident and is best carried on by not really thinking about it much. In 1927 Sylvia Townsend Warner was given a smart notebook by a friend; a day out prompted a few hesitant jottings and, before she knew it, she was off. Warner had acquired a habit that would last – with a few significant gaps – until her death some fifty years later. The result is quite simply a miracle. For wit, candour and brilliance of style, the diary can have few rivals; and in its later brooding on love and mortality it becomes (surely) one of the most moving of all human documents.

Wisely, Sylvia never stopped to ask herself why she wrote, or for whom (questions that have stymied many a diarist). However, there is a clue in one of her earliest novels, where a character remarks feelingly that 'one does not admire things enough: and worst of all one allows whole days to slip by without once pausing to see an object, any object, exactly as it is'. It is this energized intentness – this willingness to marvel – that give the diary its brio, whether Sylvia is gossiping about her pets, the love lives of her friends, or the ever-changing effect of light and weather in the English countryside. After a visit to Sylvia in Dorset, the poet Jean Untermeyer wrote, 'she is so *alive* that her vital awareness is translated into everything she thinks and does. She can make an event of the fact that the carrots have come up.'

When the journal begins Sylvia is 33, living in Bayswater and enjoying the success of her first novels, *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and *Mr Fortune's Maggot* (1927). The phrase 'social whirl' has rarely seemed so apposite. Her young friends are called things like Bunny, Wobb and Doffles and they all do something in publishing or journalism or the arts. Whether she is recording church crawls into Suffolk or long walks in the Essex marshes, Mahler at the Courtauld or Stravinsky at the BBC, lamb with 'a miraculous and undiagnosable sauce' at Boulestin's or oysters from Mrs Diver's bar, the diaries convey an overpowering *joie de vivre*. My guess is that most of her young men were in love with her, and more than a little in awe; she clearly had the sort of charm that at once provoked resistance and makes it useless. The constant picnics have a smack of *Swallows and Amazons*, or even the Famous Five – although I dare say the conversation was racier:

We argued passionately about the aesthetic emotion, the league of nations, whether animals masturbate, whether there is an essential difference between lyric and epigram, whether Mr Stuart was a honest man or a married man...

This poem by George Townsend Warner, set to music by Malcolm Davidson, appeared in *The Monthly Chapbook*, December 1919, No. 6, Vol. 1.

At the Turn of the Burn

At the turn
Of the burn
Where the chatter of the stream
With a dash
And a splash
Weaves its song into your dream.
Through the dream the ripples rush,
Calling "Listen!"
"Listen!" "Listen!"
While the tree-tops whisper "Hush!"

As you sleep,
Soft winds creep
And set the harebells ringing
Fairy chimes,
To the rhymes
You can hear the Fairies singing.
Through the rhymes the ripples rush,
Calling "Listen!"
"Listen!" "Listen!"
While the tree-tops whisper "Hush!"

Lean with your Sight

Leans a boy to look, on the rough hide of the tree
Which only last autumn fell and now like a shot beast lies
Enormous, sprawled on a bank at the top of the rise;
Leans a boy to look at the world across a green valley.

Lean your weak sight, old man, on the curving horizon,
Over the ribbed and rippled hide of the sea:
There where the cold sky offers a new country,
There at time's end an immortal sun is rising.

Valentine Ackland
from *Peninsula: an Anthology of Verse from the West Country*
(Macdonald, London, 1957)