

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Chair: Janet Montefiore
36 St Dunstan's Street
Canterbury, Kent, CT2 8BZ, UK
jem1@kent.ac.uk

Hon. Secretary: Vacant

Treasurer: Jenny Wildblood
Flat 4, Ventnor Lodge
Hallam Road
Clevedon BS21 7SF
wildbloodj@yahoo.co.uk

Membership Secretary: Dr Mercedes Aguirre
American & Australasian Studies, British Library
Aguirre.Mercedes@outlook.com

Events Organiser: Richard Searle
7 Longmoor Street
Poundbury, Dorchester
Dorset DT1 3GN
0771 285 7704 - richardsearle486@btinternet.com

Journal Editor: Professor Peter Swaab
Department of English, UCL
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT
p.swaab@ucl.ac.uk

Newsletter Editor: Jay Barksdale
311 Washington Street, 11C
Jersey City, NJ 07302 USA
201 763 6800 – birdale88@yahoo.com

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Sylvia Townsend Warner @ Tanya Stobbs
The Society's website is at www.townsendwarner.com

NEWSLETTER NUMBER THIRTY-FIVE

AGM 2017 * Call for Papers * Events
Richard Burleigh * Arthur Machen * John Craske
Walter de la Mare * Paul Nordoff * Rebecca Taksel
William Maxwell * T.H. White
letters * poems * appreciations * a story

Thanks go to Judith Bond, Judith Stinton, Peter Swaab and Rebecca Taksel for contributions to this issue. Future contributions, suggestions and corrections are most welcome.

* * * * *

On behalf of the Society, the officers would like to thank Dr Vike Martina Plock, University of Exeter, for her years and work as Membership Secretary. Succeeding to this position will be Dr Mercedes Aguirre, Lead Curator of American Collections at the British Library. Welcome, Mercedes!

Similarly, we wish to thank Lynn Mutti for her years of work as Hon. Secretary. This most necessary office is now open and we hope all members will consider volunteering for it. If so, please contact any of the officers.

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The Estates of Sylvia and Valentine have a new website; clean and clear, attractive and efficient. It is sylviatownsendwarnerestate.com. The email is estatestw@gmail.com.

Call for Papers : Sylvia Townsend Warner and Modernism

The University of Manchester – 6 & 7 April 2018
Confirmed speakers : Claire Harman – Jan Montefiore

Today, when political misinformation abounds, nationalism and Fascism have reappeared, and we find ourselves contending with ideology in simple, complex and covert forms, Sylvia Townsend Warner's writing seems ever more relevant. In turns insightful, comic, cutting, and poignant, her texts ask what art is for, and how we might navigate personal relationships, social change, belief and the past. Warner has an acute sense of the relationship between material conditions and human consciousness, of place and the ordinary. This conference seeks papers that analyse her importance for studies of, among other possibilities, modernism, politics (specifically communism), gender and sexuality. Claire Harman's 1989 biography began a revival of interest in Warner.

Virago published her fiction, *Carcantet* the *Collected Poems*, and *Literature Compass* undertook a special issue in 2015. Her relationship with Valentine Ackland and the queerness of *Summer Will Show* have attracted critical attention, and *Lolly Willowses* continues to feature on undergraduate courses on gender and sexuality. Critical discussions of Warner's work though deserve to be broadened further in terms of themes and the texts addressed – for example her later novels, short stories and non-fiction. She participated in Marxist, musical and artistic communities, and had friends such as composers Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gerald Finzi; poet, journalist and editor Edgell Rickword; prominent Communist Party member Tom Wintringham; and poet Edith Sitwell. Warner published 6 novels and 11 collections of short stories during a literary career that spanned 5 decades. An expert musicologist, she also translated Proust, published widely in *The New Yorker*, wrote a travel guide to Somerset, a biography of T. H. White, a short book on Jane Austen, 6 collections of verse, and a wealth of material is to be found in her non-fiction, diaries, letters and essays. The range of Warner's work and thought has not yet received its due. We welcome proposals on any aspect of her writing, translation or musicology, especially those committed to taking debate in new directions. Proposals for 20-minute papers will be considered, including (but not limited to): Modernism – the Historical novel – Critical theory – Postcolonial Warner – Marxism – Feminism – Realism – The Communist Party – Everyday life – Review culture – Lesbian modernism – Translation – Travel writing – Queer Warner – Cultures of the left – the Left Review – Relations with particular writers, artists and composers – Internationalism – Books, magazines and publishers – Letters and diaries – The New Yorker – Warner and Europe – Music, musicology and composition.

The Conference location is to be at Friends' Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester. The Organisers are Dr Howard J. Booth (University of Manchester) and Dr Gemma Moss (Birmingham City University). Proposals of 250 words should be sent to stwconference2018@gmail.com by 30 January 2018. There are two bursaries for graduate students of £100, offered by the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society. Please write to the conference email address above for information on the application procedure.

Poor Shelter

The grave you hollowed out for her,
Deep as it looked and warm,
Was not enough to shelter her
Except from weather-storm –

The earth you heaped upon her head,
The mound you shaped with care,
Can never hush the things you said
Before you laid her there.

Valentine Ackland
Time & Tide, 30 August 1930

Events

The bi-annual Sylvia Townsend Warner Lecture was given on 22 June this year by Professor Maud Ellmann of the University of Chicago. Her topic was 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and *After the Death of Don Juan*'. She vividly brought out the character of this strange and still undervalued novel and more fully than any previous commentator she gave us some of the contexts and backgrounds to help understand its milieu and intentions. The lecture drew richly, for instance, on Buñuel's 1932 film *Las Hurdes* and the monograph on *Las Hurdes* by Maurice Legendre as well as on sources from Orwell and Molière and on contemporary Spanish periodicals and speeches. An expanded version of the talk will be published in the *Warner Journal*.

The lecture was rather lavishly hosted by UCL Press, and the evening also acted as the official launch of the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* as a digital as well as print publication. Peter Swaab gave a brief talk outlining the continuing and further aims of the *Journal* and thanking UCL Press for its financial support and for letting the *Journal* be a little non-conformist, as Warner would surely have wanted it to be.

Despite the hot weather there was a good turnout. It included society members and academic visitors from Australia and the USA as well as students and staff from UCL, and also Warner's literary executor Tanya Stobbs. There was a more than generous supply of drinks for after the talk, and a good convivial time was had by all. 'Warnerites are a very pleasant crew', Maud Ellmann remarked, confirming how right we'd been to invite her to give the lecture. (PS)

* * * * *

The Southbank Centre in London made a recording of the event on Warner's poetry at the Poetry Library and this is now accessible at <https://soundcloud.com/the-poetry-library/sylvia-townsend-warners-poetic-works>. It will also be lodged in the Warner-Ackland archive. This event was proposed and organized by two former students at UCL, Katherine Rodgers and Aileen Wang – organized so well, in fact, that all seats were taken and there was standing room only, not always a phrase associated with poetry events. After only a small technical glitch it began with Warner's reading of 'Gloriana Dying'. This was followed by a general introduction to Warner's poetry by Peter Swaab, and talks by Claire Harman on the place of poetry in Warner's writing life and by Frances Bingham on the nature of her literary collaboration with Valentine Ackland. The evening finished with a lively Q & A and reception and eventually by the organisers tactfully intimating that they'd like the remaining drinkers to move on, please. (PS)

Minutes of the 16th Annual General Meeting

Sylvia Townsend Warner Society – Dorset County Museum, 6 May 2017

Present: Jan Montefiore (Chair), Eileen Johnson, Judith Bond, Judith Stinton, Richard Searle, Vike Plock, Ruth Williams, Peter Swaab, Jenny Wildblood, Ann Henderson, Lynn Mutti.

Apologies: Winifred Johnson, Helen Sutherland, Tess Ormrod.

1. Minutes of the AGM 2016 were approved as a correct record and signed by Jan Montefiore.
2. Matters Arising: Richard Searle noted that there was no balance on the Society bank account published in the last newsletter. Jenny Wildblood, Treasurer, said that the figure was in the papers to be presented.
3. Journal: Peter Swaab, Journal Editor, reported that work will begin this summer on digitising all back copies of the Society's *Journal*; the English Department at University College London have agreed to cover all or most of the costs of this work. The issues for 2015 and 2016 has already been put up on the Ingenta Connect platform. There is a link on the Society website. Digitisation will involve asking the copyright holders of articles for their permission. Where this is not given or the copyright holder cannot be reached the material will not be digitised. Indexing articles would be desirable but there is the question of cost. The 2016 *Journal* has been available on-line for some time after it was delayed by discussions with Formara printers regarding sharply rising costs for the printed copies and postage. UCL Press has been very successful and is already expanding, which has meant they have been able to offer various kinds of help but sometimes exert pressure for their preferred house style. The 2017 *Journal* should be published towards the end of November. From 2018 there will be two issues a year. Jan thanked Peter for 'catching-up' with the publication schedule and for his efforts with UCL Press.
4. Treasurer's Report: Jenny Wildblood presented the Society's accounts via a spreadsheet. Cheryl Parry has checked the accounts for 2017. The accounts for 2016, presented last year as un-checked, will now be checked retrospectively. There has been a reduction in income this year due to fewer sales of back issues of the *Journal* and *Newsletter* – complete sets were sold last year. The reduction in income is likely to continue as the *Journal* is now freely available online. It was agreed to retain five copies each of the Society's publications, ensuring archival copies were kept. Jan Montefiore commented that the current membership income would no longer cover the costs of the *Journal* and *Newsletter*. The membership subscription of £10, unchanged since the Society began in 2000, would need to be raised. Richard Searle proposed that the membership be informed of a proposed rise in subscription in the next *Newsletter*, seconded by Vike Plock. A new rate of £15 was suggested. A separate discussion

regarding the new subscription rate will be undertaken at the next committee meeting. Jenny Wildblood continues to have difficulties with Barclays Bank on behalf of the Society, despite written complaints to them; she proposed changing banks. Judith Bond drew attention to the fact that Barclays does not charge for processing cheques in foreign currencies as do many other banks, a valuable facility with so many US members.

5. Membership Report: Vike Plock, Membership Secretary, presented a written report. Twenty percent of the membership are overseas; 23 in USA, 8 in Europe and 1 other. There are 3 discontinued memberships and she continues to chase the 12 outstanding subscriptions. There are 2 new members and 1 joint membership to date in 2017. It was agreed to amend the membership form to make clear that membership runs from January 1, but that late joiners in any year would receive copies of that year's publications. Paying for membership via PayPal is being investigated by Jenny Wildblood.
6. Website Report: Karina Taubert sent an annotated report outlining 'visitors' to the site for the past year. The graph showed a slow but steady increase of visitors on a daily basis. The rate has doubled over the past 5 years and is now approximately 100 per day. Karina outlined the changes: On-going news publication – *Journal* online publication has been linked – Bank transfer form updated to reflect IBAN payment options – Edited passages for Committee posts – Re-titling of 'Publications' navigation circle to Journal. She requested input from members to the Society's Facebook page which urgently needs new posts. 'Photographs and personal messages about meetings held, museums visited and other such events would bring life to the FB page'.
7. A.O.B. a) Mercedes Aguirre has expanded her role as Editorial Assistant and is now proof-reading as well as original tasks. b) It was suggested, and passed, that the submission date for the Mary Jacobs Essay Prize be extended to September 1. Only one entry has been received so far although UCL students have been urged to participate. c) Jan Montefiore notified the meeting of a two-day Sylvia Townsend Warner Conference to be held at the University of Manchester in April 2018. Keynote speakers are herself and Claire Harman. Vike Plock suggested that the Society might provide student bursaries, 2 at £100 each. Agreed nem con. It was also suggested that the Society membership information could be included in the conference stationery. d) Both Vike Plock, Membership Secretary and Lynn Mutti, Secretary have resigned their posts. Mercedes Aguirre has agreed to become Membership Secretary and the Committee hopes to have another Secretary in place by mid-September.

Thanks were given to Vike and Lynn for their work for the Society. There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 12 noon.

Richard Burleigh

Richard Burleigh, a member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society from its inception, died in February at the age of eighty-five. He was a great lover of Dorset landscape, literature and archaeology, a member of the Powys Society and Newsletter Editor of the William Barnes Society.

A Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, before his retirement to Broadwindsor (and later Charmouth) he worked on radio carbon dating at the British Museum. He was a keen book collector, and was for a while a book dealer too – a gamekeeper turned poacher.

Characteristically, he chose to have a green funeral, and requested that his wake be held in the pub at Wynyard's Gap, with its extensive views over the Dorset countryside.

Judith Stinton

T.H. White

Conor Mark Jameson writes in his recent book *Looking for the Goshawk* (Bloomsbury, 2013) "I'm reading Tim White's biography, by Sylvia Townsend Warner. He was born in India at the turn of the 20th century, soon traumatised by violent quarrels between his parents and their humiliatingly public break-up. He was shipped to England to be educated, sent to Cheltenham College, a prestigious private school close to England's western border with Wales. I drove past it recently, an elegant old building, faintly redolent of a Victorian prison. I'm sure it doesn't happen nowadays but it is recorded that White was brutalised there. It helped him develop his need to work, learn and write, to free himself from his unhappiness.

He graduated from Cambridge, following a thesis on Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, although he claimed not to have actually read it while a student. He took a teaching job at a rural private school in central England, among some of Europe's finest landscaped gardens, created in the 18th century, with more than 40 monuments, temples and follies. After a few years of this he wrote to his friend David Garnett: "It is time to face the issue. I hope to get out....and live in Scotland on £200 a year. I want to get married too, and escape from all this piddling homosexuality and fear and unreality."

White's Arthurian legend novels were later compiled as *The Once and Future King*, in turn condensed into the Broadway musical *Camelot*, and later the hugely popular Disney films. J.K. Rowling cites the character of Wart, the young King Arthur, as the spiritual forebear of Harry Potter. It is plain that White's influence has been widely felt, yet he remains curiously marginalised in literary history."

At the Movies

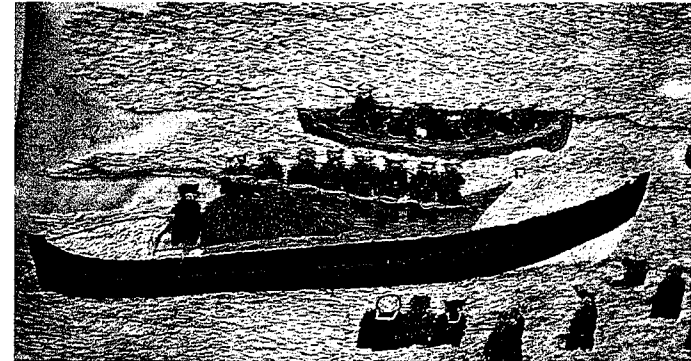
Wonder Woman: The *New York Daily News*, June 12, writes that "in 1914, Welsh author **Arthur Machen** unintentionally authored a piece of fake news when the 'fiction' label disappeared from his story [*The Bowmen*] in the *Evening News* about phantoms who helped British forces win the decisive Battle of Mons against the Germans. It also didn't help that the story was written in the first-person. Over time, accounts of divine intervention multiplied, morphing from Machen's original tale of ghostly medieval longbow archers to a glowing cloud to, most popular of all, warrior angels... the parallels between the stories of the Angels of Mons and what happens in the blockbuster are undeniable, from the way that Wonder Woman can't be touched by gunfire to how she soars across bombed out wasteland and, most importantly, inspires the group of soldiers behind her to join in the charge toward their German enemies."

Dunkirk: The *Norfolk Eastern Daily Press*, 17 June, reports that "with a new film about to be released about the 1940 'miracle of Dunkirk', Trevor Heaton sees a remarkable Norfolk artwork inspired by the rescue – and its equally remarkable creator. His life was wrecked by the 'War to end all Wars'. But that did not stop him honouring those caught up in its sequel. And for Norfolk fisherman-turned-artist **John Craske**, that tribute was expressed in an extraordinary artwork, an embroidery honouring the bravery and skill of the fleet of 'little boats' which saved hundreds of thousands of troops at Dunkirk. At 11 feet long and 25 inches wide, this is like a one-man Bayeux Tapestry, and is by far the largest of dozens – perhaps hundreds – of paintings and embroideries produced by Craske. He began his life with no inkling that he would do anything other than follow his father and his forefathers before him into a hard life of danger and unremitting labour in the Sheringham fishing industry. The danger might have disappeared when his father decided to move to Dereham - far from the sea - and set up a fishmonger's shop in 1905, but the hard work certainly didn't. Craske worked for years from 6am to 11pm every day, rarely taking any days off or holidays, even when he married local girl Laura Eke in 1908. The First World War affected the Craskes as they did millions of families across the world. But John Craske, called up in 1917, was to meet his nemesis not in some German bullet, but with the onset of influenza. Truth be told, he was already a sick man. 'He had already tried to enlist twice, but been rejected on medical grounds,' explained Ruth Battersby Tooke, Curator of the Norfolk Museums Service Costumes and Textiles Department... The influenza led to what was diagnosed at the time as abscesses of the brain, a diagnosis that has been disputed in recent years. The upshot was that the 27-year-old was left sick and utterly lethargic, often hospitalised, with slurred speech and problems keeping his balance. Julia Blackburn, who chronicled what scraps of information we have about his life in her acclaimed 2015 biography *Threads*, believes that the diabetic Craske might also have been suffering from a pituitary gland disorder. Unable to work, he poured what energy he had into producing a host of sea-related paintings, and then – encouraged by Laura – embroideries with whatever

materials he had to hand. The couple survived, just, on what John could sell his creations for. He once said: 'I was ill in bed for 3 years, which I remember very little about, after which I just felt something I couldn't explain urging me on to make pictures of the sea and ships. Continually, fresh ideas are flashing through my mind and when I hear the thrilling stories of sea rescues on the wireless, I make a note of them and hope some day to put them in pictures. I thank God for this gift as I realise it comes from Him!' In 1927 or 1928 he was 'discovered' by poet Valentine Ackland on a visit to her mother's holiday cottage. The Crasques lived in Hemsby by now, and Ackland writes how she found him 'fragile and sickly'. Her passion for his work resulted in an exhibition in London in 1929 where critics praised its simplicity and 'extraordinary charm'. Ackland met her lover Sylvia Townshend Walker [sic] in 1930, and soon she too was swept up in her enthusiasm for Craske's work. The two championed his work throughout their lives, often in the face of ambivalence from the art establishment. After Valentine's death, Sylvia wrote to Peter Pears – whom she had never met but deeply admired – asking him to see her Craske collection and give it a permanent home in East Anglia after her death. The Suffolk singer was entranced with the Crasques, and they were exhibited in 1971 as part of the Aldeburgh Festival. Two other exhibitions followed in 1974 and 1977. Sylvia died in 1978. As for poor John Craske, he was long in his grave by now.

In 1940 he had begun his greatest work, inspired by the bravery of the 'little ships' which had answered - in their hundreds - their nation's desperate call to rescue the troops at Dunkirk. The result of his labours is laid out for me to see on a long table in the Shire Hall offices... and a wonder it is: thousands upon thousands of intricate stitches - 'it's all stem stitch' - have created a vast panorama of ships and sea, aircraft and flame, ack-ack explosions, soldiers and dunes. It sounds dramatic, and is. 'Had he remained a fisherman he would have been involved with the rescue himself,' Ruth explained. 'I believe this was his way of 'doing his bit' to recognise that extraordinary effort. It must have been deeply emotional for him.' Craske's experience of the sea can be seen everywhere, from the pattern of the bow waves to the slackness of a cable caught by a dip in the waves. 'He wouldn't have been able to go to the cinema in his condition, so he never saw any newsreels of the evacuation. I think he may have seen some of the ships in [the magazine] Picture Post.' There are no pencil marks on the backing canvas, so all of this vast sweep of detail was created in Craske's mind's eye. Impressive enough for anyone, but for someone in his condition, simply incredible. 'As an embroiderer, he is fantastic,' Ruth added. 'There is so much movement, texture and colour.' By 1943, time was running out for Craske. 'By this stage he was so infirm that he could not leave his bed. He made the embroidery on a framework made out of an old deckchair.' His creation has been out on display, but not recently. 'It's something I am always hoping to get more recognition for, and I'm always open to loaning it out [to other museums],' she explained. It is also possible to see the embroidery by appointment - 'We have it out of storage at least six times a year' - and previous viewers

have included some of the extended Craske family... Those given the chance to see it will immediately spot that it is not quite finished. When he went into hospital for the final time, Craske asked his devoted wife Laura to bring in his embroidery for one last effort. But a few days later he fell into a coma and died on August 26 1943. Unlike the hundreds of thousands of troops at Dunkirk who had inspired his masterpiece, Craske was not to be given a second chance."



John Craske's Country from 'Five British Water Colours' is in *New Collected Poems*. This shorter version, with very slight variations and differently titled, appeared in *The Countryman*, 34/2, Winter 1946.

Herring Country

You cannot love here as you can love inland
Where love grows easy as a pig or a south-wall fruit.
Love on this 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.
You must build a stout box out of brick and flint cobbles
With a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt water between.

And you cannot mourn here as you can mourn 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 lips sore
With a wind blowing from the North Pole and only salt water between.

Walter de la Mare

In her biography, Claire Harman writes that "In mid-December [1969] she went to stay with Ruth and Tony Scott, and was at the Stones' house for Christmas Day, where Walter de la Mare's poem 'Autumn', in a book she was given as a present, struck her so forcibly she thought she would die then and there from 'shock of this sudden assault of the truth', but being in company, she did not die. 'Total grief is like a minefield,' she wrote in her diary. 'No knowing when one will touch the tripwire.'"

Autumn

There is wind where the rose was;
Cold rain where sweet grass was;
And clouds like sheep
Stream o'er the steep
Grey skies where the lark was.

Nought gold where your hair was;
Nought warm where your hand was;
But phantom, forlorn,
Beneath the thorn,
Your ghost where your face was.

Sad winds where your voice was;
Tears, tears where my heart was;
And ever with me,
Child, ever with me,
Silence where hope was.

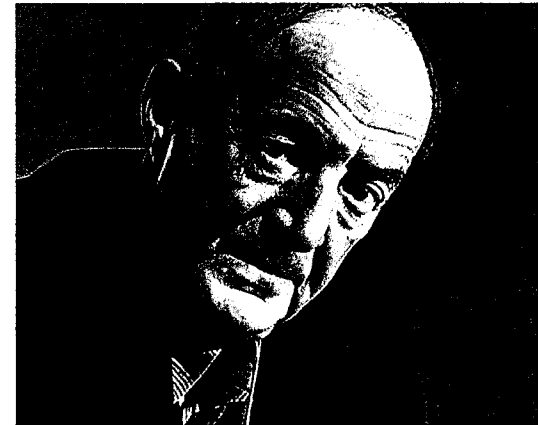
From the *Diaries* 21.viii.1951 : I read Denton Welch's unfinished *Voice from a Cloud* – as I finished it, its paternity, conscious or unconscious, blazed on me: de la Mare. And de la Mare is still alive, & Welch is dead at 31.

David Garnett to Sylvia 5 May 1972 : We ate better than you might suppose, as I did the shopping. The place – Dan-yr-Allt – might have been invented by de la Mare.

William Maxwell to Sylvia, describing the New York City blackout of 1965 : The river shone bright silver, like a poem by de la Mare, and the whole of Eighty-sixth Street was white with moonlight.

Silver

Slowly, silently, now the moon
Walks the night in her silver shoon;
This way, and that, she peers, and sees
Silver fruit upon silver trees;
One by one the casements catch
Her beams beneath the silvery thatch;
Couched in his kennel, like a log,
With paws of silver sleeps the dog;
From their shadowy cote the white breasts peep
Of doves in silver feathered sleep.
A harvest mouse goes scampering by,
With silver claws, and silver eye;
And moveless fish in the water gleam,
By silver reeds in a silver stream.



The Society : www.walterdelamare.co.uk

An Appreciation

Writer and teacher **Rebecca Taksel** (rebeccataksel.com) sends us this, based on the diary entries for 19 April and 12 May 1928:

“There was a wireless in the restaurant, and we listened to a very good Blues. I thought how close the analogy is between Jazz and plainsong: both so anonymous, so curiously restricted and conventionalised, so perfectly adapted to their metiers, both flowing with a kind of devout anonymity.”

And for 12 May: “The blues I admired on the 19th is by Gershwin called *The Man I Love*. Victor [Butler] also under its spell.”

Almost a month separates the two observations. “*The Man I Love*,” with lyrics by George Gershwin’s brother Ira, was cut by the producer of the Gershwins’ 1924 Broadway show *Lady Be Good*. Lady Edwina Mountbatten got hold of it and, as with many things she took up, made it a sensation in England. It is likely that Sylvia heard it around and about during the course of that month.

Sylvia’s remarks about the song are rather brief, and yet she acknowledges the power of what is to her a very narrow genre. What strikes me most in reading these entries about a song and a composer I love is simply that she notices them, knows about Gershwin, stops to comment about something in the air. Her ear, in this case (though the same is true of all her senses) is simply too acute not to. In the same May 12 entry, she mentions the *petits-fours* (“sensuous and practical”) at the restaurant where she dined with Victor Butler; going to the BBC to see Stravinsky conducting his *Oedipus Rex* (“...it sounds old and cold, a chilly shadow that has never lifted from man’s mind.”) where her cigarette case caught fire; and having a conversation with Butler about “climate and religion.”

She notices, she observes, whether music great and small or weavers of horsehair or, in the entry for May 5, “a smell of water and a sound of trees” in a London street near a canal. To this last, she appends, “Shall I ever be able to write about London?” To which the answer is an emphatic Yes, as it must be about anything and everything else that strikes her eye, her ear, her curiosity, her intelligence.

Ninety years after the diary entries “*The Man I Love*” is standard in the jazz repertoire; and Gershwin’s music, along with that of other contributors to the great American songbook, has been accepted in many quarters into the classical music canon. Whether Sylvia would agree with the assessment does not concern me. As an amateur reader of her fiction, her poetry, her letters, her diaries, that whole coherent universe of writing that she left, I can say unequivocally that, more than any other author, Sylvia Townsend Warner taught me to aspire to live fully, to notice and appreciate and examine critically the matter of everyday life.

An unpublished letter from William Maxwell (via eBay)

2/4 [1977]

Dear Sylvia:

I didn’t tell you how much I liked that young girl with her adolescent airs and graces. And yesterday the book arrived. I left my file of galleys of the series with Mr. Menaker, so he wouldn’t flounder if a fairy story came along, as in fact one did, and I don’t have here (though it may be tucked in one of your books in the country) the story originally called “*Something Entirely Different*”, and now called “*The One and the Other*.” I read it with wonder, with no idea whether it was unchanged or not. As writing it may be the finest you have ever done. I try to read one story a day and cannot hold myself back. The Duke of Orkney arrived, I expect, too late to be included. But what made you take against *The Ambassador from Brociliande*? I hope it was nothing I ever said, because I loved that [cat?] girl queen with spectacles. Not to mention the courtyard with those seven-foot statues. Or the moment of his falling in love. If someone asks you for a little book, some letter press, I mean, the two of them would be a treasure. I am beginning to feel that I understand how you felt during the long drought, only here it is the cold. We are nowhere near the end of it, and I am quite near the end of my patience with it. And fighting off (successfully, I think) a cold that insinuated into my system on a day when I decided not to wear my jaeger undershirt.

It is much colder where Kate is, and I don’t dare think how high the snow drifts are. At least she is warm. Think of me during the month of February as seated at the dining room table collecting statistics for the Internal Revenue Service. Did you know that the father of our country, when asked if he had cut down a young cherry tree, said “I cannot tell a lie, Father, I did it with my little hatchet.” In my mind this used to take place on February 22nd, until Nixon confused the national holidays to a point where nobody now knows which myth took place when.

I am looking at the silver teapot which Valentine got for Emmy from the shop in Cerne Abbas that was closed. That magical day, when Brookie was helping you in the kitchen and Kate and Valentine were discussing (I assume) the Brontes, in her study. And then we all changed partners, like a county dance. My love, [signed] William

Four letters – photocopies courtesy of Michael Steinman

undated, from William Maxwell to Maeve Brennan

Dear Maeve:

What I don’t know is whether I ever told you that Sylvia Townsend Warner said in a letter [22 April 1972] “Please tell Maeve Brennan how much I admire ‘*The Springs of Affection*’. I could hardly endure to read it but was too spell-bound not to; though at intervals I had to come to the surface and howl.”

Love,

undated, from William Maxwell to a Mr. Best

Dear Mr. Best:

I have been Sylvia Townsend Warner's editor here for God knows how many years – since at least 1939 – and we have long since become dear friends and it seems to me I have enjoyed passionately every word she ever committed to paper, but I cannot see how, as a New Yorker editor, I can praise publicly one New Yorker writer's book and say no, sorry, to a similar request from another, which leave me the choice of being a liar or not ever giving quotes, even when, as in the present instance, I am sorely tempted.

Would you like the galleys back or may I keep them?

Yours, most sincerely,

undated, from William Maxwell to Paul Nordoff

Dear Paul:

I'm so sorry, but next Wednesday is no good. I don't suppose you would have time to drop by after lunch, for a few minutes. I have spent so much time thinking about *The Sea Change* and wanted to talk to you about it before I forget what it is I think. Say quarter of three, or between then and four o'clock? When I read it the first time, in the typed version, that is to say the version you set to music, I felt, to my disappointment that Shelley was simply not there; that it would have been an extraordinary tour de force, in any case, if he had been, but he just wasn't. But because the manuscript is so interesting to anyone who cares passionately about Sylvia's work and career, I sat down and began to put in, in pencil, the lines that had been crossed out and speeches that had been taken from one character and given to another, or moved ahead or behind other speeches, and more and more I began to remember the period of my youth when I read the romantic poets, and more and more to feel that it really was Shelley. And when I came to the line I am gone, I am gone (which are not missing) I felt my hair stiffen with surprise and shock. What I feel, without ever having heard a note of the music, is that, because of the limitation on the time (judging from the correspondence) and musical problems (high notes not being singable with gone) etc., what actually was a minor miracle, and only that by the skin of its teeth, had to give way, and is any longer valid as theater. If you would rather not discuss this, we won't. I wouldn't feel there is any point in my mentioning it, in any case, if I didn't firmly believe that a work of art leads a life of its own and mysteriously will not stay forever on anybody's shelf. By the laws of its creation, and this one was created more happily than most, it has to and will seek the light of day.

I am keeping Sylvia's manuscript here, as we agreed, for safety. And thank you very very much for the copy of *Mr. Fortune*. I promise to keep my trap shut about that.

Yours, Bill [signed]

from Sylvia to Maxwell, Frome Vauchurch, 26.ii.1940

Dear Mr. Maxwell.

As you see, your beautiful paper arrived duly.

I feel so grateful for it that I want to make you a small gift in return, so I am sending you this autograph letter from an English Bishop. I know you are interested in our Bishops, because you liked my piece on how they are undressed. This is a pretty good specimen, I stole it from a religious waste paper basket. The date explains the kind of letter it was in answer to, the neumae at the bottom means Yrs affbly Bertrand Norvic. Affly is a contraction for affectionately.

It is rather unusual for a Bishop to be affly, so his give the letter an additional grace as a collector's item.

I am so glad the piece about Wellington College pleased you, thank you very much for sending the dollar cheque. It arrived on a wet day when one of my evacuees had had a fit, and I was feeling that everything was pretty mean and that I should never see a New Yorker cheque again. So you can imagine that it looked very friendly.

Yours sincerely [signed]

Tidman's Pride – by Sylvia Townsend Warner

I happened to remark to Mrs Culver how well the magnolia in the Red House garden was blooming.

'Lovely', said she. 'But you know, Miss, it wasn't them Tidmans who planted it. No! It was Mr and Mrs Wilmot, who lived there before them.'

She allowed a little pause for this to sink in, but I could see that there was more to come.

'Mr and Mrs Wilmot', continued Mrs Culver, 'were as nice as you could wish. My husband used to say that Mr Wilmot could plant out young greens as well as if he'd been doing it for a living. That's the sort of people they were. And when they went to church (which they did regular) they'd sit themselves down anywhere, and look as pleasant in a hind pew as in a front one. Ah!'

Mrs Culver fell into a short muse.

'But the first act of them Tidmans, being settled in, was to march up to the front pew and sit themselves down in it as if it was musical chairs. And drove out poor old Fox, who sat there because of being churchwarden, and lame in one leg, and more convenient. I don't mind where I sits, he says to me, but sit alongside that proud piece and be swarmed over as if it was the Saturday bus, I can't fancy it. Because Mrs Tidman, you see, she had to be first for the communion. The words wouldn't be out of the Reverend Lowdler's mouth before up she'd start, and scramble herself over old Fox, and prance up to the altar rails, so's to be sure of her place at the head of the line.

'But so it happened', continued Mrs Culver, her eye brightening, 'that the Reverend Lowdler took ill, and another clergyman came to take the services. He was one of those

bachelor clergymen, you know what I mean, they live in towns mostly, and dress like Romans, and call themselves Fathers. This one was down on a holiday, so I understand. And he needed it. He was as thin as a clothes-horse. Well, come communion, there was Mrs Tidman at the head of the line as usual, and down at the bottom there was old Mrs Garlick, meek-hearted old soul, she always took the lowest place. And what did that clergyman go and do? He started at the bottom of the line, and worked up. Yes, that he did!

'The last', said I, 'shall be first and the first last'.

'Yes, my dear. Fox used the identical same words. And that's what Mrs Tidman she studied out, too. For next Sunday morning, what happened? Up she jumped, same as usual. And went and kneeled herself down at the bottom of the line, she did. Got there in a flash.'

Mrs Culver gazed into the depths of her shopping-bag, as though into the past.

'And there she stayed, in a manner of speaking, till the Reverend Lowdler took over. And then she bobbed back to her old place.

Mrs Culver shook her head sorrowfully.

'Quite a lot of folk noticed it', she concluded. 'You couldn't but'.

The Countryman, 29/1, Spring, 1944

Corrections, etc.

Member Roger Peers states that the wooden plaque on the door, mentioned in 'The Archive and I' (newsletter 33) was actually engraved by one of Reynolds Stone's pupils, "a distinguished letter carver (and cut the lettering on the facade of the extension of the National Gallery in London)".

And in 'Who is Sylvia?' (newsletter 30), about a death mask of Valentine, Mr Peers states "Sylvia asked me, when I was the Curator & Secretary of the DNH&AS, if I would arrange for a cast to be made of Valentine's hand, but both of her hands were too swollen when the time came. There was never a death mask of Valentine Ackland made, or even conceived." However, Eve Cleall maintains "that she had seen Valentine's death mask which was still in the house when Antonia [Trauttmansdorff] was living there, but she didn't know what happened to it after that". The mystery continues!

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September

The beautiful and rich, and pastoral gay
September with her pomp of fields and farms.

John Clare