

The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Diffuse, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned,

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter Number Forty

Poems, The Flint Anchor, The Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, The Flint Anchor, Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of Childhood, One Thing Leading to Another, The Music at Long Verney, Dorset Stories, Portrait of a Tortoise, Somerset, The Espalier, Time Importuned, Opus 7, Rainbow, Whether a Dove or Seagull, Boxwood, King Duffus, Twelve Poems, Lolly Willowes, Mr Fortune's Maggot, The True Heart, Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan, The Corner that Held Them, The Flint Anchor, The Salutation, More Joy in Heaven, The Cat's Cradle Book, A Garland of Straw, The Museum of Cheats, Winter in the Air, A Spirit Rises, Sketches from Nature, A Stranger with a Bag, Swans on an Autumn River, Two Conversation Pieces, The Innocent and the Guilty, Kingdoms of Elfin, Scenes of

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society



photo John Miles

was founded in January 2000, to promote a wider readership and a better understanding of the writings of Sylvia Townsend Warner. Its membership is wide-ranging, reflecting the broad appeal of her work. Libraries and bookstores now regularly stock her novels, stories, poetry, letters and diaries, and in the academic world an increasing number of scholars, several who are members of the Society, publish works on the significance of her life and writings.

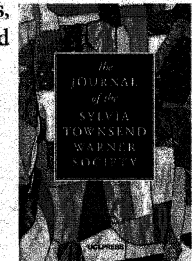
Every year we meet on the Saturday nearest 1st May, the anniversary of her death, in East Chaldon, to lunch at The Sailor's Return and afterwards, at St. Nicholas's Churchyard, to lay flowers on the memorial tablet to Sylvia and her life partner, Valentine Ackland. The Society's Annual General Meeting is held in Dorchester and often linked with a walk or an event. In recent years Society members have visited Norfolk, Somerset and Suffolk, exploring places important in the lives of Sylvia and Valentine.

Each year the Society produces four publications: two peer-reviewed Journals, and in the spring and autumn, newsletters, informal in nature, with brief articles, uncollected works, and Society news.

More information about the Society and how to join it will be found on our website

www.townsendwarner.com

or from an officer at
society@townsendwarner.com



Sylvia writes on 26 November 1974 –

Dear Mr Schmidt,

Both books parcels have come. Thank you very much for the Edgell [Rickword, *Essays and Opinions 1921-1931*, edited by Alan Young]. I am delighted to have it; it will be rational reading through the irrational days to come. Please give him my regards, and tell him how happy I am to be recalled to the days of my youth – and often to essays of his which I read in the *New Statesman* and still remember because they helped me to make up my mind about the literature of that time; or introduced me to writers like [Tristan] Corbière.

You have made a handsome book of it. I have grown to look with great esteem at your Cat. She represents discrimination.

Here are three books of my poetry. *Opus 7* I have several copies of – so if you care to, please keep it.

With best wishes,
Sylvia Townsend Warner

In a note, this Cat is “an outlined, bewhiskered cat, making a ‘c’ shape with its arched back and tail curled under and was the colophon of the Press for many years”.

As Elbins do not believe in survival after death they feel no obligation to placate the dead by post-obit tributes: monuments, animal sacrifices, shaving the head, wearing crape arm-bands, etc. Funeral pomps are reserved for monarchs. In the Northern Kingdoms of Thule and Blokula, the dead queen is sunk in a crevasse. At Broceliande she is cremated with fireworks. At Elfhome in Scotland queens are buried in air.
from ‘Queen Mousie’ (*Of Cats and Elbins*)

Opposite is an advertisement for the Society, designed by the good folk of Creeds Design and Print, Bridport, which has done such a splendid job with the newsletters. It looks better in its original colors, and if you should like a copy for a stealth campaign at your local Oxfam shop, beam me a note and I’ll send you a pdf of it. It is size A6 and without that irritating UDC tag.

NEWSLETTER NUMBER FORTY

AGMs 2020 & 2019 – Sin Eating – A Feminist in the Thirties – past events – lecture and queries – The Reading Group – new publications – reviews old and new

Thanks go to Hannah Berry, Kate Macdonald, Jan Montefiore and Tess Ormrod for contributing to this issue.

The story ‘A Breaking Wave’ is collected in *One Thing Leading to Another* and *Dorset Stories*. But it first appeared in *Lilliput*, August 1948, which prints this blurb:

Sylvia Townsend Warner was educated on the principle of teach a child to read and never interfere with its reading – a system abetted by Sir Frederick Kenyon, then Director and Principal Librarian, who let her have a reader’s ticket in the British Museum some years before she was legally entitled to it; says she owes her start in life to the Carnegie U.K. Trust, which paid her £150 a year to decipher 15th and 16th century music mss. Her first book, a volume of poetry, was published in 1925. The author she most venerates is Stendhal.

THE SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER SOCIETY *Annual General Meeting – 2 May 2020*

The 2020 AGM will be on Saturday May 2nd in Dorchester at the Learning Room, Shire Hall (Learning Room / Shire Hall Historic Courthouse / High West Street / Dorchester / DT1 1UY) starting at 11.00 for 11.15 a.m. Please let Jan Montefiore know if you will attend, by April 25th, for she must let them know a few days in advance, to ready the tea and coffee.

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting Dorchester Library and Learning Centre – 11 May 2019

Present: Janet Montefiore (Chair), Mercedes Aguirre, Peter Swaab, Lynn Mutti, Judith Stinton, Richard Betts, Rowan Bright, Ann Henderson, Eileen Johnson, Gill Davies, Tess Ormrod, Ruth Williams, Jay Barksdale, Kate Macdonald, Ailsa Granne, Richard Searle, Judith Bond

1. Apologies: Helen Sutherland, Harry Daniels, Jenny Wildblood, David and Penny Penton, Ren Draya, Annie Rhodes

2. Minutes of the 2018 Annual General Meeting: With the addition of Hester Styles Vickery to the list of founders of the Warner Reading Group, the minutes of the 2018 AGM were approved as a correct record and signed by Jan Montefiore.

3. Matters Arising: A new Honorary Secretary has been found, Harry Daniels. The membership fee increase has been implemented and the new methods of payment seem to be working well.

4. Election of Officers: Officers of the Society were elected as follows:

Chairman - Janet Montefiore, proposed by Judith Bond, seconded by Ann Henderson
Secretary - Harry Daniels (in absentia), proposed by Ailsa Granne, seconded by Richard Searle

Membership Secretary - Mercedes Aguirre, proposed by Janet Montefiore, seconded by Richard Searle

Newsletter Editor - Jay Barksdale, proposed by Janet Montefiore, seconded by Lynn Mutti

Journal Editor - Peter Swaab, proposed by Janet Montefiore, seconded by Lynn Mutti

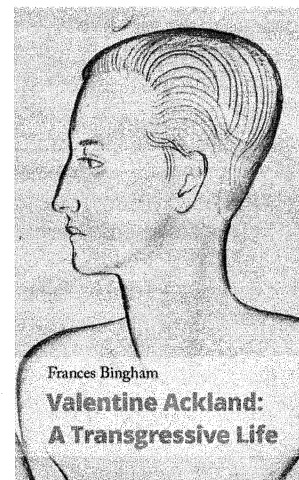
Treasurer - Helen Jones (in absentia), proposed by Peter Swaab, seconded by Tess Ormrod

Events Organiser - Richard Searle will continue until the Society weekend in Sussex in June and Claire Gale has been approached with a view to taking on the role.

5. Treasurer's Report: Jenny Wildblood, the Treasurer, was unable to attend but had sent a balance sheet and comments. Subscriptions have gone up this year, owing to the increased rate, but costs are high. We have a balance of £4731.51 but each Journal costs approximately £900 for printing and postage and Jenny pointed out that, even with the increase in the subscription rate, we would be unlikely to cover costs of two Journals and two Newsletters a year. Her report and comments were noted.

6. Membership Secretary's Report: Mercedes Aguirre, Membership Secretary, reported that the Society currently has 121 active members, defined as members who have paid a subscription in the past 18 months, although there are some who have yet to pay the 2019 subscription. Four new members joined the Society in 2019. Most of our members are based in the UK. There are 18 active members based in the United States, two in Germany, two in Australia, and one each in France, Norway, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands and India. So far, 73 people have paid their 2019 membership. Mercedes will send reminders to the rest and to those who have not updated their Standing Orders. She pointed out that it would be helpful to have a Google document which could be updated by both Treasurer and Membership Secretary as they both receive payments from members and this would ensure an accurate record of membership numbers. She also suggested contacting universities suggesting that they buy a subscription in order to receive the printed version of the Journal. Lynn Mutti offered the list of university contacts she had compiled when Secretary.

If we dare to be so ungenerous as to criticise this interesting work, it is on the grounds that in scrupulously tracing the events of her chronicle Miss Townsend Warner allows the individuality of her characters to be submerged. Figures in a tapestry are repetitions, they exist only in relation to the general pattern and it has to be admitted that the various prioresses of Oby tend to vanish in this fashion. Isobel, Alicia, Johanna, Matilda . . . names which tantalise us with their evocation of a vanished life. But the candle blows out, the cloisters are dark and the record dust.



The Handheld Press, rapidly becoming Dove and Seagull's 'gentleman friend' of the 21st century, will publish Frances Bingham's life of Valentine, probably in May 2021. Yippee! The cover drawing is by Eric Gill, of whom Ackland wrote

An erudite artist called Gill
In print has announced: "Well, I still
Believe in the Fall
And in Adam and all,
And in Art and in Love and in Gill."

(unpublished typescript at the STW/VA Archive)

Fifty Fifty : Carcanet's Jubilee in Letters
(ISBN 9781784108786)

As all the world knows, Carcanet Press is the Prince among publishers of poetry. This most enjoyable and clever book celebrates its poets (and critics and translators and biographers) with a year-by-year celebration, each of a single writer, Sylvia's being 1974. It begins with Anne Ridler (1969), ends with Iain Bamforth (2018) and between we enjoy correspondence of Peter Scupham, Alison Brackenbury, Eavan Boland, Thom Gunn and others. The book is edited by Robyn Marsack and introduced by, and with interjections from Michael Schmidt. An added treat for bibliophiles is each year-end summary of Carcanet's publications – The Year in Books. Schmidt's commentary begins "Sylvia Townsend Warner became the subject of a poem I published in [his] *The Love of Strangers* (1989)..." Hmm. Stay tuned...

January 16, 2020) and the *New York Times* (Josephine Livingstone – January 5, 2020). Here is a contemporary unsigned review from the TLS of 18 December, 1948:

In *Lolly Willowes*, and in many of her earlier books, Miss Warner switched disconcertingly from irony to whimsy, from the subtleties of family intrigue to witches at Great Mop. Her gossip and her metaphysics did not always mix very well. Now, in *The Corner That Held Them*, she has observed and blended the nice trivialities, the emotional upsets and the occasional spiritual reflections of some fourteenth-century nuns.

The convent at Oby is a make-shift building and the nuns pass their lives, some calmly, weaving tapestries or cooking marzipan, others worried over tithes, or the construction of a new spire, and one, Dame Liliias, suffers from a peculiar form of religious ennui. Sir Ralph, the priest, is a fraud and no priest at all, so that the nuns are damned anyway – an irony which they never appreciate since the old man dies with his secret, notorious only for his seduction of Magdalen Figg, a fat sluggish woman from the alehouse. The form of the novel is outwardly as ramshackle as the convent building; the story meanders over two generations and need never have stopped, but this is a licence that may be allowed to the charm, the wit and the speculation which make the book very remarkable.

* * * * *

THE CORNER THAT HELD THEM. *Sylvia Townsend Warner* (Chatto and Windus 9s.6d.) – Reviewed by Iris Morley – *Our Time*, Vol. 8, no. 2, February 1949, pp. 47-48

... Finally, we come with very great pleasure to Sylvia Townsend Warner. Her irony and her spare undecorated prose give us an assurance of great reserves of power, which I think only once, in her novel *Summer Will Show* did she fully display. In this new historical novel, *The Corner That Held Them*, her capacities are, as it were, kept well banked down, deliberately subdued to the same key as the flat, silvery waterlands which are the scene of the story. She tells the history of a nunnery during the 14th century, and traces with something of the pure exact colours of a piece of embroidery the lives of the nuns who make up this small community.

This is the story of the “ordinary nun”, and the skill and scholarship of the author shows us the exact place of the religious house in feudal society: both its good and useful aspects as a refuge where the minor arts and crafts were nurtured and (in the period) its growing reactionary role as a greedy and incompetent landlord. In the same way the lives of the inhabitants respond to this dualism; the nun often had more opportunity to develop and use her gifts than her lay sister and she presumably attained more independence in community life than she would have done in marriage, yet the limitations of this carefully guarded freedom made her susceptible to nervous disorders and superstitious terrors. The perfectly happy nun, we feel, must always have been the rich, clever and irreligious woman.

7. Publications and Website: Newsletter Report - Jay Barksdale reported that he is very happy with the service provided by Creeds the printers, and hopes that members will send more news for inclusion. There will be a Newsletter published in November which will be devoted to articles about Valentine Ackland, on the 50th anniversary of her death.

Ways of publicising the Society were discussed. The Alliance of Literary Societies is a very helpful organisation and the Society is listed on its website. Membership leaflets might be useful although most members find the Society through the website now.

Kate Macdonald, of Handheld Press, who has published Peter Judd’s *The Akeing Heart* and a new edition of *Kingdoms of Elfin*, reported that she is publishing in January 2020 an anthology entitled ‘Of Cats and Elfin - Short Tales and Fantasy’, and would be happy for the Society to put in a short piece of about 200 words about the work it is doing.

[Action by J. Montefiore]

Journal Report - Peter Swaab, Journal Editor, reported that we are now on track to have two Journals a year. Some will be focused on specific themes, such as the latest one on Conference papers, and the next will be about Valentine Ackland. The digitising of the past Journals will be completed this year. He welcomed Judith Stinton to the Editorial Board and reported that Peter Tolhurst had resigned from his place on the Board.

Discussion took place on Peter Tolhurst’s criticisms of what he had described as the current academic nature of the Journal. Most views expressed at the meeting were generally in support of the Journal in its present form and members felt that a good balance was being maintained between academic articles and those of interest to the more general reader. Ann Henderson felt that some articles were rather wordy and obscure and Peter explained that he has strict standards of clarity and has often edited articles to make them more readable. Tess Ormrod wondered if older non-academic members would be deterred from offering contributions if the Journal becomes too academic. Judith Stinton pointed out that the majority of our members are not academics. Ailsa Granne felt that there was an excellent balance in the Journal of general interest and scholarly articles, and with the Newsletter our publications give a rounded picture. Gill Davies felt that the Newsletter was directed at the non-academic reader, and so there should be a place for an academic Journal. Richard Betts, a new member, expressed the opinion that the Journal articles were very rewarding and not at all self-indulgent.

Ailsa pointed out that it is most important that young people get involved, and praised the Warner Reading Group as an excellent forum for young people to study Warner. Peter felt that the Conference in Manchester last year, the Mary Jacobs Essay prize and now the Reading Group were bringing in young people although members of their generation might be less inclined to join literary societies. Rowan Bright suggested that more conferences would reach out to young people. Kate explained that young

people would be most likely to look at websites and Wikipedia, and she asked if anyone has the responsibility of checking the Warner details on Wikipedia. She suggested that the website could be updated and have a list of reading group questions that might help to stimulate discussion in other reading groups. Members could be asked to contribute ideas on this if they have studied Warner in their own reading groups. [J. Montefiore to liaise with K. Taubert and H. Baker]

8. A.O.B. : The Society Lecture - Peter has approached several possible lecturers but no one has been available to undertake this. He has accepted the Society's invitation to give the lecture in the autumn. We should now be thinking of approaching potential lecturers for 2021. Various names were suggested, Ali Smith, Sarah Waters, Claire Harman and Patrick Gale.

The Warner Book Group - Peter reported that the Group meets on the first Thursday of every month, either at UCL or at the John Sandoe Bookshop, with about 20 people attending, mostly young people. It is proving a great success. Anyone who wants to be added to the mailing list should contact Peter Swaab or Harry Daniels. Kate suggested a joint meeting with the British Fantasy Society or the British Science Fiction Association could be arranged.

Warner Publications - Peter reported that Faber and Faber are planning to publish a complete collection of Warner short stories, and Penguin may publish some Warner novels as Penguin Classics. Lynn wondered how to get the New Collected Poems back in print - Peter suggested contacting Michael Schmidt of Carcanet.

50th Anniversary of the death of Valentine Ackland - Richard Betts suggested that the anniversary of Valentine's death should be marked by the Society. He proposed getting a group together to co-ordinate an event. [Action - RB]

Society Weekend in Sussex - Richard Searle enquired about numbers intending to come on the trip to Sussex. A minimum of 10 people would be needed to qualify for discount on entry fees. So far, he has 6 names.

There being no further business the meeting closed at 12.55pm.

* * * * *

We note with sadness the death of Dr Glen Cavaliero, on 30 October 2019, at age 92. Dr Cavaliero, poet, scholar and much-loved teacher at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, was a founding member of our Society and contributed greatly to the early journals. His critical writings include *John Cowper Powys: Novelist, The Rural Tradition in the English Novel 1900-1939, A Reading of E.M. Forster, Charles Williams: Poet of Theology, The Supernatural and English Fiction, and The Alchemy of Laughter: Comedy in English Fiction*. His unique depth and range of reading are reflected in the titles of his books. He published seven collections of poetry, culminating in *The Flash of Weathercocks: New and Collected Poems* (2016).

one of the fairy courts has occasion to observe, "The notion of a God is an inherent fever in mortals".

Like fairies, cats live aslant to humans – among them but apart, studying their ways, tracing their weaknesses. In a house that "lay like a pear fallen from a tree", a man collects the fables that cats tell their kittens. "So you speak cat?" he asks his visitor. "A little", she replies. "I understand it better than I can speak it." He lets her in on his startling theory – that human tales come to us from cats. "Try to clear your mind of humanism and consider the evidence. Where do we find the stories most constant, most uncontaminated? Among the cats."

These are the fables that follow. Two ravens complain about the difficulty of feeding on frozen corpses; a tiger is overtaken by a mysterious illness called virtue; a girl who is one-quarter cat ("All the fur is inside, thank heaven!") cannot resist running after mice. Cut from crystalline prose, they are strange, wonderful and often wickedly funny, as when Apollo responds to a farmer's complaint: "Stupid prayers are often soonest answered, for no deity can stand them". This is storytelling as enchantment and it feels like an answered prayer to fall under Warner's spell.

* * * * *

...*The Cat's Cradle Book* is a set of pseudo-folk stories, purportedly told by cats of all ages and countries, and here again there is a touch of cat fever. The "legends" of the fox who wouldn't be Pope, Apollo and the mice, and so on, have a wry, though not always agreeable, humour. --- 'Books Received', *TLS*, 14 October 1960

The Corner That Held Them

was reprinted by the New York Review of Books in 2019, with an introduction by Claire Harman. George Steiner, in the 1988 December 2-8 *TLS* wrote

Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Corner That Held Them* strikes one as a masterpiece. As an act of imagined history—the life of a fenland nunnery in the fourteenth century—this novel has few rivals. Warner conveys the strange ordinariness of a distant yet immediate past with utter authority. But her chronicle of lives under pressure, at once visionary and petty, makes for a fiction of extreme density. No one after Hardy has interwoven more closely the sheer feel of material things, of weather, of light across water or foliage, with the inward landscapes of character. The prose precisely matches the theme and settings: it is at once bone-spare and of a rich, troubling opacity. A classic, whose resonance deepens inside the reader in proportion to its austere, luminous discretion. Also, as it happens, a work of high, frequent comedy.

Besides being the best-selling book on a local book-monger's 'new' table (so they said), it has received favourable reviews from *The New York Review of Books* (Claire Wills –

Of Cats and Elfin

Of Cats and Elfin – Emily Rhodes – *The Guardian* – 16 January 2020

This collects several pieces of Warner’s short fantasy fiction, from 1929 to 1976. Each tale is a beautifully realised imaginative world, resonant with folklore and a rich appreciation of nature. The stories are full of characters – male and female – who don’t fit in with society’s expectations, like the eponymous protagonist of *Lolly Willowes* in her celebrated 1926 novel.

Just as Warner offered Lolly an unexpected escape – to become a witch in the countryside instead of living with her dreary relations or marrying – here her narratives provide a wealth of surprising sidesteps from the bounds of convention.

Humans can learn to “speak cat”; a nymph, masquerading as a seller of “stay-laces and suchlike female oddments”, vanishes from her male pursuer among the blackthorn bushes; and a baker’s weary daughter transforms, mid-song, into an owl. Better yet, those who are left behind – propagators of cruelty, greed, malice or ignorance – are made to suffer, such as Mr Poldero, who conspires to kill his “civil and obliging” phoenix to profit from the spectacle of its fire and rebirth, only to perish in the blaze.

Of Cats and Elfin

Fairies – Elizabeth Winkler – *TLS* – 14 February 2020

The moon is full on the night that Mr Mulready, a draper in Somerset, starts looking for nymphs. His longing is awakened by the phrase of a madrigal – “The nymph is light and shadowlike” – but it has the quality of a lost memory. “As one has a word on the tip of one’s tongue, so Mr. Mulready had a nymph on the tip of his imagination.” Seeing her the next morning in his shop, “he recognized her as one recognizes a melody”.

Sylvia Townsend Warner’s stories don’t always begin under a full moon, but they all belong to the moonlit world of dreams and myths, enchantment and intoxicating eccentricity...

Many of Warner’s short stories first appeared in the *New Yorker*, and were collected in 1977 in *Kingdoms of Elfin*. Handheld Press, which reissued that volume in 2018, has followed it up with a new collection. *Of Cats and Elfin* gathers her remaining Elfin fiction about fairies together with fables originally published as *The Cat’s Cradle Book* in 1940.

The book opens with her overview of Elfkind and their relation to humans. Fairies are proud and caustic, beautiful and cold. “Many of those who have thrust themselves in upon fairies have had good cause to rue their presumption.” Their sagas are teeming with satire and whimsy, and that dispassionate view of human folly and vanity that only a magical race can offer. The narrator recounting royal machinations at

Sin Eating

Janet Montefiore

Peter Tolhurst’s fascinating note on STW’s unpublished play *The Sin Eater* and its connections with the actual folk custom of sin eating (*STW Newsletter* 38, October 2019), reminded me of another 1920s book: Mary Webb’s once-famous novel, *Precious Bane* (1924, Virago reprint 1978, chapter 4, pp. 34-6) set in rural Shropshire in the period just after the Napoleonic wars. Early in the novel, its narrator heroine Prue Sarn describes the funeral of her father at which the sexton asks ‘Be there a Sin Eater?’ She explains the question:

For it was still the custom at that time, in our part of the country, to give a fee to some poor man after a death, and then he would take bread and wine handed across the coffin, and eat and drink, saying

I give easement and rest to thee, dear man that ye walk not over the fields nor in the by-ways. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul.

Prue’s brother Gideon, who to their mother’s great distress has refused to pay the high price that sin-eaters now demand, offers to be his father’s sin eater in exchange for ownership of the family farm which now belongs to his mother:

‘Oot turn the farm over to me if I be the Sin Eater, Mother?’

‘No, no! Sin Eaters be accurst!’

‘What harm, to drink a sup of your own wine, and chumble a crust of your own bread? But if you dunna care, let be. He can go with the sin on him.’

Mother gives in to her son’s emotional blackmail (‘What be the farm to me? You can take all, and welcome!’), and Gideon duly takes possession.

Clearly, neither Mary Webb nor STW could have influenced or even known about each other, since the former died in 1927, well before STW began publishing, and *Precious Bane* anyway post-dates Sylvia’s play. ‘It may be no coincidence,’ writes Peter Tolhurst, ‘that her [STW’s] play was written in the same year that saw an abridged version of *The Golden Bough*, Sir James Frazer’s hugely influential study of magic and religion.’ I’m sure that he is right. Frazer might also have influenced Mary Webb, although her foreword to *Precious Bane* mentions only William Sharpe, aka Fiona Macleod, whose book *The Sin Eater and Other Tales* (1895), and John Aubrey, whom Tolhurst also mentions. Other influential anthropological studies published in the early 1920s are Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), mentioned in Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land* (1922), and Margaret Murray’s *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921); the theme of STW’s play is very much of its time.

A Feminist in the Thirties

Tess Ormrod

“In this short essay I have succeeded in carrying back Man’s Moral Law to primitive man. Such an antiquity is respectable enough; yet I believe that research should be carried a step further; and it is with confidence that I recommend to those who may come after me a patient enquiry into the conduct of baboons”

from *The More I See of Men*– 1932 p.131

During the First World War millions of women found themselves undertaking roles which the pre-War generation would never have imagined. Also more and more women were becoming wholly or partly enfranchised – in the UK in 1919 (over 30) and 1928 (fully), in the USA 1920, in Germany and Austria 1918, although interestingly, in France not until 1944. In 1893 and 1902 New Zealand and Australia had led the field.

As a result of this, the “Question” or “Problem” of women had become a major social issue, indeed almost an obsession with many, mainly male, writers and commentators. This state of affairs was amusingly described by E.M.Delafield in *The Provincial Lady in America* when she visited there in 1933. As the ship arrived in New York, she observed

“just as I was admiring everything from the top deck two unknown women suddenly materialised... also young man with camera, and I am approached and asked if I will at once give my views on the United States, the American Woman and Modern American Novels... I have evidently never taken the subject of women seriously enough, the only problem about them, in England is being why there are so many.”

Such was the climate when in 1932 Harper Bros. published a volume of essays by women writers entitled *The More I See of Men*– [this was also published in the same year in Great Britain under the title of *Man Proud Man* in a slightly revised form]. According to the publisher’s blurb, Dr. Mabel Ulrich decided that the truth about the male had never been exposed.

“After discussing the matter with friends, here and abroad, it was decided that the truth should be told. Hence this volume. In it nine of the shrewdest and most merciless women writers of the day hold up man’s shrinking naked form for observation – dissect his follies, laugh at his pomposities and occasionally grant him a modicum of virtues. Women will read this book to learn about men. Men will read it to learn – not about themselves – but about women’s notions concerning their rightful lords and masters. Among the contributors are Sylvia Townsend Warner, E.M. Delafield, Rebecca West and G.B. Stern.”

Interestingly the book’s introduction is by a male American historian, Frederick Lewis Allen, no doubt to provide a counterbalance to the opinions expressed in the text. Allen cites Rose Macaulay’s essay on ‘Women as News’ (1925) in which she points out the absurdity of the way in which newspapers, magazines and books discussed women as if they were “some queer alien species” to be pointed out and analysed and put under the microscope for examination. Men, she says, were apparently ordinary human beings whom everybody knew all about, but women were news.

Sylvia Townsend Warner’s contribution was titled ‘Man’s Moral Law’ and as one might

Of Cats and Elfin

a new collection of Sylvia Townsend Warner’s fantasy fiction

Kate Macdonald

When Handheld Press republished *Kingdoms of Elfin* in 2018, the rapturous reception it received made it clear that the public are keen on Sylvia Townsend Warner’s short fantasy fiction. When I read a section from ‘The Mortal Milk’ at a science fiction & fantasy convention in Bristol in 2018, with 50% of the audience in their twenties, the pin-drop quiet in the room told me that this generation of fans were ready for more Sylvia Townsend Warner.

But what could I serve them for their next course? The rights for *Lolly Willowes*, Sylvia’s only full-length fantasy novel, are held by another publisher, but I knew there were short fantasy stories scattered through many collections that hadn’t been republished for decades. I spotted an opportunity to collect together all Sylvia’s short fantasy fiction in a companion volume to *Kingdoms of Elfin*, and I began to do my research.

The remaining four Elfin stories, from *One Thing Leading to Another*, were easily popped into the net. I’m very fond of Sylvia’s dryad story, ‘Stay, Corydon, Thou Swain’, and it was undoubtedly fantastical. From rereading the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* I found her 1927 essay ‘The Kingdom of Elfin’ that Vike Plock had discovered, so that had to go in as well. And then I read, for the first time, *The Cat’s Cradle Book* (1940).

I don’t know how many people even know about this collection, outside the circle of Warner enthusiasts. It was first published in wartime in the USA, and only in the UK in 1960. It was never reprinted, and gets almost no attention in the critical writing because it is very strange indeed, and has no connection with her canonical full-length novels. It’s a book of fables written for cat-fanciers, prefaced by a very long introductory story featuring Sylvia, Valentine and several of their cats in Frankfort Manor. The introduction is dark, and the fables twist in unexpected ways that are nonetheless completely in tune with the amorality of the Elfin stories. All these stories make a fine new collection. We hope you will like it.

Of Cats and Elfin: Short Tales and Fantasies by Sylvia Townsend Warner has an introduction by Greer Gilman, and has been endorsed (again!) by friend of Handheld Press Neil Gaiman. It was published on 20 January, in paperback, epub and Kindle formats. Handheld Press books are now available in North America through the distributor Two Rivers, so readers on that side of the Atlantic can order our books easily from their local bookstore.

* * * * *

Diary – 30:iii:1977 – ... Then a cable from Vikpres to say K. of E. going into a paperback. Adieu, panniens. Vendages sont faits.

Also, was there significance that five of the 16 stories in *Kingdoms of Elfin* were set in Scotland? Kate Macdonald has written about these stories in the freely available on-line magazine, *The Bottle Imp* (bottle.imp.org.uk), # 24, 'The Scottish Kingdoms of Elfin'.

Warner's diaries for the succeeding years [after VA's death], and some of her letters, give hints of the dogged endurance and desolation of spirit that she was experiencing. To escape into writing about something outside her grief-stricken existence would indeed have been a relief. But it may also have transmuted that grief into a bearable art.

Macdonald concludes that

The utter loneliness of an Elfin ghost ignored by his kind is on a par with the lonely human captive imprisoned for decades. It is hard to avoid noticing that Warner's saddest stories of Elfin are located in Scottish settings. Suffolk sees picaresque adventure, Brittany has stately ritual, Lappland has witchcraft, Austria has astonishing banquets and Persia has a murderous tyrant, but simple existential isolation is confined to the Scottish experience, the moors on which 'nothing stirred except the sheep wandering slowly over the waste. Nothing sounded except their baa-ings and the sudden cackle of a grouse'. When Professor Sutherland is ejected from the Foxcastle broch, 'a couple of sheep took fright and galloped off, their hoofs drumming on the shallow turf. The hill had been fired, nothing remained of the heather except a few charred stumps. He would not have known where he was except for the peat hags and the hurrying burn in the valley.' This association between fairies and humans and Scotland, and the sadness of loss and exile, is relentless, the one influencing the other, and cannot be accidental.

The STW Reading Group

in London continues to thrive. It regularly explores the canon and recently has focused on *The Espalier*, *Kingdoms of Elfin*, *The Salutation*, *The Corner That Held Them*, and *The Weekend Dickens*. Whew! If you find yourself in London, all are welcome. To join the list, or for more information, please contact Peter Swaab, or Harriet Baker (harrietrjbaker@gmail.com).

* * * * *

There is no pastime so engrossing as being in the right, and when it is crowned by becoming unpopular no person of intellect can withstand its charms.

from *Narrative of Events Preceding the Death of Queen Ermine*

expect, is full of the slightly acerbic irony which so much characterises much of her writing. Aldous Huxley, reviewing the volume writes "Miss Townsend Warner's essay on men's strange love of rules for rules sake is both witty and profound".

Throughout the volume it is striking to notice the absence of stridency and aggression which has tended to feature in the writings of more recent polemicists; these women of the Thirties preferred the scalpel to the bludgeon and were perhaps more effective by doing so.

In describing the task before her, STW states

"In a world where so little romance is left, where every *ultima thule* of the imagination has been mapped and charted and where the bison is rapidly becoming extinct, would it not be better to leave Man's Moral Law alone? And for a moment I experienced an abashed awe such as I used to feel as a child when my nurse would point to a local gas container and tell me that if I were ever so wicked as to stick a pin into those vast cylindrical walls...an instant explosion would hurl me and the neighbourhood to disintegration...for suppose...that Man's Moral Law were indeed what my nurse's theory of gas vats so grossly boded forth, and might, at one unadvised and sacrilegious prod, explode and bring about the disintegration of society. Where should I be then, meddling creature?"

She goes on to explain that her approach will be traditional idioms to make her point; idioms that have passed into everyday language, taking three common phrases.

"The first of these is the expression, 'Playing the game'; the second, the often heard reproach 'It's not cricket'; the third, the exclamation, always used in a slighting or belittling sense, 'Skittles!' or, 'That's all skittles'. This may seem an arbitrary choice. But in the prolegomena of so virgin a subject one must begin somewhere; and I hope that I may presently show that the choice is not so arbitrary as it may seem at first sight.

Let us observe what these phrases have in common. It will be seen that while (a) they are all based upon pastimes, they all (b) convey a moral judgement; and (c) they are all masculine phrases. Should it be objected against this last statement that women may and frequently do use these phrases with exactly the same connotation and emphasis as they bear in the mouths of men I must bring forward the counter-objection that women have produced no equivalent phrases drawn from the specific interests and occupations of femininity. It is absurd to suppose that Penelope or Lucretia would condemn a lapse from conjugal fidelity with the expression, 'It's not needlework,' and though cookery has supplied the term of reproach, 'half-baked', this is used as a plain metaphor of semi-imbecility, and conveys none of the earnest moral censure inseparable from the male phrases above".

A little later STW draws examples from newspaper advertisements which are constantly before the eyes of all ages, classes and both sexes.

"Here, for example are two advertisements taken at random from the *Daily Mail* of September 16, 1931. One is male, one is female; and any reader of advertisements will see that they are typical of their kind, and in no way constitute a special pleading for my point. 'Treat them rough' the first begins. 'Wear them day in, day out in the foulest, muddiest weather on the roughest of roads – these boots will 'stick it' with dogged,

steadfast endurance.' Boots, admittedly should be durable; but so should lipstick. In the second advertisement, of a lipstick, the performance of the particular brand is especially stressed. 'It holds where others smear and wear – yet leaves no trace of greasy residue. It ends that artificial smear that women have tried for years to overcome. A colour that glorifies the lips to pulse-quicken loveliness – trust the *French* for that! On sale everywhere in four shades'.... Women are realists – grim realists as is shown by that painful phrase about the greasy residue. But man at all times refers his choice to the implicit idealism of his Moral Law, and will buy no article without its sanction.

Here is another advertisement in which this fact has been so completely accepted that the real advantages of the article in question are mentioned only to whet by contrast the superior moral inducement. 'It's not alone the reasonable first cost or the light fuel-consumption – it's the intrinsic quality of our material, the built-in sturdiness... the downright goodness of the car that makes satisfaction assured.' One would suppose that it was not a car that was recommended thus, but a wife for a colonial bishop – were it not that men, even bishops, sadly aware of female non-morality, abandon, in the choice of wife, the standards by which they choose their pipe tobacco and their underwear."

She concludes her discussion with a typical tongue in cheek "prophesy":

"I venture to prophesy that the final revelation and understanding of Man's Moral Law will be most swiftly, safely, and surely arrived at by such a method as I have here, however modestly, inaugurated – an examination into its minor phenomena... Any enquiry by women into so jealously guarded a male mystery as Man's Moral Law is likely to arouse anger and ill-feeling, and I am prepared for obloquy. Yet, while enquiry may with justification hope for such rich results, it may be weak-minded to hold back; nor, on his own showing, has man anything to fear from an impartial investigation of this subject, claiming as he does, and no doubt rightly, that it is by the very possession of a peculiar Moral Law that he is eminent in created things, and while following its dictates, infallible in judgement and conduct."

What clearly emerges from the essay is a picture of a woman, still in her thirties who has superb self-consciousness and awareness of her own person, and hence because she does not fear men, she can afford to laugh at them.

The book is no longer easily available either in American or English editions and where a copy can be found, is likely to be horribly expensive, but 'Man's Moral Law' is a valuable aide towards putting Sylvia Townsend Warner in the social context of her time – the time of her flourishing – which is now rapidly approaching a century ago.

[n.b. the essay may be found in the *Journal of the STW Society*, 2016, p.9]

References: Dr. Mabel S. Ulrich (ed) *The More I See of Men*– Harper Bros. New York 1932 : E.M.Delafield *The Provincial Lady in America* Macmillan London 1934 : Rose Macaulay *Women as News* lecture given to Six-Point Group November 1925

Antonia von Trauttmansdorff takes Sylvia to Valentine's grave

(*This Narrow Place*, Wendy Mulford (Pandora, 1988), preface, p. xvi)

Early in the New Year I took the unprecedented step of asking Sylvia if she would like to go out for a drive. "People often take old ladies for drives", I said, "it is the respectable thing to do." She accepted. Quite soon I took her again. "Would you think me unduly morbid if I asked you to drive me to my grave?" "No", I replied, thinking "yes."

Fortunately it was a beautiful day. The rooks were cawing with archaic rustiness above Chaldon churchyard and the sound was steady, but still I found it hard to watch that old woman looking down on the grave, which was already Valentine's, and was before long to be hers too. So I turned away and sat on a low wall from which I could see a well cultivated kitchen garden. As I did so I heard Sylvia shout to the four winds, "If I forget Thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her cunning"; a desolate incantation which still haunts me.

The biannual Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Lecture

was held on 10 October 2019 at UCL. It was a well-attended occasion, with around 60 in the audience, and there was plenty of lively discussion both in the Q&A that followed the lecture and during the drinks at the post-talk reception.

The lecture was given by Peter Swaab, and his title was 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Possibilities of Freedom'. The lecture explored Warner's long literary life, considering reasons why her work may have been undervalued and neglected, and offering the idea of 'possibilities of freedom' as an overarching perspective on her writings. Peter Swaab argued that freedom was central to what mattered most in Warner's life and literary career: politically, her adoption of communism in the mid-1930s; sexually, her decision to love and live with another woman, Valentine Ackland; professionally, her abandoning a life as poet, composer and leading musicologist to dedicate herself to prose fiction; ethically and philosophically, her living through the major period of existentialism, with its call for courageous self-fashioning. In exploring this idea the lecture suggested a trajectory across Warner's career, touching first on her best-known novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926), and continuing with brief readings of her narrative poem *Opus 7* (1931), and of two short stories, 'To Come So Far' (1947), and 'The Young Sailor' (1954). The lecture will be published in the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* in June/July 2020.

* * * * *

In newsletter 38 I asked if anyone knew why Sylvia collected and printed *Sketches from Nature* and *Two Conversation Pieces*. Susanna Pinney kindly emailed to state that Sylvia "and Valentine decided it would make a change from sending Christmas Cards. They duly sent them to their friends. I refer to this in the short memoir I did for Peter Swaab in *Journal* 2018:1". Thank you, Susanna Pinney.

When you look at me (175)

Valentine's early impressions of Chaldon

(For *Sylvia: an honest account* (Norton, 1985), pp. 98-99)

It was evening by the time we arrived at the village, and when we found the cottage it turned out to be a thatch and stone-built one, with a small living-room and the stairs leading into the big bedroom and a smaller room beyond. There was an earth closet at the end of the garden, next to the pigsty. All water was drawn from a well. In the grate a fine fire burned and although I could scarcely stand, I was so tired and felt so strangely light-headed, we sat down to a meal of strong tea and biscuits, and later on we had some Bovril and cheese, and then went upstairs to bed.

The extraordinary pleasure of sleeping alone. I have never been happier, never known a greater rapture in my life than I knew when I shut the door of my bedroom that night! I lay in bed and by the light of a candle looked around the tiny room: sloping ceiling, minute window, the overhanging eyebrow of that above it; a text on the wall above the washstand said 'GOD IS LOVE'. I blew out the candle and lay on my back, listening to the owls until I fell asleep.

Every autumn (173)

The crow (198)

Rose of gentleness

(unpublished typescript in the STW/VA Archive)

Rose of gentleness:

Lord of the world:

Master of light:

White cloud in darkness:

The pause in music:

Word born before speech:

Shadow on moonlit grass:

Wind over the hayfield:

Flight of swallows:

Coolness in desert:

Running water on the mountain:

Wood smoke scent in the empty house:

Welcoming peace to the dying:

Spring morning wakening to those who pass death.

Valentine's instructions regarding burial of ashes

(unpublished typescript in the STW/VA Archive)

I would like us both to be buried in East Chaldon, in the churchyard, near Katie Powys... or indeed anywhere in that happy place. ... I would like buried with me the silver octagonal frame containing the picture of Sylvia as a little child, and the little knitted blue purse. Put the Crucifix (brass) which is on the top of the chest in my dressing-room, into the ground with the urn.

STW Society Weekend in East Sussex, June 2019

Hannah Berry

On Friday 14th June, a handful of society members and STW-curious friends made our way to Lewes, the pretty market town known for its riotous Bonfire Night parades.

Five of us gathered for dinner in the noisy but hospitable Swan Inn, off Juggs Road. At the time we believed ourselves to be just around from Juggs Corner, where Sylvia used to visit Trekkie and Ian Parsons in the early 1960s, but the true location of the house is where Juggs Road enters the next village of Kingston – quite a walk!

After coffee at Robson's the next morning, we were joined by the final two members of our party. We met at Berwick Church of St Michael and All Angels, beautifully nestled in the South Downs landscape, to see frescoes painted and installed by members of the Bloomsbury clan who were then living over the hill at Charleston. The models used to inspire the rustic scenes visibly included members of the family, local servicemen and Bishop Bell, who commissioned the works in 1941. Jan Montefiore gave us some of the back story, pointing out a churchyard bench dedicated to Jonet, daughter of the Hon. Mrs Sandilands, who had rallied her society of jam-makers in objection to the project and against whom, fortunately, the enlightened Bishop of Chichester prevailed.



In front of The Cricketers Arms - Andrew McDonald

We had lunch at the Cricketers Arms. Here a wealth of sporting memorabilia sparked anecdotes and transnational connections involving Indian batting heroes and less revered psychoanalytic interpreters of Kipling. Having warmed up over tea the sun shone again and we hastily assembled a group photo to a backdrop of loud chirping - the thick greenery swathing the pub was swarming with house sparrows.

(top – Hannah Berry, Richard Searle, Jan Montefiore, Peter Swaab, Andrew McDonald : bottom – Sabah Siddique, Mary Joannou)

From Berwick we proceeded to Monks House in Rodmell where Leonard Woolf lived - first with Virginia and later on his own, with lover Trekkie Parsons visiting. Mary Joannou lowered our expectations by warning that only a small section of the house was open, but there was more than enough to appreciate in both house and garden (between rain showers) and we interrogated the knowledgeable guides stationed in each of the three rooms. At one point we were called away to Virginia's writing studio, the room of her own, where we were treated to an actorly rendition of Orlando's transformation scene in Constantinople.

Ducking out of the drizzle into the airy Abergavenny Arms for pints, tea and

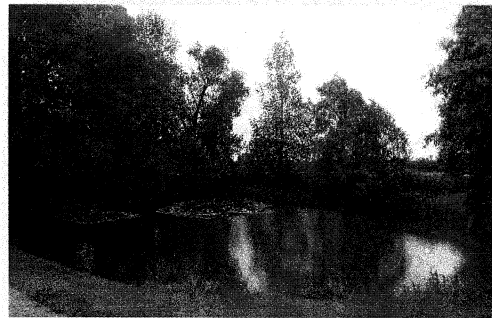
crisps, we discussed some of the loose connections between Sylvia and the Bloomsbury group. From all the stories shared over the weekend I noted without surprise that it was the kinder characters, including David Garnett and Leonard Woolf, to whom she was closest.

Everyone had a chance to rest before venturing out for dinner in Lewes, where Limetree Kitchen foxed us at first with its unusual pan-European take on tapas, but we got the hang of it.

A reduced group made it to Charleston the next day. However, luckily for those of us who had never visited before, it was too late to cancel the private tour. We were compensated with tea and coffee and lots of biscuits in the Outer Studio after a fascinating passage through the main rooms, art and legends of the house. As we rested, surrounded by the Famous Women Dinner Service - 50 plates hand-decorated by Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant - Jan read from a letter to TH White from David Garnett which added nuance to our accumulated images and impressions of life at Charleston.

The last stop was the new, purpose-built Wolfson gallery, which was showing a range of works by 20th century British artists chosen by Cressida Bell, textile designer and granddaughter of Vanessa, reflecting her "personal aesthetic as well as her artistic heritage". A couple of beautifully coloured, northern urban scenes helped prepare me for my approaching re-entry into Manchester life.

Many thanks to Richard Searle for organising everything and to Jan for helping to show how Sylvia weaved in and out of this East Sussex world. I felt immensely better educated and refreshed and hope more members will be able to enjoy whatever delights this year's Society Weekend has in store.



The lake at Charleston - Sabah Siddique

Warner is anything but a reassuring novelist; for all her elegant wit and her preoccupation with subjects dear to the readership her fictions apparently set out to attract, her work is quite unsparing in its allowance for life's brutality, discomforts, and ignominious reversals. In this author's world the maypole and the gallows are within each other's view.

Glen Cavaliero, *The Alchemy of Laughter*, p. 213

Non omnis moriar A Commemoration of Valentine Ackland

On 9 November 2019 seven members of The Society gathered at St Nicholas Church, East Chaldon, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the death of Valentine Ackland. It was a rainy morning, but we faced the elements, meeting for lunch at The Sailor's Return, to talk merrily over fish & chips of Valentine and Sylvia and all things literary and otherwise. So long so that the weather cleared and we were able to visit the grave to read our tributes, with the rooks rustily cawing in the bright sunshine. After which we visited the church, signed the guestbook, and walked about, enjoying the fine clearing and the sweet smell of newly washed grass. Many thanks go to Richard Betts for organizing such an enjoyable day.



left to right:
Janet Smith
Richard Betts
Judith Stinton
Tess Osmrod
Judith Bond
Ailse Granne
(yours truly behind the camera)

I have wanted the sea

(*Journey from Winter: Selected Poems*, Frances Bingham, ed., Carcanet 2008, p. 196)

Space is invisible waves (ibid., p. 67)

More true than tree or fruit

(unpublished typescript in the STW/VA Archive)

More true than tree or fruit
The truth of the root:
More keen than any gale,
More resolute to hold,
This, pliable and frail,
Clings rigidly as cold.

Love rooted deep in us,
By the gale's toss
Deeper and deeper thrust;
However high the tree
Grows, its roots in dust
(Our dust) hold steadily.