

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, 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-Four

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, The Museum

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I was much impressed by the way Sylvia Warner had managed to solve the eternal problem of the writer: how to make a living but yet keep enough free time and energy for the work you really wanted to do. She simply rented a farm labourer's cottage for six shillings a week and paid for it, and the rest of her living expenses, by one short story a month for one of the American papers; *New Masses*, I think it was. There was even a suggestion that I might settle in Dorset and do the same sort of thing, and they would help me look around.

How amazingly kind they all were to this absolutely unknown young person from New Zealand, with nothing to his name, but a solitary slim volume published at his own expense (or, rather, his mother's), and a few poems in a notebook!



Woodcut by
Rae Garnett for the title
page and dust-jacket of
The True Heart
(Chatto & Windus,
1929)

If you haven't already, do track down the *TLS* from February 25. **Jan Montefiore** has written a wonderfully enjoyable article: "Not only for ease and pleasure: Sylvia Townsend Warner – outsider, modernist and great novelist". She focuses on the Penguin newly re-issued novels and Bingham's/Handheld's Ackland biography. Even we seasoned Dove and Seagull devotees will learn something.

solitary pint of ale they could afford.

'That's Hardy's moor,' he said, laying about him with his walking-stick, as we reached the ragged uplands.

Oh, Lord, I thought, and what would there be left for me to write about?

Up on the hillside, 'my brother *Theodore*' was noting with a kindly eye every village maiden that got herself laid in wold oak-tree bed; and down in the valley Sylvia Warner and Valentine Ackland were industriously turning over every stone. I was too pleased to be meeting all these heroes and heroines of my youth to be much troubled at the time by their monopoly of all the possible subject-matter for miles around; but the thought did occur, afterwards with increasing force.

I don't remember so much about Theodore, but he was a nice, pink, silvery, rather chunky sort of man, who, appropriately enough for the author of that exquisite fantasy *Mr Weston's Good Wine*, looked as if he might have been either a parson or the gentlest and kindest of innkeepers. We had a peculiar conversation about pigs – whether or not they would eat a man – because he had written *Mr Tasker's Gods*, in which just such a catastrophe occurred.

Sylvia Townsend Warner was dark and tall and slim and graceful, and Valentine Ackland, who surprised me by occasionally smoking a clay pipe, was blonde and soft and a little plumper. I remember walking with her through the stubble of the hayfields one golden summer twilight and thinking how attractive she was; and how beautiful was the English countryside. She introduced me to John Clare's poetry, which she loved, and for which I too soon developed an affection, though my favourites among the English nature poets (if that is the right term for them) remained, under Wordsworth of course, W.H. Davies and Edmund Blunden. I got talking to Sylvia Townsend Warner about her own poetry and said how much I admired it for its fluency and suppleness, the way she could vary the length of her lines and the pattern of her stanzas, weaving them in and out like a ballet; and she said that perhaps this was because, like her father before her, she was a musician. I said that it was quite beyond me to attempt such feats, and she said to not to worry – 'You have a heavy animal rhythm of your own.' Hm.... But also when I showed her, clipped from the *Bulletin* and pasted into a black notebook, a poem called 'Haystack' she said, as a goddess passing judgement from Olympus, 'I think it's a lovely poem.' Bliss!

Afterwards when I stayed a week-end with them at a cottage they had moved to at Maiden Newton, still in Dorset, where there was a trout stream running so close by that Valentine sometimes caught small fish from the veranda, the two writers drove me to see T.E. Lawrence's grave, with lettering cut into the headstone by Eric Gill. They fed me on whisky and roast pheasant, and told me how amused they had been when their guest of the preceding week-end, a Chinese gentleman from the League of Nations – I do believe it was Dr Wellington Koo – had left a broken suitcase under his bed in the spare room: I suppose getting rid of it had presented the poor fellow with a major social problem. [cf Sylvia's letter to Edgell Rickword of 10.xi.1937 (*Letters*, Viking, 1982) for an amusing and fuller version of this incident]

NEWSLETTER NUMBER FORTY-FOUR

The 2022 AGM and Weekend * *T. H. White : A Biography* * The True Heart Lists * Helen Thomas * Douglas Stewart

Thanks to Gill Davis, Ann Torday Gulden and Peter Swaab for their contributions.

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Sylvia Townsend Warner Society AGM & Weekend 14-15 May Provisional Schedule

Saturday 14th May

- 11.15 am Society AGM. Venue: Shire Hall Historic Courthouse, High West Street, Dorchester DT1 1UY. Followed by ...
- 1.00 pm ... buffet lunch at Shire Hall ...
- 2.15pm ... and a guided group visit to the Shire Hall Historic Courthouse museum
- 4.15pm Visit to The Old Rectory, Litton Cheney, former home of Reynolds and Janet Stone
- 8.00pm Supper at The Rajpoot, 43 West Street, Dorchester, Dorset

Sunday 15th May

- 10.30am Meet at St Basil's Church, Toller Fratrum. Tour of church with Judith Stinton
- 12.15pm Lunch at Sculpture by the Lakes, Pallington, Dorchester, Dorset DT2 8QU, followed by a visit to the sculpture park. NB those who'd like to see the sculpture park need to book tickets in advance. See <https://www.sculpturebythelakes.co.uk>

If you're able to attend all or some of the weekend please email Jan Montefiore at j.e.montefiore@kent.ac.uk. There's no need to commit to anything at this point, but we will need to tell Shire Hall our numbers for the buffet lunch and also for the guided tour a week or two before the event. It would be good, too, to tell our hosts at Litton Cheney how many to expect for our visit. And again we'll need to book enough places for supper on Saturday. It has been a very long time since we were able to meet in person and I hope to catch up with many old friends and some new ones in May.

Peter Swaab



Sylvia Townsend Warner

T H White

A Biography

Handheld Press, 2022
Painting by T. H. White, a selfie
Cover design by Nadja Guggi of Messrs Dash + Dare

from Stewart's *Springtime in Taranaki: an autobiography of youth*
(Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1983)

... And then out of Scotland and back into England again, away from ancestors and approaching with delight the glittering world of literature, I met at Chaldon in Dorsetshire, in what I called 'a valley full of my gods', none other than the great John Cowper Powys himself: with Theodore, his brother, up in his thatched cottage on the hillside for good measure; and along the valley a bit, down the lane and across the hayfield, Sylvia Townsend Warner and her friend Valentine Ackland, who had published jointly a book of country poems, which, no less than the Powys' novels, far off in Taranaki had lit up the earth for me. *Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, it was called.

John Cowper Powys was like one of the great apes; or at least, since he had more nose about him than an ape can usually produce, in a fact a mighty crag of a nose, he was like one of the first of men, some shambling, powerful, beetle-browed breed that had peopled England or Wales in Neanderthal times. His black, piercing eyes were sunk extraordinarily deep beneath a massive, overhanging forehead, like nothing I had ever seen before among the human race. In fact so exuberant, so extravagant, so strange and wild and uncontrollable he was in every way that he stays in my mind as one of the three people I have met in my life who have conveyed to me the impression of genius: of talent and personality quite beyond the ordinary. The other two were Norman Lindsay and Eve Langley.

'Are you Douglas Stewart?' he hallooed to me at the top of his voice across the main street in Chaldon, thereby forcing all the villagers – but I don't suppose there were more than two or three of them – to stop and stare at us. Then he complimented me about my trousers, which were a new pair of cheap grey flannels. 'Ah, what beautiful trousers you are wearing,' he said. I don't think he meant any harm by this. One of his friends, Clifford Tolchard, who came to Australia, has told me that Powys always paid him a compliment when he was wearing a new tie; whereupon Tolchard would present it to him. I did not present him with my trousers.

He astonished me one morning when he had invited me over to his cottage from the village inn where I was staying, by eating two raw eggs for breakfast. He just cracked them into a cup, one after the other, and swallowed them down whole. Gulp; gulp; and that was breakfast. I believe he did this as a concession to stomach ulcers.

Dressed in rough country tweed and brandishing an enormous walking-stick with which he thrashed the bushes head of us in case of lurking adders – a dramatisation hardly necessary in the innocent Dorset countryside – he took me walking with him around the village and over the rolling green hills, striding at a great pace and pointing out the sights of Chaldon.

'Ah, that's a *sinister* place,' he said, talking in his customary italics, as we passed the little stone church. 'My brother *Theodore* wrote a story about that church.'

'David *Garnett* wrote a story about that inn,' he said as we sped past the inn where I was staying . . . where the villagers congregated each night and paid twopence for the

days a week it does not leave much to go to Glencoe with. There was a wild hope in every bosom last summer, when the allowances were first granted, that it would be possible to save up for three or four months and then go a bust; and a lot of people got their cars out of storage and licensed them and so on, in this hope; but apparently this would be too difficult to administer, for the order is that you have to cash your petrol coupons for the month in which they are valid.

I think this is the worst and the most generally felt deprivation; it hits all classes, for the carless people who used to enjoy touring by bus are hit too by a cut in bus services. You would not believe how empty the roads are – not how crowded (and expensive) the trains. And while this tomfool airlift to Berlin goes on, which is purely a matter of political prestige, there is no hope that we in this island will be better served.

However, though we can't think about Glencoe, I hope we shall be going to Rome toward the end of next month. By living in squalor when we are there we may be able to stretch our traveling allowance (£35 p.a. for travel in Europe, unless you are a business man, or somebody's nephew) to three weeks. I scarcely dare think of it, or speak of it, in case something gets in between. I have not been in Europe since 1938, and I have never been to Rome.

Valentine sends her love with mine.

Ever,

[signed] Sylvia Townsend Warner

GREEN LIONS

The bay is gouged by the wind.
In the jagged hollows green lions crouch,
And stretch,
And slouch,
And sudden with spurting manes and glitter of haunches
Charge at the shore
And rend the sand and roar.

And inland, in offices and banks
Though trams clang down and heavy stone resists
The mutter of distance carnage still persists,
And men denied the jungle of young years
Grow taut, and clench their fists.

from *Green Lions* / Poems by Douglas Stewart / printed for the author by Whitcome & Tombs Limited / Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Invercargill, London, Melbourne, Sydney [n.d.]

T. H. White: A Biography

Gill Davies

I expect that *Newsletter* readers will be pleased to hear that Handheld Press will be publishing a new edition of Warner's *T. H. White: A Biography* in January 2023. It was first published in 1967 then reprinted by OUP in 1989 and will be an excellent addition to Handheld's growing list of Warner-related books.

I am writing the Introduction. As well as outlining the genesis and progress of the biography, I have tried to see it in the context of Warner's other work and, to some extent, of her own life at this point.

Much of my pleasure in undertaking the project came from reading Warner's comments in her letters and diaries. I imagine that the sense of being steadily taken over by her subject's life will be familiar to most researchers and biographers. Warner expresses it perfectly, so here are some examples.

She wrote to William Maxwell about visiting White's house in Alderney after his death:

His suitcases were at the foot of the stairs, as though he had just come back.

The grander furniture had gone to the sale room, but the part of the house he mainly inhabited he still inhabited. His clothes were on hangers. His sewing-basket with an unfinished hawk-hood; his litter of fishing-flies, his books, his *awful* ornaments presented by his hot polo friends, his vulgar toys bought at the Cherbourg Fairs, his neat rows of books about flagellation – everything was there, defenceless as a corpse. And so was he; morose, suspicious, intensely watchful and determined to despair. I have never felt such an *imminent* haunt. (*Letters* ed. Maxwell 1982 p.226)

Once she had settled down to work on the biography, she found it a delight, writing again to Maxwell:

I get up at 6.30 and work till 8.30, drinking black coffee and from time to time eating a little more bread & honey; and it is delightful. Not a bell, not a bore, not a telephone; and a sense of virtue that keeps me in a good temper all day. There is about five hundred weight of him disposed about the house. It is like trying to write the biography of a large and animated octopus." (*Letters* p.213)

She found that White's presence – despite the fact that she had never met him – continued to haunt her:

My room is full of the smell of roses and new cut hay and of elder blossom; and coiled up in all this like the snake in Eden, is the smell of long wet winters in Ireland; Tim White's Irish diaries, written twenty years ago and more, but still exuding a smell of damp and melancholy and a very faint smell of paraffin.

I see I shall be leading two lives at once, rather as I did when I was translating *Contre Sainte-Beuve*. (Letters pp. 212-3)

In 1966 she notes her growing obsession:

Sometimes as I handle these mss, note-books, letters the sense of his existence – that he handled them, knew the look of them – almost overwhelms me, and I think, I shall die when these are withdrawn: *they are mine, he bequeathed them to me.*” (Diaries ed. Claire Harman 1994 p.303)

And when she had finished the book, she found that relinquishing the project – and the man with whom she had spent the last two years – was a terrible separation. In February 1967 she wrote:

The lights are going out all over Sylvia. ... Valentine was out at Wells, and as I walked to the kitchen to eat after finishing off the preliminaries I said to the air, O Tim, I don't like to lose you; and could have sworn that a large shape – much too tall & too broad for the passage – was following me. It has been a strange love-story between an old woman and a dead man. (Diaries p.308)

The Reading Group

On March 15 an international group of Warnerians (Portugal, UK, Norway, USA) zoomed their way through *The True Heart*. Led with expertise by our own Peter Swaab, we discussed the roles of obedience vs. disobedience, the extent Nature can be a route to reality, Warner's acceptance, or rejection of D.H. Lawrence's sexual topos. Is the novel a morality tale in which everyone gets their just desserts? Why were there only two digressions from the 3rd person narrative and what did that mean? Was gender or class the main critical fault-line? Several topics for articles came to light: an exploration of Prudence, a most vivid character; and Sukey's relationship to the Bible. Many thanks to Peter and Jan for organizing the session.

Compared to the other novels, there is less critical exploration of *TTH*. But there is some – *Trees and Dreams: STW, the Pastoral, and Fantastic Ruralism*, Mary Jacobs (Journal 2011), *Landscape and the Embodiment in STW's Lolly Willowes and The True Heart* (Harriet Baker), *History and Fantasy in The True Heart*, Lucy Haenlein (both Journal 2018:1). For more, see Jan Montefiore's bibliography at townsendwarner.com.

Next, date tba, we will explore Sylvia's narrative poem, *Opus 7*. The imbibing of gin & tonics during the meeting will be mandatory.

Rosemary Dobson left us some of her poems to read. I think she has got the makings of the real thing. There was a small one about a street which I admired a great deal, and some of the large landscape pieces are admirable; but I thought the Devil and Angel sequent horribly damaged by strokes of smartness and archness, and it struck me that if she is not careful about this sort of thing she will get lost on the Great Flats of USA magazine verse. I risked telling her so; and she answered very sweetly. I hope she will not bear me an undying grudge; but I could not in conscience see such a real talent threatened by monkey-tricks.

She is a charming creature, beautiful and sensitive as a butterfly. It would have not surprised me if she had taken flight and flown from the window.

Will you ever come over to this country, or are you too busy? It would be a great pleasure to us both to see you again.

Yours sincerely

[signed] Sylvia Townsend Warner

Frome Vauchurch, 5.i.1949

Dear Douglas.

Glencoe came, and thank you so much for it, and praise you so much for it. Snow is in the high notes, water in the low . . . you have made a very good summary of it in that line. I have read it with great admiration, and much concurrence. When one really likes a piece of writing, one has the sensation of writing it oneself as one reads, knowing why this is there, and what 'tother is there for. It is a long time since I have read a poem with so much certainty that I shall remember what I read, sharply and solidly, like a house lived in.

And how well you have done the lingo... the best lingo for poetry that man ever made, so I think. And being the best, also the most dangerous. But you have leaped over all the quagmires.

I wish you would come to England again; and tell me what you see changed, for undoubtedly there are considerable changes, more than just the bricks and mortar down, and girls' legs without stockings, and the big houses empty and the little ones overfilled. But it is hard to assess changes that go on under one's own changing nose. And I would like to hear about your plays, and with the Bulletin. I had a charming letter from Mrs Dobson, who tells me that Rosemary is still in this country. I liked Mrs D. very much. She struck me as one of those characters that elegantly enfold a great deal more than they will let on to; and she had a tranquil and appraising eye – not much escapes it, I fancied. I was so glad you sent them to us.

You have given me a new ambition, or at any rate, quickened an old one. I must travel the pass of Glencoe. But how and when? That is the worst thing in this country: the fact that one is tethered to one place by petrol restrictions – unless one is so rich that one can keep four or five cars, and draw petrol for all of them. We, for instance, shall get enough petrol a month to go ninety miles; and as Valentine has to drive to a job five

Frome Vauchurch, 12.ix.[?]

Dear Douglas Stewart,

Many thanks for your letter: New Masses's address is: - 31, East 27th Street, New York City. But for the poem, part of which you quote to me, I suggest rather The New Republic, 421, West 21st Street.... With a personal note addressed to Malcolm Cowley, saying – if you like – that I advised you to send in some stuff. They have very occasionally printed work of mine (they pay well) and I recently met Cowley in Madrid. Both these things may possibly help though your own work will help you much better than just saying names and references!

In any case, you may already know them quite well – If so, forgive me for what will seem an impertinence.

I'm so glad you like Scotland – I know it only from once or twice, but have a profound feeling of affection, and respect, for it and its people. About two-thirds of me is Scottish, anyway, and it is a strong colour to have mixed into one's make-up.

We are settled here, and very happy. It is a lovely, romantic, melancholy place; the river running alongside makes everything one does and think seem slightly wavering, either deeper or shallower than might have seemed at first, with a queer watery quality that is most beguiling, even when it is most betraying.

But it is sad for me that I have to leave here for a short while, just when everything is at its newest and most shining. I had engaged to work at one of the Basque Refugee Schools, if I were needed, & now I hear I AM. So I go in a week – But let us know when you will be anywhere near Dorset, and if you can manage to take a cottage as you hoped – I think it might be possible to find you one or two to look at, and put you up while you looked! But more of this later. Meanwhile, send off the poems if you feel like it, and let one of us know whether you want my London introductions – not that we've any "powerful" ones, but there are some people who are more companionable than others!

Yours,
[signed] Valentine Ackland

Frome Vauchurch, 14.vi.1948

Dear Douglas Stewart.

It was a great pleasure to see Rosemary Dobson and her mother, and to hear news of you. Better still, to catch a glimpse of your Glencoe poems. She brought the book, but could not spare to lend it. However, I managed to read one or two of them enough to admire their quality; especially the poem with the child's hand, which struck me as a very fine example of how to be forcible without the horrors – a rare achievement, out of the actual ballad literature.

Who doesn't enjoy a list?

And they are everywhere, from Defoe to Capote. But sticking to Warner, who was especially fond of them, member Anne Torday Gulden send us this fine example. It is from *Somerset* (Paul Elek, 1949) as Sylvia sees the Bishop of Bath and Wells 'moving-in': "Over the draw-bridge went iron-bound coffers, mahogany dining-tables, cradles, wine-coolers, lutes, grand-pianos and spinets, lecterns, roasting-jacks, dutch-ovens, prie-dieus, ottomans, buffets and tall-boys, four-poster beds and truckle-beds, jardinières, sewing-machines, marble pastry-boards, statues of saints and statues of heathen deities, books past counting from Crockfords to *Incunabuli*, reliquaries, barometers, iron cauldrons, coffee-urns, hour-glasses, umbrella-stands and wig-stands, robes lined with fox-skins, perambulators, iron safes and coffins. All this time the furniture of the current bishop was passing before me and when the men had finished with their load they climbed into the van and went away. But in my mind's eye the procession over the draw-bridge continued, and gradually the furniture gave place to bishops: great bishops, small bishops, lean bishops, brawny bishops, brown bishops, black bishops (attending a pan-Anglican congress, no doubt), grey bishops, tawny bishops, grave old plodders, gay young friskers... There is a great deal that is fascinating in the Church of England, and I don't know a quieter place to study it in than Wells."

Almost at random, I chose a fine one embedded in a letter from William Maxwell, September 14, 1965 (*The Element of Lavishness*):

"When I go back to the office with this catalogue, I realized that of course the friend who told you about seeing *Lolly Willowses* on the third floor of the New York Public Library sent you a catalogue. *But what if she didn't*. So here is another copy, for the cats to peruse. It is a glorious show. There you are with Dorian Gray's buttonhole of Parma violets and Mrs. Woolf's note to herself about the plan of *To the Lighthouse* and Thackeray's minute perpendicular utterly legible copperplate, and Ouida's baroque silk thread. Looking at your handwriting I had a kind of seizure, as I re-arranged my memories of you. I was that minute looking at you at an age which predated our first meeting, at the beginning of the war, in this office. The writing was the same, but younger, that was all."

Do you have a favorite Sylvia-and-her-Circle list?

Helen Thomas

In the Dorset Archive there is a batch of typed letters from Helen Thomas, the wife of the poet and exemplary member of the tribe of widows keeping the flame alive – she outlived him by 50 years. I may not have found them all, for the one below is the earliest, from 1931 as the pencil annotation dates it. There is then a skip to the early 1960s. Affectionate and warm and passionate, they are typed transcriptions by Jon – Thomas's script was difficult to read. Sylvia writes to Joy & Marchette Chute (21.v:1963): "I do apologise for writing by hand – and so badly. I shall soon be like

Helen Thomas, notoriously illegible. In her last letter only two words stood out plain; 'Blood pressure'. Subsequent research demonstrated that what she had actually written was 'Beloved friends.'"

Dear Miss Townsend Warner,

The finding of people who admire and love my husband has been one of the loveliest outcomes of my books. From all over the world I have had letters from people who are glad to have read about the man whose work has meant so much to them. You can imagine how these letters warm and cheer me and how grateful I am to the people who trouble to write them. And your letter was especially welcome because I know and admire your work, and Edward would have done so too, and higher praise than that I cannot give, because his instinct for sincerity and delicacy was unerring. I have reread the passages you speak of, and I am very sorry that after this lapse of time I cannot remember who the poets were that he is speaking of. I have looked through the work of some of the poets we knew and whose work would be uppermost in his mind at the time to see if I can find a clue, but I can't. These poets would be John Freeman, De la Mare, Ralph Hodgson, Rupert Brooke, Vivian Locke Ellis, Wilfred Gibson, Abercrombie, Robert Frost, WH Davies, but the poems he is referring to I cannot trace. I am so sorry not to be able to help you. I hate to "let down" one to whom Edward's work means so much. His lovers are not so numerous but that I am eager to encourage in any way I can those discerning ones, who in all the welter of books have discovered his beautiful quiet dignified sincere prose and poetry. I value your praise of my work very deeply and thank you very much for writing to me.

Yours sincerely,

HELEN THOMAS

and from July 1962

My very dears,

How grateful I am for your postcard Sylvia – thank you. Please Valentine be warned and get heaps of sleep. Shakespeare knew what lack of sleep does and what enough of it does too, so please be warned.

And really I could kick myself for having let out that I have a birthday soon, for now I know that one of you went rushing off to Dorchester in the car to buy and post that book which I've been longing for. It came while I was still in bed and kept me there dipping into its stupendous knowledge until it was so late that I felt utterly ashamed of myself. I need never be short of reading matter again, for here is all about place names, ancient monuments, flowers and birds and rivers and downs and everything that I so passionately love. One of the things I feel so deeply thankful for is that I have known and walked in England before the motor car was invented and known untouched villages as they had been for hundreds of years, and downs covered with flowers and sheep and solitary ancient ways, and little bye lanes with ruts for dust and water and a great peace on it all, when wayfarers stopped and spoke to each other so rare was a stranger, and at

These, two from Valentine and two from Sylvia, are courtesy of
The National Library of Australia at Canberra

West Chaldon, 13.viii.1937

Dear Douglas Stewart,

Thank you: my blood did run cold, because I didn't remember having sent such a bunch of poems to anyone, and it seemed to me, as I opened the envelope, that I'd been asking for it in my sleep! But it was good of you to write a letter like that, and I do really thank you.

Do keep John Clare as long as you want, but also do guard him as the apple of your eye! Sylvia gave that book to me and it has been my most dear friend for a long time now, and the poems are so much to my mind that (if you can understand this) I can sometimes scarcely bear to read them – but the book is dear, and so I ask you to guard it.

I have just received a good letter from Horace Gregory, editor of the New York paper "New Masses". He asks for more poems! He also, even most astonishingly, asks me to tell the new poets here to send him some stuff. His paper, as you probably know, is "Left" and it publishes really good stuff, and the poetry is the best part of it, even so. The other week the paper printed four pages of poems, and out of 8 poets, at least six were very fine indeed. . . . If you have anything you think might do, please send it to him, mentioning my name. You may not get paid, but it is good advertisement anyhow, and maybe is worth more than that. (If you don't know the paper, let me hear, and I'll send you a copy.) His address is: c/o New Masses, 31, East 27th Street, N.Y.City.

At the moment, life is busy for us with visitors, an incipient move, articles to write "to order", and book-reviews: there is no time for making books of poetry. But Sylvia has written some fine stuff (in a private book she wrote out for me) about our first visit to Spain, and some others too, which you shall have as soon as I can get a moment to copy them. Meanwhile – we both hope you will like what you see of England and Scotland, and we look forward to seeing you here, or near-about, very soon indeed. It is rare to meet a poet one feels happy about – as a poet and as a person. . . . We both hope you won't throw in your hand and leave England before you've started to find out about living in Dorset!

Our new address will be FROME VAUCHURCH. MAIDEN NEWTON, DORSET. But this finds us for a month, and our 'phone number is WINFRITH 226. Please keep these in mind and let us know what happens to you, and if you can get down here, do come to see us – Your book of poems, and those you sent me, have made us both most anxious to meet you again, if our fortune is so.

[signed] Valentine Ackland

away since; but I am glad you have been a free man. There are too few of them. I don't only mean, though, the compulsion of war. Fashion and starvation between them have made slaves enough in non-belligerent countries. More Kellys, I think. I am glad you have done a melodrama, and that it howls. It is a good form.

J.C. Powys is still living at Corwen in central Wales. I shall be seeing his sister at the end of this week, I will send on your message by her. The house where you visited us that first time, and the house up on the hill where Llewelyn Powys lived (he died two winters ago, in Switzerland) have had plenty bombs around them, and plenty of air battles overhead. But the village has escaped damage, and looks much the same except that every cottage door has a bucket and a sandbag beside it, and a shovel: an odd appearance that the local population is entirely given over to playing mud pies. More ploughed land and corn has altered the landscape. It used to be good corn and barley land in the last century, so they said; and certainly it seems to be taking very kindly to arable. Theodore has moved further inland, his wife fussed and made him do it. He now lives in a converted village school, mid-victorian epoch with semi-gothic roof, pitchpine cusps and what-not. It has been partitioned into several little rooms, all with lofty ecclesiastical ceilings. His old house was immediately requisitioned by the army, and had a major lodging in it, and a sentry outside watching over the major. It looked very funny.

Valentine is now working in a local army office as a clerk. I remain a flat-footed civilian except for being a fire-watcher two nights a week. It is a very reasonable excuse for going for walks at night. I witnessed a few rumpusses last winter, but all peripheral. Even so, a bomb proceeding overhead on its way to fall somewhere else sounds astonishingly loud and long. We usually have three or four local cats going round with us, and when I feel benevolent I give the smaller ones rides in my tin hat. Presumably they suppose we are out mousing, but not good at it. Not serious, you know. No application.

Do write again some time. It is very pleasant to get a letter from somewhere outside this island, and mitigates the feeling of claustrophobia which sometimes afflicts us.

With best wishes from us both,

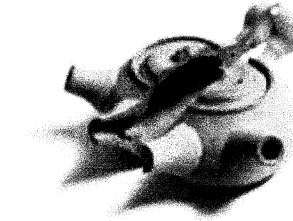
yours ever
Sylvia. [signed]

Both of these letters above are courtesy of the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

the inn you could get a two penorth of bread and cheese (a whole loaf and a great piece of cheese to cut from) and all was slow and friendly, and the plough was pulled by horses and the hay was made by women and children and the seasons had their festival and God was worshipped and families were united, and I and Edward strode along looking and listening and taking into our soul all it was offering us. Oh what days! Some things have not altered – friendship for instance. How I depend on it, and affection. Thank you for your part in my life how wonderful at 85. But all the time (a lot of it) you've been there and I here and now we have come together. Its no new affair is it? Its like a happy Hardy poem about the Titanic and the iceberg if you can follow my zig-zag thought. Oh I've not said thanks, there's heaps more to say but later.

HELEN

Persephone Press is publishing Helen Thomas's two memoirs *As it Was* and *World Without End* (in one volume) just about now, April. 2022 These are of course about her marriage with the poet Edward Thomas. For news of Edward Thomas, see www.edward-thomas-fellowship.org.uk



*From The Times Literary Supplement
(NB – February 11)*

“Some writers influence the West; others stick to influencing one another. Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland did a bit of both, it seems. They met in 1930 and co-habitated, in Dorset and briefly in Norfolk, for the best part of four decades. Warner was the more commercially successful, but together they published a poetry collection (*Whether a Dove or a Seagull*, 1933), joined the Communist Party, worked with the Red Cross during the Spanish Civil War, and suffered pain and heartache (largely caused by Ackland, it seems, at Warner's expense).

The artist Amanda Chambers came to them through Warner's first novel, *Lolly Willowes* (a novel that would certainly make our own list of Proper Debuts). In a series of ceramics called “**Quiet Revolutions**”, Chambers recalls both the politically involved and the rural/domestic sides of these writers' lives. “Impulse, [not] pictured above, has the dashingly dressed Ackland cradled by half of a dissected clay bottle; associations of setting out to sea and alcoholism (with which Ackland was afflicted) come bubbling wickedly to mind.

Coinciding the LGBT History Month, “Quite Revolutions” will be on display at the Dorset County Museum in Dorchester until March 17.”

What is pictured above is a dissected teapot, the three spouts representing, for lack of a better word, Sylvia, Valentine and Elizabeth Wade White.

Douglas Stewart

In Peter Haring Judd's *The Akeing Heart* (Handheld Press, 2018), there is a long letter from Sylvia to Elizabeth, 27.viii.1937, with this tantalizing bit:

“There is a new young poet. I hope there are many, but this one arrived in Chaldon from New Zealand, to visit John [Cowper] Powys, and learning that Dove and Seagull were near at hand, came to our doorstep. He is called Douglas Stewart, and his book is called 'Green Lions,' and has some good things in it, but he had better stuff with him in manuscript. A very rich and solid poetry, with a tang of Frost about it, though he has never read any Frost. A sort of Scotch bun poetry. I don't know though, if you have eaten Scotch Bun. Its other name is Apothecaries Delight. It is very hard, rich, heavy, melancholy, and tastes salt rather than sweet.

He spoke of the difficulty of writing poetry in New Zealand. All the place names and plant names were taken straight over from the Maori, and though beautiful in themselves do not assimilate with the English language. Wawapipoki, and so forth. You will see that it presents difficulties.

The green lions are waves.”

A footnote explains that “...Stewart (1913-1985), born in New Zealand, was at this time briefly and unsuccessfully seeking work as a journalist in England during which he interviewed British writers. He left for Australia in 1938 and in his life published 13 books of poetry. He was an important literary editor and came to be considered a major Australian poet”.

Two months later, 27.x.1937, Sylvia writes to Stewart, c/o New Zealand House Strand / London

Dear Mr Stewart.

Thank you for your welcome letter. We should like very much to have another sight of you before [you] leave England. It would be much better if you could come here, rather than stay at Dorchester (unless you feel a particular affinity with Dorchester?). On Friday night unfortunately, our spare-room is taken up with a Chinese gentleman with the beautiful name of Shelley Wang. He is speaking in Dorchester on Saturday afternoon, and we shall be going there to hear him. Could we pick you up then, and bring you back for Saturday and Sunday night?

I am not certain yet of the time when Shelley Wang's lecture will be over; but as soon as I know, I will write to you with a suggested meeting-place and meeting-time. I am only sorry that we cannot manage Friday night itself.

We congratulate ourselves, quite as much as you, on this news of a book of your poems. Dents is a very good firm, I hope with all my heart that the negotiations go well.

Yours sincerely [signed] Sylvia Townsend Warner

Years pass, and from Frome Vauchurch, 16.x.1941, Sylvia writes:

Dear Douglas Stewart.

Your letter came today; and gave me so much pleasure and such a strong sense of you being alive kicking and friendly that I will answer it at once.

Australia cannot be a more unreal, unreal, to live in than this country, where for four months we have been feeling like the fat weed that rots on Lethe wharf. When Germany attacked USSR every one sat up and said Now we can kick him in the pants. But our fate is still to be like the prince in the Arabian nights, 'marble from the waist downwards.' Not a kick. Or else our legs have been hewen [sic] off, and so far we have not learned to fight upon our stumps. It is bloody. As bad as Munich, and worse. Every one is sick and sour and very sullen. It is felt that the Russian reverses will not finish off Russia, but will be likely to finish off us, when Hitler's policy of one by one turns our way. If not diabolically double-crossed we shall be finished off fighting, I hope. Sick and sour and sullen, the mood of the people is not timid. It's not particularly patriotic either. It is flat cold murderous. Though we are swaddled in dishonour, I think you might quite like us if you saw us now.

But judging from today's news from Japan, you are likely to be in it before we are. The news I mean is the Japanese flying-base at Timor. Not that I think a Japanese flying-base at Timor is much of an actual danger. Even in this charted and over-populated country air-raids have little more than nuisance-value. Same in China. Same in Germany. And I don't think parachutists dropped in N. Australia would decide very much. But while politicians and strategists shut their eyes to air-raids and leave their long ears open to hear the bangs I suppose the flying-base will have just the effect Japan means it to have – a rattle and alarum.

To end your days as a sort of twentieth century bushranger . . . I think it might suit you very well. The fire burns and the kettle boils I quote your phrase about life in England – just as well out of doors as in, and perhaps better. The things you are homesick for in this country are almost all of them, I guess, after the order of fires and kettles; the venerable servants, the old family nurses of our race, like fire and wool and apple trees and cabbage yards and guns and wooden spoons. But I wish you could visit our fireside now, for you would find an extra grace in it. There being coal shortages from time to time I got a load of peats. It took about four months to get them, and they are a great nuisance and cover the hearth with the finest grey ash that lifts at a breath and distributes itself everywhere; but the scent is exquisite, and when the rain drives the smoke down from the chimney I go and stand outside to snuff it up.

I look forward to another book. If the Elegy one was a slammed-together swansong, then all I can say is that you have advance streets on your earlier work. I have read those poems very often. I do like intelligent poetry; by which I don't mean intellectual.

Personally, I can remember nothing strikingly wrong about the size of your chest. It seemed a neat and comely chest enough. I hope you have not let mice nibble bits of it