

NEWSLETTER NUMBER FORTY-NINE

Autumn 2025

Mary Jacobs Memorial Essay Prize 2025

The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society is pleased to announce the Mary Jacobs Memorial Essay Prize 2026. The aim of the Prize is to encourage further study of the writings of Sylvia Townsend Warner, in honour of the distinguished work of Dr Mary Jacobs.

The theme for the 2026 essay competition is the title of the conference to be held at University College London on 29-30 May 2026, namely '*Lolly Willows* at 100: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Religion and the Supernatural'. Essays entered for the prize may address any part of this title and need not make specific reference to *Lolly Willows* unless they wish to. Entrants will be asked whether in principle they would be able to present a 20-minute version of their essay at the conference (but this will not influence the judging of the competition).

The Award

The prize for the winning essay will be £300, publication in the Society's *Journal* and one year's free membership in the Society. At the discretion of the judges there may also be two runners-up prizes of £100 each.

Procedure

Essays should be no longer than 6000 words, including notes but excluding bibliography. They should preferably be submitted in electronic form, or else in hard copy, and should be submitted in two parts – 1) the essay without any information to identify the author (if sent as a file it should be named by the essay title), and 2) a separate document with author's name, title of the essay, email and postal addresses, and a note about the availability for the conference of a paper based on the essay. Entries should be sent electronically to p.swaab@ucl.ac.uk or in hard copy to The Editor of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal, English Department, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT.

The deadline for receipt of entries is 31 March 2026. The winners will be notified by the Chair of the Society early in April 2026.

The winning essay will be published in the *Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* at the end of 2026.

Terms and Conditions

The competition is open to all, with the exception of the officers of the Society.

The judges' decision will be final and no correspondence will be entered into.

The Committee reserves the right not to award the Prize or runners-up prizes if entries are deemed not to merit the award.

Essays entered must not have been published elsewhere or have publication pending.

The Society will not contribute towards any expenses incurred by entrants to the competition.

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STW Society Conference, 29-30th May 2026

IAS Common Ground, University College London

'She, Laura Willowses, in England, in the year 1922, had entered into a compact with the Devil. The compact was made, and affirmed, and sealed with the round red seal of her blood.'

Having been scratched by a black kitten — shortly to become her familiar, Vinegar — Laura finds herself suddenly inducted into her new life: her newfound 'vocation' as a witch. The scene marks a similar moment of transformation in the novel to which she belongs, a pivot from naturalism to the supernatural that reroutes its social comedy through the fresh terms of the weird and the eerie. For Laura as for Sylvia Townsend Warner, and for a number of her later protagonists, the persistence of magic in the world serves as a clue for upsetting the established order of things.

Organised by the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society to mark the centenary of *Lolly Willowses; or, The Loving Huntsman* (1926), this conference will take Warner's first novel as an opportunity to explore further the place of religion and the supernatural in her work. In this call for papers, we invite 250-word abstracts for 20-minute contributions that will address the representation of the supernatural in Lolly Willowses and/or Warner's other fiction, or will consider the complex treatments of religion — in both fiction and

non-fiction — present throughout her work. We also welcome comparative presentations that approach Warner's depiction of religion or the supernatural in dialogue with other authors, be they Warner's contemporaries or predecessors, or figures subsequently inspired by her work.

Please direct all inquiries (under the subject heading: 'UCL Warner Conference') to Peter Swaab at p.swaab@ucl.ac.uk, copying in Janet Montefiore at J.E.Montefiore@kent.ac.uk, and William Burns at william.burns.15@ucl.ac.uk.

Please send submissions to Kate Macdonald at kmacdonald@brookes.ac.uk by 30th September 2025.

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Drawing you, heavy with sleep: Celebrating Sylvia Townsend Warner

Saturday 27th September 2025, Shire Hall Museum, Dorchester, 2pm
Join Mark Damon Chutter of the Thomas Hardy Society for a talk on Sylvia Townsend Warner, and readings from her literary fiction such as *Lolly Willowes* (1926) and from her poetry such as 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep' which mirrors her love and deep devotion to her partner Valentine Ackland.

There will also be readings from her diaries which connect her to Dorchester, East Chaldon and Frome Vauchurch.

To book, email info@shirehalldorset.org or phone 01305 261849.

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The unveiling of Sylvia's statue

The unveiling will take place on Sunday 14th December at 1pm, opposite Gould's Fashion Store on South Street.

This photo of the maquette was posted by Visible Women on Bluesky in March.



The Sylvia I knew. A personal recollection

by Bea Howe

This essay was first published in P N Review [Poetry Nation Review] in Volume 8 Number 3, January - February 1982, and is reproduced here by kind permission of the Editor, Michael Schmidt.



Bea Howe by Duncan Grant, 1925,
Sheffield Museums (© Estate of Duncan
Grant).

It was a day late in April 1978, when answering the ringing telephone in my London flat I heard after a longish pause Sylvia's voice for the last time. It came very faint from her Dorset home. I already knew that she had not long to live and had offered to go and see her. 'No, not just at present, darling,' I heard her say. 'Later, perhaps. You understand?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'I understand perfectly.' A few more faint words and then 'My love, darling. Goodbye.' Her voice trailed away weakly. I put down the receiver. I knew as well as she did that these few words were all she could manage to say in her failing strength, we who had spoken so much to one another and for so long, year after year, since when? Ah, yes, since when?

I think it was very early in the winter of 1919 after we had come to London to live at Number 18, Lowndes Square, Knightsbridge, that I was taken by my only brother, George, to meet Sylvia at 125, Queens Road, Bayswater. I remember little of her ground floor flat except that it generally smelt of strong coffee or China tea being brewed; cups of which Sylvia seemed to live on plus cigarettes offered to one from a packet.¹ Sylvia was an inveterate smoker all her life.

¹ In this period among their class cigarettes would normally be offered to guests from a case or a box.

At twenty-five (five years my senior) Sylvia was excessively thin and gawky in her movements; her clothes quite nondescript. With her ever-questing mind she had little thought to give to what she was wearing. I, on the other hand, have always been dress-conscious. Peering at me with her small, bright, short-sighted eyes that had odd yellow flecks in them, I wonder now what she thought of me in that first glance through the thick lenses of her glasses. She never told me and I never asked her.

But what I remember vividly from that first meeting was my immediate reaction to the shape of Sylvia's long, narrow face with its pointed chin and very pale skin. To me, it was pure Tudor; a face drawn by Holbein. Sylvia never looked her best in a hat. A small Elizabethan cap sprouting a single plume or a curling feather, a plain white coif or a Mary-Queen-of-Scots velvet bonnet – they might all have been suitable headgear for her. For her thin black wirey [sic] hair grew in a peak, scraped back from a pale, high forehead.

The ex-Harrovians who frequented her flat and whom I knew were also well-known to Sylvia, pupils once of her father, George Townsend Warner, housemaster and Head of the Modern Side at Harrow and an enlightened teacher of English. Turning up at all times of the day and night Sylvia fed them generously and provided her sofa for a bed if necessary. Her door was ever-open; her heart maternal. But I soon realised that Sylvia's male visitors took her hospitality very much for granted. They treated her more like the Universal Provider that Mr William Whiteley ² called himself down her road than as a young woman of intellect and unusual looks. I felt this especially in the case of Stephen Tomlin (Tommy to us) who was now at Oxford with my brother and very much in Sylvia's life as he was in mine.

There soon developed a friendship between Sylvia and myself which ended only with her death 'Early one morning just as the sun was rising' on 1st May 1978. I have only to think of Sylvia and all the haunting English and Scottish ballads she loved and introduced me to and which we sang gathered round her piano flood back to mind. The songs of Dowland, Thomas Nashe and Campion too. For at this time she had undertaken the editing of 15th- and 16th-century Church Music working for the OUP under terms of a charter of the Carnegie Trust. Whenever we rang the doorbell of 125 Queens Road and there

² The founder of London's first department store in Bayswater in the 1870s.

came no answer we knew that Sylvia had vanished to work in some dimly-lit cathedral room in Tenby,³ or perhaps Durham.

In London, I was enduring the life of a debutante and driving my father's open car three days a week in the Light Touring Section of the RAC.⁴ But all I wanted to be was a writer, having had a few poetic sketches and lightweight articles accepted and printed in minor literary journals, *Today*, *The English Review* and *The Englishwoman*. What inspired and intrigued most about Sylvia was her way of talking. I had never heard anybody speak like her before. Some chance remark or an artfully-posed question by Tommy – who loved to argue with her – and Sylvia was off in a fantastic flight of her own. Poetic words, colourful phrases, an apt quotation, extraordinary similes poured forth from her in a way I did not meet again till I came to know, and dine with, Virginia Woolf. But where Sylvia kept her conversational flights of fancy more or less under control while the slightly malicious gleam in her eyes dared one to give verbal battle, Virginia's flights of pure fantasy, soaring sky-high, as the light in her beautiful deep-set luminous eyes kindled and grew almost wild, silenced one to listen to her, entranced.

So talking to Sylvia was something novel and exhilarating to me. So was walking. For despite her curious ambling gait and peering, short-sighted eyes, Sylvia was a great walker. Moreover she was a nocturnal one. Her companion had usually been Tommy till joined by George and myself.

London's East End became our stamping ground, one we were continually exploring. It was a long step from Lowndes Square to Limehouse – put on the map by Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights*, recently published. But Limehouse saw us, as well as the Dockland, Poplar High Street, Shadwell and the Isle of Dogs. I have only to murmur those names to myself and the smell of joss-sticks in the Chinese quarter with its tucked-away sleazy restaurants up incredibly narrow and winding staircases, Shadwell's dark wooden houses from which painted child-harlots (figures I had never seen before) crept, silent Wapping Stairs with slimy steps leading down to deep, dark water lapping softly where barges lay moored, hidden,

³ Tenby has never had a cathedral but its St Mary's Church dates from the fifteenth century and once had a choir school.

⁴ The Royal Automobile Club's Club Historian suggests that Bea could have been driving the special 'light' cars available at the time in time trials, but without more detail it's not known why she would have been driving these three days a week.

secretive, the naptha flares on street stalls and the sound of raucous Cockney boys shouting, the pale yellow gleam through lamplight striking down through misty air, are still vivid memories. One evening we ended up on a tiny paved landing-stage below Tower Bridge looming high above us as we threw spare coppers into the swiftly-flowing Thames as summer tourists throw coin into Roman fountains and wish.

Easter of 1921 Sylvia, Tommy, George and I went to stay at The Weld Arms, East Lulworth, in Dorset – an address I was given by a kind archaeologist I sat next to one dinner. Our holiday was an immense success. Below the Weld Arms, through a small tangled wood and down a winding grass pathway Arish Mell Gap was reached; from there a wonderful, wild, remote and utterly lovely piece of coastal countryside stretched to Tyneham, Worbarrow Down, Chapman's Pool and beyond, for us to explore.

From The Weld Arms we watched Tommy, on our last evening, with rucksack on shoulder, disappear over the brow of a hill to discover Chaldon Herring, tucked away in the folds of a lonely green valley. It was a discovery which led to many important events in our lives. The following morning Sylvia, George and I stepped into our wagonette which jogged us, slowly, to catch the London train at Wool.

Dishevelled, tired but happy, we found the family Daimler waiting for us at Waterloo, to Sylvia's great amusement. 'Travelling with Bea is the height of luxury – like having a bunch of expensive flowers in a third-class compartment,' she said. My next unforgettable foray into unknown country with Sylvia was in August 1922 when I joined her for a few days at Drinkwaters, an old black and white timbered farm lying off the beaten track in the little-known Dengie Hundred of Essex. This Hundred divides two tidal rivers, the Crouch and Blackwater, and is composed largely of farmland and marshes. I had discovered Dorset; now it was Sylvia's turn to discover Essex. Little did I know when I accepted Sylvia's ecstatic summons to tramp the Blackwater marshes that years later my husband and I would buy The Olde Forge, Althorne, not so far off from Drinkwaters, which we owned for twenty-five happy years. Nor did Sylvia know that in 1929 she would be publishing *The True Heart*, her third novel, inspired by that Essex visit.

When Sylvia's work in church music was drawing to a close I suggested she ought to sit down and write a book. 'Well if I do, I'll dedicate it to you,' was her reply. She had moved to 121 Inverness

Terrace, a pleasant ground-floor flat with light rooms, tall windows and high ceilings. What I remember chiefly about that flat was the pair of brightly-coloured cotton curtains she made for her sitting-room. For she appliqued two large figures on them who came to be known as Duncan and Vanessa.⁵

By now Tommy and I were going to Bloomsbury parties, Tommy having met David Garnett whose *Lady into Fox*⁶ had become a best-seller. He was soon introduced to Sylvia. On my own part, I was having some success in writing, having been taken up, and encouraged, by Naomi Royd Smith⁷ [sic], editor of *The Weekly Westminster*. Ever kind to the young writer she accepted a certain amount of my early work and stories, later, when she edited *The Queen*. In 1926 Sylvia's first novel, *Lolly Willowes; or, The Loving Huntsman*, came out, published by Chatto and Windus. Faithful to her word, she had dedicated it to me. *Lolly* was an instant success and Sylvia's literary future assured. My own one and only novel *A Fairy Leapt Upon My Knee* followed in 1927, sheperded [sic] kindly by Sylvia, who put it into the hands of Charles Prentice at Chatto and Windus.

In the autumn of 1929 I became engaged to Mark Lubbock, at much the same time that Sylvia came to meet Valentine Ackland. They both had cottages at Chaldon Herring. After my marriage in 1930 I was swept headlong into a purely musical world, for my husband went on the permanent staff of the BBC as both composer and conductor. Life became very hectic. In Dorset, first at Chaldon Herring then at Frome Vauchurch, Maiden Newton, Sylvia and Valentine set up house together. I was no longer in the mainstream of Sylvia's life nor she in mine. But we stayed with one another regularly and she wrote me long letters as always. In one of them she declared she could 'wail out her woes', when woes she had, because 'our love had been so long a-growing!' So our particular brand of friendship, close but also independent as befitted our Sagittarian

⁵ The art of Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell often featured large figures.

⁶ David Garnett's first novel under his own name was published in 1922, a fantasy about a woman who turns into a fox and how animal nature overcomes the human.

⁷ Naomi Royde Smith (1875-1964) was a leading literary editor and novelist, and responsible for publishing the early work of many early twentieth-century writers, including Rose Macaulay, with whom she shared a flat, Rupert Brooke, Elizabeth Bowen, Walter de la Mare and D H Lawrence.

temperaments (our birthdays were both in December) survived the years.

We never talked politics or religion, or, if I come to think, much about people, those known to us or not. Of our mutual love of gardening, yes. Endless discourse about the flowers we loved and grew or wanted to grow, their folk names and native habitats. About cooking too. We were both cooks, though sometimes reluctant ones when the Stove and Sink took over from the typewriter and frustration followed as our writing went temporarily to the wall. Valentine did not cook. She saw to the wine in their menage and concocted delicious ices. I never had a poor meal with Sylvia but one individual to her culinary taste and expertise. She was also an expert needlewoman, contriving to create the most odd but enchanting objects with her needle. I still possess a tiny round multicoloured silk-covered box, hung round with a minute pearl fringe. How had she made it? Her minute stitchery could only have found its equal, I thought, in that work done by Beatrix Potter's little mice-people.

'Never give up anything one does well,' Sylvia counselled me. She never did. In her eighties she began her *Kingdoms of Elfin*, a book she declared she would write 'only to please herself'. The result she achieved in the closing years of her life was a masterpiece of originality and imaginative invention, her wit still pointed and lively and all her writing skills unimpaired. A work entirely individual to herself.

After the death of Valentine from cancer in 1969, aged sixty-three, Sylvia underwent a period of intense loneliness and physical fatigue with infinite courage. But she survived, as she did any crisis. I tried to see as much of her as possible, telephoned her more than before and we both stepped up our correspondence. I made a point too of spending her birthday with her, the sixth of December. On her last one, in 1977, I arrived with my usual bottle of Tio Pepe and some extra goodies she enjoyed, to spare her cooking for me. But as usual Sylvia had forestalled me. Everything we were to eat was in readiness. Always a courteous and thoughtful hostess with perfect manners, I was not allowed to go into the kitchen once during my visit. She wrote me a touching letter which moved me deeply after I left. She wrote how lying in bed one morning:

... I began to think of all the things I owe to you in my life [here followed a list]. You have been like an underground river through all my books. Oh, another thing! I owe you Dorset. If

you had not met that archaeologist and heard from him about East Lulworth and Tommy had not been sent off by candlelight to end up in Chaldon and meet the Powyses I would never have known Valentine. I should not be here.

So my fairy godmother dropped you into my cradle even before you were born, my darling Bea. Always,

Sylvia

But if I had been like an underground river through all her books, what had she been to me in my life? Much, much more, than I will ever be able to express in words, dear Sylvia.

Bea Howe and Sylvia at Frankfort Manor, from Claire Harman's biography of Sylvia.



Bea Howe, Sylvia Townsend Warner and *A Fairy Leapt Upon My Knee*

by Kate Macdonald

When Charles Prentice wrote to Sylvia to say how well *A Fairy Leapt Upon My Knee* was doing, Sylvia promised to pass on the news to Bea.

A Fairy is not about witches, though it comes pretty close when a young woman almost gives in to the blandishments of a thunderstorm. It is about the effect of a fairy on the lives and engagement of Evelina, an independent and wealthy young woman who lives (apparently alone, at the age of twenty-three) in a small house in Cadogan Place, Mayfair, and William Fawcett, a young gentleman of property who is devoted to entomology.

Evelina and William meet at a dance and later get engaged. It's a bloodless betrothal: they are both rather vague and would probably irritate each other with her charming poses and William's aloofness. But they are satisfied and seem to think getting married a good idea. Then William goes back to Oxfordshire for his annual fortnight of solitude on his estate, and Evelina is a little piqued. He has returned to hunt the moths which he collects (and pins to a board) and prepares his patent entrapment mixture of treacle and beer with care.

He anoints the beech trees in the field, waits until dark, and walks round to inspect each trap to see what the night has brought him. Beautiful moths abound, and he is pleased with his haul. Then he approaches the last trap, and sees:

A pale, extremely ugly, wizened-looking little face, about the size of a hazel-nut, stared up at him. And this face did not belong to a giant moth or beetle! The filmy stuff, the cobwebby matter which had first stuck to his fingers and given such a peculiar sensation to his skin, was evidently part of this creature's clothing. Underneath its thin protection William could see the vague outline of a tiny body. It was a woman's body, shaped quite perfectly, like a minikin statuette. With a vague feeling of embarrassment he knelt down and rolled his prisoner gently off his palm on to the ground. The fairy did not move.

This is because the poor creature is tipsy with the beer and remains stupefied for some time. William carries her home, and she takes up resentful residence in his library, hiding in a Ming vase when she feels antisocial, and refusing to cooperate with any persuasion he tries.

Readers who already know *Lolly Willowes* will recognise the style: this is Sylvia's fantasy mode, obviously matter of fact about the impossible, and realistic on the details of such a creature's potential existence. But while Sylvia, fifty years later in *Kingdoms of Elfin*, would describe the anthropology of Elfin with a severe scholarly approach, Bea revels in the joy of magic. When the fairy feels happy, and basks in a ray of sunlight:

Her wings spread unfurled behind her; they were like the wings of a gorgeous butterfly. Every variety of rainbow colour shot and rippled in them, while her own dusky wrappings floated out from her like small pieces of luminous shadow. She had no body. She was an exquisite point of different colours melting into each other. She looked and was enchanted.

When William writes to tell Evelina about the fairy, he asks her to look up fairies in the British Library as he needs the latest research to apply to his observations. Dutifully she does this and absorbs all the current fairy lore she can to report back to him. She discusses the theories of Robert Kirk, the seventeenth-century Scottish minister who visited the fairies and wrote his treatise *The Secret Commonwealth* about them. She mentions MacRitchie's *Testimony of Tradition*, Jacob's *English Fairy Tales*, Hartland's *Science of Folk Lore* and Evan Wentz's *The Fairy Faith of Celtic Countries*. She is a research assistant *par excellence*.

Several of these titles are cited here and there in the *Kingdoms of Elfin* stories in the 1970s, and Sylvia may well have used them in her 1927 article 'The Kingdom of Elfin' (republished in *Of Cats and Elfin* in 2020). It is likely that Bea and Sylvia drew from the same sources. So if you're interested in Sylvia's fantasy writing, *A Fairy Leapt Upon My Knee* is interesting reading, if you can find a copy.

As a novel it is not 100% satisfying. The plot is a bit lacking, and the fairy doesn't do very much, for all that she is supposed to be causing fatal misunderstandings between the lovers. It's more of a near-final draft, and could have been developed, with the feyer parts trimmed to reveal more of the steel and passion which are certainly present.

There is altogether too much trying to be charming and not enough of the imaginative brilliance Bea was capable of writing.

Bea can be spotted in Sylvia's life in the biographies of Sylvia by Wendy Mulford and Claire Harman, and in Sylvia's published diaries and letters. Bea wrote the foreword for the posthumous publication of Valentine's *For Sylvia – An Honest Account*, which was published in 1985. She herself is most well-known for her group biography of famous and forgotten governesses, *A Galaxy of Governesses*, which came out in 1954 with thanks to Sylvia in the Acknowledgements. Her fictionalised biography of Jane Loudon, the early Victorian science fiction novelist and gardening authority, *Green Fingers. The Life of Jane Loudon* (1961), is dedicated to Sylvia: 'In Love And Admiration To Sylvia Townsend Warner Who Also Has Green Fingers'. Bea also published a biography of Mary Haweis, the Victorian Chaucerian scholar and children's novelist, in which Sylvia is thanked for reading its final draft, a book on Victorian antiques and a memoir of her childhood in Chile.

Like almost all of Bea's books *A Fairy Leapt Upon My Knee* had completely disappeared from sight by the end of Bea's life. But it should be remembered as part of the remarkable flowering of 1920s English literary fantasy, alongside Stella Benson's *Living Alone* (1919) and Hope Mirrlees' *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926). And, of course, *Lolly Willows* in 1926, and the rush of popular witchcraft novels that followed it in 1927.

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Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Saturday 10 May 2025 online by Zoom, 4-6 pm BST

Present: Kate Macdonald (minutes), Peter Swaab (minutes), Gill Davies, Janet Montefiore (Chair), Jay Barksdale, Scott Herrick, Sarah Pattison, Judith Bond, Will N Burns, Maud Ellmann, Andrew McDonald, Hilary Bedder, Carolyn Maxim, Rose McMahon, Russell Pierce Foster, Ren Draya, Cody Bates, Howard Booth, Hannah Berry, Annie Rhodes.

The reports have not been attached here but were sent with the minutes to all members in May 2025.

1. Jan welcomed everybody attending, especially our US members Jay, Carolyn, Rose, Russell, Ren, Scott and Cody. There were apologies for absence: Page Nelson, Jennifer Nesbitt, Clare Mabey, Judith Stinton, Mary Joannou and Helen Jones.
2. Approval of Minutes of AGM 2024 (report 1).
3. Matters arising:
 - a. Mary Jacobs Essay Competition. It was agreed to hold the competition in 2026, and announcements will be sent out shortly. **Action: Peter Swaab.**
 - b. The next Society Lecture will be given by Harriet Baker on 22 October 2025 at the Institute for Advanced Studies, UCL, the event starting at 5.30pm.
 - c. Norfolk trip (see report 2). Kate proposed an itinerary running from north to south, from Salhouse to Sloley (location of Frankfort Manor) or Horning for the night, and then Winterton and St Benet's Gateway, to take place on the last weekend in July. Hilary offered to help with planning. The itinerary will be sent with more details in a separate email to members soon. **Action: Kate**
4. Two new officers were proposed: Annie Rhodes as our new Treasurer *, to succeed Helen Jones, and Hilary Bedder to succeed Sarah Jane Pattison as Membership Secretary. These were accepted unanimously. Jan recorded her heartfelt thanks to Helen for her work for the Society over the years, and for continuing for so long with no successor in sight.
5. Treasurer's report (report 3) and accounts of 2024-25 (report 4), presented by Helen Jones and Annie Rhodes. The Society has a healthy balance but it would be helpful to regain the recent reduction in membership income. Peter noted that there had been a recent purchase by the University of Göttingen of some back numbers of the Journal (£42).
6. There are important decisions to be made about how we should bank. We considered four questions raised by Helen and Annie:
 - a. We ask **Annie** to research an alternative to PayPal, and report back to the Chair about the best way forward.
 - b. Conversion fees for non-UK members: it was agreed that the subscriptions cover this.

- c. We ask **Hilary** to chase members who have not paid increased subscription fees, and liaise with Annie, bearing in mind that we could offer reduced fees for those unable to pay.
 - d. We decided not to raise the subscription rate for this year, and asked **Annie** to consider the matter for next year.
 - e. Sarah Jane Pattison raised the issue of banking with Barclays (report 5) over their hostile policy towards trans users and staff. It was agreed to write a letter to Barclays registering concerns and for the Society to consider a change of banks. Judith Bond noted that Barclays had offered some advantageous arrangements. We ask **Annie** to research alternative banking arrangements and report back to the next AGM. **Action: Sarah and Pete** to write to Barclays.
7. Sarah presented the Membership Secretary's report (report 6). Jan expressed her thanks to Sarah for all her work, and for continuing to serve the Society in difficult circumstances. **Hilary** and **Annie** are asked to liaise with Sarah and Helen to make sure we know who the current members are.
 8. Jan presented her Chair's report (report 7), describing the achievements and difficulties of the past year, and announcing that for reasons of health and other pressures, she is stepping down from this role as soon as a replacement can be found. The meeting warmly concurred when Pete thanked Jan for her huge contribution to the Society in her nine years as its Chair, and in particular for taking on the increasingly onerous further role of Secretary when nobody else was available for that post.

Following discussion after the meeting Professor Maud Ellmann was approached to see if she would be willing to take on the role of Society Chair, and she has said that she would be willing. If any members wish to put forward another candidate or to raise any objections, they should contact The Society Secretary, Kate Macdonald (kmacdonald@brookes.ac.uk), by 1st June. Otherwise Prof Ellmann will be confirmed as Chair, starting from 2nd June.
 9. Kate Macdonald offered to take on the role of Secretary for the Society, which was accepted.
 10. Reports from other officers:

- a. Hannah Berry reported on her work as the Online officer (report 8). She plans to be more proactive with the website, asks for more input from members and on Society activities that she can post, plans to move the Society's social media presence from Twitter/X to Bluesky, and to work with Karina on the Facebook page. Jan thanked Hannah for her work.
 - b. Pete reported on the progress of the Journal (report 9), a high point of which this year has been a count of over a third of a million downloads of Journal articles since it was made Open Access by UCL Press. UCL Press in effect subsidise the journal's digital production by waiving its usual fees, and Pete pointed out that this arrangement depends on a UCL staff member remaining as an editor of the Journal. Jan expressed her deep thanks to Pete for his work as Journal Editor, and congratulated him for the high quality of the Journal. **Pete** agreed to Annie's suggestion to bring the existing link to the Society more prominently onto the Journal's webpage when articles are downloaded.
 - c. Kate reported on the Newsletter (report 10), and on the new leaflet. She will send leaflets to Dorset County Museum, Dorchester Library, the Dorset History Centre and the church at Chaldon. **Action: Kate.**
11. Peter reported on planning for the *Lolly Willowes* centenary conference. This will be held at UCL 100 years after *Lolly Willowes* was published. The title has yet to be finalised, but will encompass STW, LW, religion and the supernatural. UCL will host the conference (which coincides with a 200-year anniversary for UCL itself) on 29-30 May 2026 at the UCL Institute for Advanced Studies (not the one at Senate House). Adam Mars-Jones, who wrote an excellent introduction for *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, will be the keynote speaker. It is hoped and fairly confidently expected that UCL will support a good deal of the costs for the conference.
 12. Jan and Sarah reported on the progress of the STW statue in Dorchester. Sarah told us that this will be unveiled at 2pm on Sunday 14th December 2025 as part of Dorchester Council's Christmas festival market. Five people at the meeting indicated that they want to attend the event. Jan said that as the town will be crowded, those needing accommodation in Dorchester in order

to be there at midday on a Sunday should book it early. **Action: Hannah**, to post this on the website.

13. AOB

- a. Jay has some old Journals to redistribute: he will liaise with Kate.
- b. Jan has some of Lyn Mutti's STW library to redistribute, and offered the books to Will Burns, who was happy to accept them.
- c. Michael Lyons is selling a 1922 translation of Bunin's stories, signed by STW on the flyleaf, for which he wants £300. This seems rather too much for the Society, and **Kate** will send Quair Books' details to Jan to forward to Mr Lyons.
- d. Jan asked if people were happy with the change to an online AGM instead of a hybrid meeting in Dorchester as before, with some members present in person and others attending online. There was general agreement this Zoom meeting has been far more satisfactory, by enabling members living at a distance or overseas to contribute to the discussions, and to talk to one another, which hasn't been possible with the hybrid meetings. We agreed to continue having the AGM online, and to try to have in-person opportunities to meet, both at Dorchester and elsewhere, which was unanimously agreed.

Jan then thanked all the members attending, and the meeting closed at 6pm.

Addendum

In late August 2025 Annie Rhodes found that her health would not permit her to carry out the Treasurer's role. John Wilkinson, who came on the Norfolk outing with our new Chair, has kindly offered to take on that role.

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A Norfolk Outing

On 26th and 27th July eleven members of the Society met at the [Shell Museum, Glandford](#), Norfolk, before lunch, to view the large embroidered picture *Panorama of the Norfolk Coast* by John Craske,

one of his paintings, and the truly delightful collection in the Museum. This consists mostly of shells, but many small and curious objects have been added to the display cases by the Curators in the century or so since the Museum was opened. It is exactly the kind of place that Sylvia and Valentine would have enjoyed, and which they may well have visited when living at Great Eye Folly on the coast at Salhouse, a few miles away. Her published Diaries don't mention it but these are selected entries, and it may well be that in the MS the Shell Museum might be mentioned. We had an excellent lunch at the Glaven Bistro around the corner in a converted farmyard, alongside artists' studios and galleries.

After lunch we met at Salhouse with the intention of walking along the beach paths to see where Great Eye Folly, which Sylvia and Valentine had rented over the winter of 1950-51, might have stood. Determined rain prevented this so instead we visited the church and its permanent exhibition about the 1953 Flood presented by Salhouse Village History. This was a serendipitous stroke of fortune, since we discovered there photographs of Great Eye Folly, formerly known as Randall's Folly, Beach House and The Rocket House, before and after the storm. The reports of the storm damage were extraordinary, which you can also read about in Sylvia's *Diaries*.



Great Eye Folly when Sylvia & Valentine rented it (left), and after the 1953 storm (right).

Continuing heavier rain split the party, some to return to hotels and dry clothes, others to visit Sheringham Museum along the coast, which has a collection of Craske embroideries on its top floor. The Museum is planning an exhibition of work by Craske, Tom Armes and Olive Edis in spring 2026.



Detail from a John Craske embroidered picture in Sheringham Museum (photo: Andrew McDonald)

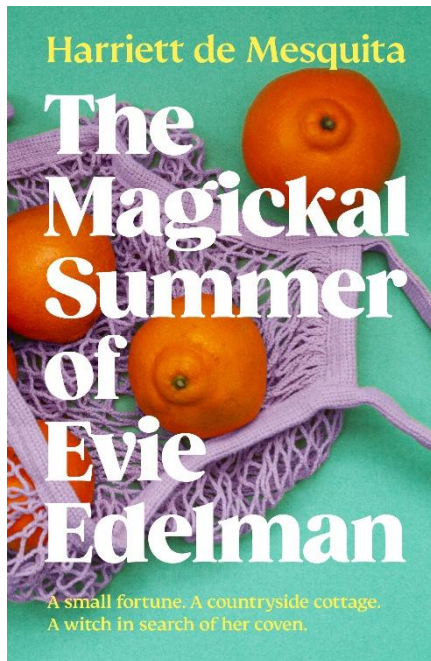
In the evening we met for dinner at the Swan Inn, Horning, where several of us were staying. The service was slow due to a shortage of staff, but enthusiastic and attentive, and the food was good.

On Sunday morning we gathered at St Benet's Abbey near Ludham, at the end of a long farm track which took us to the River Bure. Marion, a volunteer from the Norfolk Archaeological Trust, met us there and gave us a 90-minute guided tour and talk, showing us the topography, the outlines of the original Abbey buildings, its connections with local settlements, and a sense of how the monks lived. She had gone to the trouble of researching aspects of the Abbey and its remains that would connect with *The Corner That Held Them*, which Sylvia had published in 1948. If there is a connection between the Abbey Gateway (its only remaining structure, along with some robbed-out walls) and that novel, Sylvia may have found it on visits to Winterton, not far away on the east coast, where Valentine's mother still lived.

The party then dispersed after a thoroughly enjoyable weekend of stimulating excursions.

The Magickal Summer of Evie Edelman, by Harriett de Mesquita

Review by Kate Macdonald



I admit, I accepted this review copy with some uncertainty. It was pitched to the Society with a quote from the author: 'I was going through a phase of reading Sylvia Townsend Warner novels and was inspired by *Lolly Willowes*: the story of a quiet, Edwardian spinster convinced she is a witch, who breaks away from her stultifying, suburban family to pursue her calling in a very dryly humorous, matter-of-fact way.'

To my great pleasure I can report that this is a highly engaging novel which grew on me quickly until I became resentful that I wasn't able to gobble it all up

immediately. Its plot does follow the *Lolly Willowes* trajectory, but this is not a slavish imitation. This is an intelligent and well written romp about a single woman's escape from a stultifying home life, by buying a cottage in the countryside where she can learn to be a witch. Where Lolly is an Edwardian spinster from London, Evie is a twenty-one year old Jewish girl living in Barnsley in 1982. Lolly is being compressed by the social requirements of her brother and sister-in-law and their entitled son Titus, none of whom she likes, but due to her brother's unfortunate loss of her savings she now has no income and has to live with them, and they can't seem to marry her off. Evie loves her father very much, and is beginning to realise that she does love her mother even though she doesn't understand her, but what is really subjugating her are the social requirements of her Jewish community, which in this case is dominated by the Susies and the Sarahs, the gossip, the expectations, the covert bullying, the constant surveillance and the parade of nice Jewish men it is suggested that Evie might like to meet.

Evie has very recently inherited a small fortune from her recently deceased Aunt Mim, as well as her yellow Alpine Sunbeam and a

chihuahua called Peggy, and so she has become a very acceptable match, despite her 'problem' which hitherto has made her completely unacceptable to the doting mothers in her community.

Evie's 'problem' is that she has Asperger's syndrome (which was the name in the 1980s for what is now classified as autism). This is the element of the novel that tugs the plot out of what might have been just another snappy romantic comedy into something rather more profound. Autism is what sets Evie apart from her family, her friends, and indeed everyone she comes across, except Aunt Mim, whom she still talks to occasionally when Aunt Mim appears on the sofa or walking beside her. It's fairly clear that Aunt Mim and Evie's father are also autistic, at different points on the spectrum, and these are, understandably, the people who Evie loves most. If Evie could be just left alone to live as she wants with her autism, exploring what she thinks being a witch might be, she would be happy, and so she pursues this happiness by buying Faithful Cottage in Thornlaw.

She likes her neighbours, she supports the village shop and goes to coffee mornings, and she discovers, to her amazement, that she is being tussled over by two men. Alex is an old boyfriend, now an estate agent, who is married to one of the perfect Susies, and has bought a house in Thornlaw where he hopes to sell the new houses to be built in the new housing estate on George Cuthbert's field. The other man is Malcolm, whom Evie thinks that she summoned up when she demanded to meet the devil. He is very attractive and seduces Evie after she has been the drunken star turn at what is probably the most excruciating dinner party scene I've ever read. Malcolm is quite obviously not reliable, and Alex is married, so where does that leave Evie?

Was Lolly Willowes herself autistic? It's an interesting point to reflect on, and I think Harriett de Mesquita has done something clever by making autism such a prominent part of her novel. Evie's attempts at witchcraft are already in train when the novel begins, and certain things are drawn to our attention that make it clear that she does have some kind of supernatural ability, just as Lolly did when she magicked Titus out of the village and accepted her kitten familiar. Evie and Lolly are both considered odd, and cause embarrassment to those who expect them to adhere to social codes. Evie goes looking for her coven but makes friends instead. Lolly did find her coven and was initiated but realised that the process was

nonsensical. In both novels nothing and no-one are quite what they seem.

The Magickal Summer of Evie Edelman is great fun, and so intelligently written that it was a pleasure to read.

*

From Lolly to Evie

Discovering Lolly Willowes inspired my own novel about a Female Outsider

by Harriett de Mesquita

It was some sort of serendipity when I discovered Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel *Lolly Willowes*. I wouldn't describe myself as a spinster quite yet, certainly not a witch, but as a single woman moving to the country, Lolly Willowes and I seemed to have a fair amount in common. I read Lolly's journey quickly and avidly, warming to this outwardly conventional woman who suddenly put her own needs first. Her journey made for compulsive reading as I settled into my own house in the country, listening to the sounds of tractors and birdsong, getting used to the enormous skies overhead.

I had left London with a sense of reaching out for something that had always eluded me. Sure enough, in the rural peace and solitude, I obtained a formal diagnosis of autism in the early spring of 2020. A few days after my diagnosis, mind still reeling, I had a thought: what if I took Lolly into modernity, linking her quest for independence and self-discovery through witchcraft to autism in women? *The Magickal Summer of Evie Edelman* was published this summer.

As a female writer I find witchcraft fascinating from a socio-political point of view. It is part of female history, and it used to be a method of suppressing independent women. As an autistic woman and writer, my autistic traits include a deep connection to nature, predictive abilities due to pattern spotting, and extreme sensitivity to environmental change. I wonder how many 'witches' were in fact autistic women? Evie, the heroine of my own novel, is a perpetual outsider looking in. Refusing to settle for a life of keeping quiet and making do, she seizes her own chance of independence. Evie's journey ultimately began with Lolly.

‘I felt as though I had tried to make a sword, only to be told what a pretty pattern there was on the blade,’ Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote of the reaction to *Lolly Willowes*. Much like Lolly herself, the novel was underestimated. Many readers and critics saw only the cosy veneer of a spinster in the countryside. But nearly a century after its publication, Lolly exemplifies a female fight against societal expectations that many women can identify with. Perhaps Lolly was ahead of her time, whilst also of her time.

In one sense, it is almost a little sad that *Lolly Willowes* is still relevant today: times have changed, women today are liberated in many ways. But any woman or girl who goes against the grain, who strikes out on her own, still has a fight on her hands. Sylvia Townsend Warner understood that only too well, and I can sense her compassion for Lolly on every page. *Lolly Willowes* is a deceptively mild and urbane documentation of female fight – I can only hope that my own novel continues to carry that torch that Sylvia lit.

*

What they’re saying about Sylvia

Here is a selection of recent sightings of Sylvia on Bluesky. Other social media channels are also available.

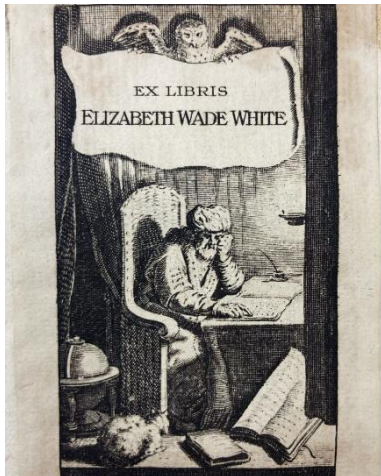
On 24th June the celebrated podcast *Backlisted* did its 242nd episode on *The Corner That Held Them*. The Penguin edition of that novel has (I think) been reprinted recently. A new edition of *Lolly Willowes* has come out in the US (as trailed in this section in the last Newsletter), and so, probably not all coincidentally, there has been a big jump in social media posts demonstrating performative readings of Sylvia and her works, showing how splendidly erudite those people are. Which is of course great to see. The more the better.

Several people mentioned that *Lolly Willowes* was included in the NYRB Books sale, from their series of supernatural works of fiction. *Summer Will Show* is also in that series and also appeared in several posts.

Tom Cox, author, complained about his cat complaining about being photographed with the author’s new novel. ‘Look how tired Jim is of it too. "Stop making me pose with this thing!" he shouted at me about

a minute after I took these. "People don't buy hardbacks, you're never going to be Sylvia Townsend Warner and everyone is too busy reading about fairy sex to bother with literary fiction nowadays."

A poster commented on the 2017 film *The Little Hours*: 'I know it's based on/inspired by the Decameron, but I always felt like this is a great pairing with *The Corner That Held Them* by Sylvia Townsend Warner.'



Liam Sims, Rare Books Specialist at Cambridge University Library, posted this splendid image of Elizabeth Wade White's bookplate. 'Beautiful bookplate of the queer American poet & activist Elizabeth Wade White (1906-94), in a work of philosophy by Giovanni Domenico Roccamora (Rome, 1668). Born in Connecticut, White moved to Dorset in the 1930s, to meet Sylvia Townsend Warner & her partner Valentine Ackland.'

He went on to note that 'the bookplate design is copied from the Elzevir edition of Aulus Gellius (first printed 1651)'.

Clare recommended reading '*Rural Hours* by Harriet Baker, looking at the periods of time Rosamund Lehmann, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf spent living in rural communities and the impact on their lives and writing.'

Novelist and folklorist Terri Windling commented 'I'm completely in love with this photograph of Sylvia Townsend Warner with her father and their spaniel, Friday. It's from a post about STW's novel *Lolly Willowes* by Anna Kennedy Smith, from her excellent Cambridge Ladies' Dining Society newsletter' [which is on Substack].



Arden commented that May Sinclair's novel *Mary Olivier – A Life* [1919, also having a bit of a moment as it's just been reprinted by NYRB Books] 'becomes more like sylvia townsend warner in style as it goes on. want to know if they ever met up to talk about spinsters'.

Craig wrote 'Every so often, I wonder if Sylvia Townsend Warner could have a viable career as a novelist these days - she'd certainly

give the marketing boffins brain bleeds. The only thing her seven novels have in common is that they're stylishly written, fiercely smart and can't be reduced to a snappy blurb.'

A few months later he wrote 'What really blows my mind about Sylvia Townsend Warner is that she really didn't write the same novel twice - and while I don't think they were all equally successful, none of them is a waste of time.'

Kathleen posted this with appreciation: 'Sylvia Townsend Warner, 19 February 1952: "Lying in bed, even in discomfort or pain, I find in myself a ... compliance towards ... a quiet sofa'd old age. I cannot say that these last five days have been agreeable; but my God, they have been congenial." [from *Secret Voices: A Year of Women's Diaries*]

Novelist Ada Palmer posted these fascinating quotations with the comment 'What does it feel like being a censor? 2 views, Saint Jerome (400 CE) & Sylvia Townsend Warner (1940)'.

"When you have once corrected these misstatements and parted them with your Censor's wand from the faith of the Church, I may read what is left with safety, and having first taken the antidote need no longer dread the poison."

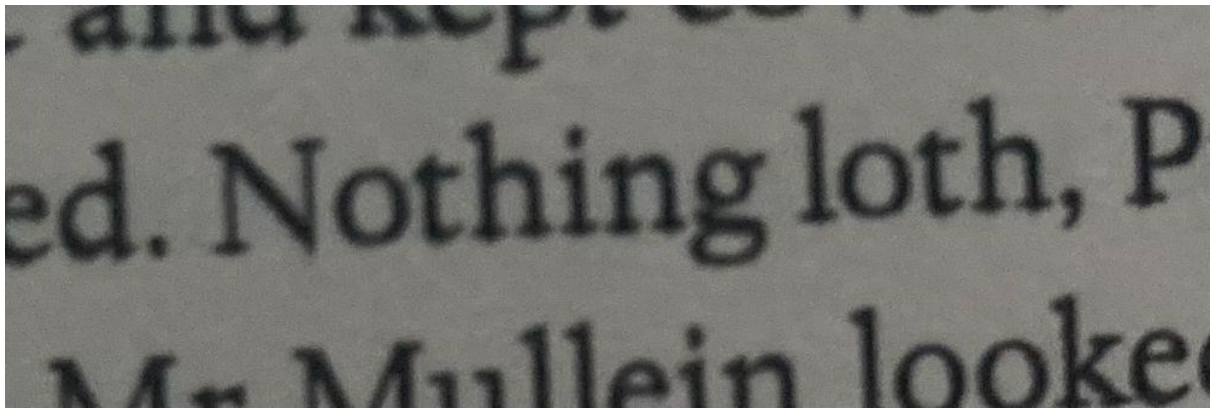
– St. Jerome, Letter LXXXIV to Pammachius and Oceanus, 400 CE

Do you ever think of the Censor? I don't mean from the point of view of muttonising your language, for it's obvious you don't do that. But do you ever think of him as rooms full of ladies and gentlemen, all engaged in the embarrassing occupation of reading other people's letters? What will they do when they can't be censors any longer...? Will they pine and languish and suddenly feel themselves cut off from humanity?... Or will they demonstrate their freedom by never opening another envelope, not even envelopes addressed to them...?"

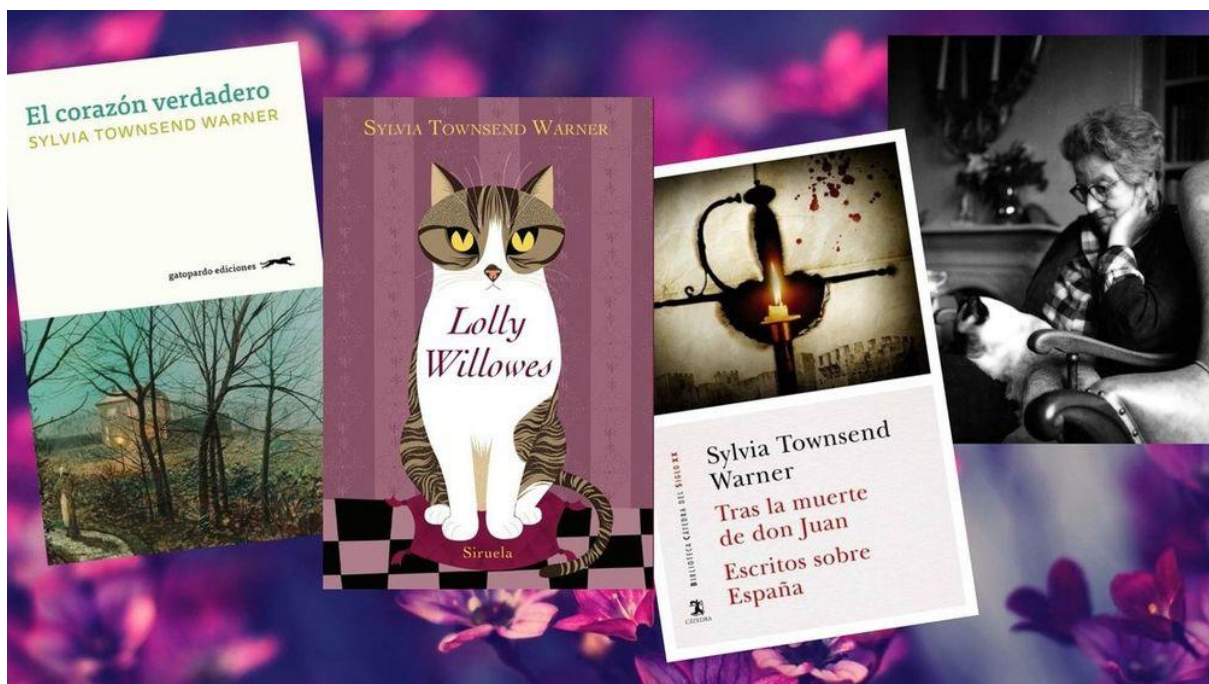
– Sylvia Townsend Warner, letter to Paul Nordoff, regarding Britain's wartime censorship of civilian letters, 1940

Novelist Gfrancie said that she had ‘absolutely devoured another Barbara Pym book. Now onto a Sylvia Townsend Warner book. August is a good time for mildly eccentric British women novelists of the 20th century.’

Scottish resident David noted this: ‘Now extinct in the wild? From a Sylvia Townsend Warner novel.’



Miguel wrote (in an annual post): ‘Un 6 de diciembre nace Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978) Escritora que sin tener estudios reglados, entre los años 20 y 40 del XX, fue una gran renovadora de la narrativa británica. Merece la pena leerla, y que siga recuperandose. Por ahora, encontrarás estas 3 traducciones’.



A Canadian posted this gnomic remark: 'The left isn't talking about Sylvia Townsend Warner anymore'.

David Benedict (biographer of Stephen Sondheim) is enraptured: 'There are umpteen reasons to love Sylvia Townsend Warner: her 7 gloriously unpredictable, unclassifiable novels, the 150 short stories, the diaries and especially the volumes of letters, the first of which, *Selected Letters*, is filled with mischief and fascination.'

And finally, Casimilus posits this interesting thought: 'Alternative history in which Sylvia Townsend Warner emerged as dictator of Britain in 1934'.



published since the 1930s, appeared from Carfax in 1982; more recently there have been selected essays (*With the Hunted*, published by Black Dog), new arrangements and reprints of stories (Penguin Press, Black Dog, Faber, Handheld Press) and, three years ago, a handsome set of the novels in the Penguin Modern Classics series. This

Sylvia Townsend Warner, 1930s

the remarkable work of recovery done since 2000 by *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, must mean that the next phase of textual life, scholarly editions, can't be far off. Two recent republications demonstrate some typical editorial and design variations in the presentation of Warner's work hitherto. Faber's new *Winter in the Air: And other stories* is an (almost) straight

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