

EDITORIAL

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We know from Sylvia's literary preferences and political allegiance that, as William Maxwell observed, 'Her heart was with the hunted, always.' The opening piece, 'Soldiers, Weeding-Women and Linnets', also confirms her sympathies for those minor characters who emerge briefly from other people's journals. As one who fashioned a life for Gilbert White's tortoise from his diaries, it is no surprise to meet his garden-help, Goody Hammond, or Byron's charwoman of 'unbelievable ugliness'. So what shadowy figures from Sylvia's own life have made it onto the page? Her correspondence was voluminous, but less than half the recipients in the Archive appear in the 1982 *Letters*. One, vividly recalled with the help of Joy Finzi's drawing, and a bundle of letters from a Norfolk farmhouse, is Ruth Scott. The story of their friendship concludes this edition, but between these pieces are several welcome contributions from Warner scholars.

The demise of the *Women's Press* has left Frances Bingham's biography of Sylvia's partner in need of a publisher. Her 'Labours of Love' article from *The Guardian* in Valentine's centenary year is just that, and helps plug the gap, but any assessment of her claim that Ackland left 'a remarkable lifetime's work of poetry' must await her edition of the *Collected Poems*. In 1967 Ronald Blythe was a struggling young writer – *Akenfield* was work in progress – but in 'Sylvia in Suffolk' his fond memories of her visit, the Lavenham she knew and her short stories, burn as brightly as the log fire crackling in the hearth when Sylvia arrived.

Mary Jacobs' 'The Politics of Disclosure and the Fable,' explores Sylvia's use of the fable with its layered meaning and subversive message, to question political and aesthetic

assumptions prevalent between the wars. Her discussion of Warner's preoccupations, through a reading of the neglected *Cat's Cradle-Book* (not published here until 1960) adds greatly to our appreciation of her as a lesbian, leftist and lady writer.

In 1919 Sylvia wrote to Thomas Hardy for permission to set three of his poems to music and, years later, in the only known piece on her illustrious neighbour, she chose to highlight his 'sensibility to music' and its effect on his poetry. In 'A True Ear', Sylvia's review of the first independent biography by Evelyn Hardy (no relation) in 1954, her assertion that it is 'by its treatment of *The Dynasts* that any critical book on Hardy must stand or fall' might raise a few eyebrows in a year which sees two more biographies of the great man.

Rachel Willcock's paper 'Re-imagining the Middle Ages' considers *The Corner That Held Them* and the way in which the author adopts the inconsequential style of the chronicle as a way into the mentalité of the medieval world. By this strategy the predominant themes – the prevalence of economic necessity over religious belief; the subordination of individual lives to monastic order; and the monotony of that enclosed world – are played out in a 'novel' that is as 'outwardly ramshackle as the convent buildings'.

Finally reviews of two new books, each in its way an important addition to our appreciation of Warner. *Dorset Stories* which includes several uncollected tales and others long out of print, enables us, as Glen Cavaliero suggests, to observe the development of her style 'from the mannered gnomic mordancy of her friend TF Powys through the somewhat skittish tone of the earlier wartime pieces to the full maturity of her art.' *Critical Essays* is welcomed by Helen Sutherland despite a bias towards the historical novels and the occasional lapse into 'lumpish' textual analysis. Ironically the answer to the question, 'why is such a remarkable writer still neglected?', posed in the Introduction, lies partly in publications like this. The faults cited stem from a lack of editorial rigour and, at £65 (165pp), the collection is beyond all but the most wealthy universities worldwide. As Sutherland concludes Warner may well have preferred her 'twilight existence' to a more elevated academic status.