

THE AKEING HEART. PASSIONATE ATTACHMENTS AND THEIR AFTERMATH

Peter Haring Judd

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(Kindle £6.70)

To most Warner enthusiasts Elizabeth Wade White is the Other Woman, a home-wrecker, a dark shadow falling on the lives of Sylvia Townsend Warner and her partner, Valentine Ackland; a shadow which, like all shadows, lacks both detail and substance. Peter Judd's book, *The Akeing Heart. Passionate Attachments and their Aftermath* changes this for by filling in the details of White's life he creates substance and reveals the complexity of her personality and the slow development

of what was originally a three-way friendship, with Warner fulfilling a 'priestly' role, into a love triangle.

The book's great strength is its extensive use of the correspondence between the three women, which not only allows us to hear all their voices directly but also gives a real sense of the dynamic (ultimately negative in its workings) of the relationships between them. It also reveals how messy the situation was, especially after its resurgence in 1949, by which time White was in a long-term relationship with Evelyn Holohan, who had previously had a brief relationship with Ackland. This was not one love triangle, but two, and Holohan's anger towards Ackland, and the generosity of her love for White are palpable. Resorting to the written word when the spoken word had failed, she argued:

My dear Elizabeth, I note you are still talking about working things out . . . [but] I assure you you can't work this out to suit yourself. . . . First of all please understand that I never will accept, trust or respect V. for reasons I have very definitely and clearly told you. On this matter, any possible doubts I might have had (and I had none) would have been more than confirmed this past summer by the selfish histrionics she burdened you with when you were already most sadly burdened. Secondly, I cannot, and never will, be able to regard your great love with the degree of respect such a love of yours should have. You have rightly censured me for speaking of your relationship with the Dorset Sappho in 'vulgar terms.' The grotesque is usually vulgar, and when you have had sexual relations with a man you are more aware of how grotesque it is for a woman to try to act like a man. . . . In saying this no doubt I have distressed you for which I am sorry but Elizabeth, you and I – and everybody

concerned – are in deadly danger and the sanest thing we can do is to speak honestly . . . as I have told you in talking to you, and as I am now telling you in this letter, you can't 'work this out', so relax and go with what has been done. Eat your cake darling and be philosophical, for that is the quietest thing for you to do. . . If you know anything on this earth you must know that I love you with my whole heart and being, and that above all things I want you to have a good and happy life. pp. 321-323

There are, however, a number of serious problems with *The Akeing Heart*. Judd has taken a biographical approach in which he quotes from letters which he then gives in full, often on the same page, making the book extremely repetitive, and softening the impact of the letters themselves. Cutting these quotations from Judd's text would produce a leaner and more effective read.

There are, too, a number of factual inaccuracies which in themselves are not terribly important (though they should not be there, and one would hope they would be corrected in any subsequent edition), but they do perhaps point to a laxness in using secondary sources. One of the most worrying aspects of this is the reliance on Wikipedia. Although some articles in Wikipedia are excellent, most are not and its unreliability means it must always be checked against a reputable source – in which case it is better just to go directly to that authority for information.

Finally, Judd's book is self-published through Amazon and something has gone seriously wrong in the process. Numbered end-notes are gathered by chapter at the end of the book, as is usual, but the corresponding numbers in the text have been lost, rendering the notes themselves practically useless. Anyone doing research on this correspondence will have to begin the whole process over again, starting with the primary sources but without the benefit of Judd's detailed knowledge of them.

So, given the extent of these problems is the book worth buying? For anyone interested in these writers the answer is 'yes' for some of the information is new: Evelyn Holohan, for example, did not feature at all in Claire Harman's discussion of the affair in *Sylvia Townsend Warner. A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989) but she was obviously a vital part of Elizabeth Wade White's life and may have been instrumental in bringing the love affair with Ackland to an end.

In general the material itself increases our understanding of these two interlinked love triangles and also of the social and historical contexts of the time in which the women lived. Their comments on the Munich Agreement, for example, reveals the suspicion with which that episode was viewed, with Warner's scornful response conveying not just her anger but a real sense of loss and shame.

In an ideal world *The Akeing Heart* would be picked up by a publisher, given the benefit of a firm editorial hand and issued in a revised edition which would better serve the needs of the general reader and constitute a starting point for research into Elizabeth Wade White. Until such time as the ideal becomes the actual we can at least access these letters and for that we must be grateful to Peter Judd.

Helen Sutherland