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'THIS WAS A LESSON IN HISTORY': Sylvia Townsend Warner, George Townsend Warner and the Matter of History

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'If story-telling had not appealed to her more,' suggests William Maxwell, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner might have been a formidable historian.' Indeed, to the privileged children of Britain's preparatory schools the name Townsend Warner is associated first and foremost with history. For even today, nearly 90 years after the death of George Townsend Warner pupils still compete in the annual Townsend Warner History Competition[1]. George Townsend Warner – son of an Anglican clergyman; sometime fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge; master of the modern side at Harrow School (a school for the brightest sons of the wealthiest families, rivalled only by Eton College) – was also a writer, particularly of history textbooks for use in schools. In his time his teaching was considered outstanding. Apparently, 'his advice [was] sought and opinions accepted without discussion' by dons at both Oxford and Cambridge[2]. His daughter, however, was educated at home. As well as being taught by governesses, she claimed to have read everything in the house[3] and often benefited from her father's undivided attention[4]. But Sylvia felt that her real education in history came when she was doing background research for *Summer Will Show*. Delving into histories and memoirs written soon after the 1848 Paris Revolt, she found inconsistent dates and incompatible accounts. 'This was a

lesson in history', she was later to recall, remarking also: 'but their prejudices made them what I needed.'[5] For one of the ironies when considering the works of both father and daughter is that it was Sylvia (musicologist, creative writer) who handled original manuscripts as she carried out research for the Tudor Church Music Project, and near-contemporary accounts as she researched her novels, whilst her father (historian, purveyor of fact) admits that his skill lay in composition. In *Landmarks of Industrial History* (1899) he asserted that 'the novelty of my book lies merely in selection and arrangement'[6]; and the stated aim of *The Groundwork of British History* (1912) (which he co-authored with C.H.K. Marten) was 'to trace out the main threads of British history, omitting small and unfruitful details.'[7]

The historian Herbert Butterfield writes in the 1920s: 'the history of textbooks is really little more than a chart of the past.' If Sylvia was used to history of this sort, it is scarcely surprising that her discovery of incompatibilities and prejudices took her aback. One of the books she used was a collection of documents: R.W. Postgate's *Revolutions from 1789 to 1906: Documents*. 'Valentine was sure I had a cold coming', Warner wrote in her diary on 16 March 1935, 'so I spent the day in bed with Postgate's Revolutionary documents of the 19th Century and my patchwork.'[8] Postgate's book is itself a patchwork of sorts, but his preface makes it plain that, though his excerpts are of many types, he has a clear design in mind:

> [This is] not an attempt to depict the course of various arbitrarily selected revolutions in the words of the revolutionaries themselves... The aim of the Editor has been rather to select speeches, posters and articles which show what the revolution 'was all about': what were the principles, the thoughts in their minds, and the phrases they used: and particularly which of their acts became the seeds of future revolution. [9]

Whilst Sylvia, too, recommended an emphasis on principles and thoughts, she was addressing novelists, rather than historians, when she delivered her lecture 'The Historical

Novel' at the Third Congress of the League of American Writers in New York in 1939.

The historical novelist cannot dodge the obligation, so it seems to me, of knowing pretty accurately how people clothed their minds. Human nature does not change etc., but human thinking alters a great deal, it is conditioned by what it has been taught, what it believes or disbelieves; what it admires in art or nature; at what age it marries, to what extent it has outwitted the weather... what careers are open to it.[10]

One wonders how much of this her father might have considered as an emphasis on those 'small and unfruitful details' he was so anxious to excise, but what Sylvia is actually describing is the uncovering of what we might call a metanarrative, a guiding system of beliefs, a narrative of history as progress. Postgate's collection of documents – primary sources presented as if neutrally – is actually history as a template for 'the seeds of future revolution', and the template used is the Communist Manifesto, which he works neatly into his design on page 139: 'not only did it turn Socialism forever from the paths of secret conspiracy into those of open propaganda; it gave to it its place in history.' Sylvia, therefore, might be seen (in *Summer Will Show*) as giving the manifesto its place in art[11]. But note here how Postgate's editing favours the rhetoric of public record, not private reflection. Even in the presentation of primary sources the historian's aim is a cohesive narrative, not the inconsistencies that gave Sylvia her 'lesson in history'. George Townsend Warner's aim was not just a cohesive narrative but also to 'add value', as it were, to history:

The value of history as an educational subject, even to the young, cannot, I think, be fully realized, unless some stress is placed upon the sequence of cause and effect, so as to exercise not merely the memory but the reason [12].

Even as he stresses history's 'value as an educational subject', Warner seems not to recognise how strongly his own values come through. For the story he narrates, what he describes as

'the broadening stream of our national history' (and we shall see shortly the fun his daughter had with streams and history,) is actually empiricist and imperialist: it is the story of Empire. In discussing, for instance, the wars Britain took part in during the mid-eighteenth century, he observes that 'this variety of enemies seems to point to Britain's being universally quarrelsome;' nevertheless, 'Britain was really only carrying on the struggle with the French which had begun with William III, the object was colonial.' Perhaps her father's prose and methods provide the inspiration for Mr Tizard – a character in her story 'A Love Match' – who, though 'he had every intention of preserving a historian's impartiality' was, nevertheless 'infected by the current mood of disliking the French.'[13]

I have considered, so far, the teaching of history in the very late 19th and early 20th centuries. Before switching my focus to Sylvia Townsend Warner's thoughts about history and historical novels in the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, I want to make a few observations about the status of historical novels, and Sylvia's use of history in her novels, during the 1920s and 1930s. It is curious, but neither the Oxford nor the Cambridge Companions to English Literature makes any mention of the novels Sylvia wrote after the 1920s. I suspect that this is because they are dismissed as being that dreaded thing 'genre fiction' or, more precisely, historical. As Janet Montefiore has put it, 'historical novels...are a fairly specialized and obscure variety of fiction.' Now whilst this observation may be correct from the perspective of recent literary criticism, this was not the case for those who were reading such novels during the 1920s and 1930s. Academic historians like Herbert Butterfield were stressing the value of historical novels in helping students to develop their 'historical imagination'[14]. Or, as GM Trevelyan observed in 1927, 'the appeal of History to us all is in the last analysis poetic'[15]. He felt that the history taught for examinations was necessary but that it 'tended to diminish the unplumbed and uncharted wastes of history.'[16] The pedagogical value of historical novels is apparent from the leaflets published by the Historical Association during the

1920s[17] and from Jonathan Nield's *Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales.* Nield states that his work was compiled 'partly as an aid to teachers' and that his new, (1929), edition was prompted 'by an almost alarming influx in this department of fiction' in 'the last year or two'. This suggests an upsurge in the writing of historical novels even before the left-wing novelists of the 1930s moved towards portraying current events in – as Montefiore and others have suggested – Aesopian language. The two novels Sylvia wrote during the 1930s (*Summer Will Show, After the Death of Don Juan*) are often read (accurately, interestingly) as a coded commentary on contemporary events. But is that to say that Sylvia used history solely to critique the present? At least two things would suggest not. Firstly – and this is something which frequently goes unremarked – history was deployed to great effect in her early novels, too. In *Lolly Willowes* there is a cunningly constructed family history[18]. And *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, dismissed by C.H. Rickword in the *Calendar of Modern Letters* as being set in the 'never never Islands', is actually set in a never-again land. As the missionary Timothy Fortune leaves the Pacific Island of Fanua, he is immediately told that in the Great War 'the Germans crucified Belgian children'. Not only is Mr Fortune exiled from 'everything that was real, everything that was significant, gone down with the island... and lost forever.' His presence has also changed the island irrevocably, leaving pencil sharpeners, measuring tapes and other such (symbolic) trappings of modernity. Note here how Sylvia has used details that her father might have considered 'small and unfruitful' to pointed effect. And this is also a devastating critique of her father's preferred metanarrative of Empire.

Yet although Sylvia does seem to use her novels as a critique of recent events, she was quite scathing about many of the historical novels of the 1930s. In the lecture she gave in New York she observes that whilst in 'traditional historical novels' there had been a class distinction – 'the upper class characters were fully period' but 'servants and peasants... had scarcely a period rag to cover them' – there had been a recent 'Revolt against this':

All the characters in historical novels are of the present day, contemporary in speech, in behaviour, in motive, in psychology. But the talisman is not infallible, and these characters straight out of modern life may make up a perfectly lifeless book. There must, it seems, be some recognition of history in the historical novel[19].

And so, having suggested that to historians (if not to literary critics) the historical novel was seen as an important pedagogical tool, I want to conclude by considering Sylvia's recognition of history, and her barbed parody of historiography, in *The Corner That Held Them*, the work that she wrote whilst England was (again) at War.

The 'small and unfruitful details' that George Townsend Warner omitted became, as we have seen, the stock-in-trade of his daughter. In her earlier novels playfully miscegenetic lists litter her works, laced with malice aforethought. As well as the gifts left on Fanya, we have lists such as this one from *Lolly Willowes*, a list of institutions the heroine feels she must 'needs forgive' before she can forgive her family:

Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great-great-aunt Salome and her prayerbook, the Bank of England, Prostitution... and half a dozen other useful props of civilisation[20].

In *The Corner That Held Them*, it is Sylvia's mock-inventorial style (deliberately conflating unlikely bedfellows) that becomes her novel's structure. She wrote (delightedly) to friends that 'my new novel has no plot', and indeed it is episodic in structure. It clearly confused her British publisher, who requested cuts, particularly of all the politicking that her nuns got up to. In the novel it is Oby, the nunnery, that is both locus and focus of the book. The nuns come and go, but Oby remains. And it is this emphasis on the many small happenings over at least 30 years within one place that makes me think that Sylvia had anticipated the coming of the soap opera to Britain, where our native soaps have such titles as *Coronation Street; Emmerdale Farm*; and *Brookside*. Place and geography are closely bound up with time and people. So

let us return to George Townsend Warner's geographical trope of 'the broadening stream of our British history' and also to Sylvia's first impressions of historical novels [that]:

had usually long and frequent descriptions of scenery – I supposed in order that the author might have a spell of taking it easy. Oaks and brooks get along through the centuries without much fuss about being 'period'[21].

In *The Corner That Held Them* Sylvia writes about a brook – the Waxle Stream – that is in a constant state of flux. But with the Waxle Stream Sylvia was not lazily adding local colour without the need for adding period detail. This stream becomes a metaphor for both flux and the passage of time. In this it is like the Hog Trail, the causeway that rises above the periodic floods caused by the Waxle Stream. The Hog Trail is not merely the Isle of Oby's connexion to the wider world, it is evidence of 'man's will to thwart nature' and, through folk memory, it is a metaphor for the presence of the past in the present. It is associated with invasion and conquest. When first mentioned – as Sylvia is narrating events in the twelfth century – it is a link with the time before the Norman Conquest: it was 'made long before the first de Bazingham came into England.' As the narrative moves to the fourteenth century, however, the Hog Trail's time line stretches still further back, to the Viking invasions of the east coast. With this dual movement in time, with the Hog Trail's stretching further back as the narrative moves forward in time, it becomes the symbol of the time, and indeed the place, in which Sylvia wrote. Europe was at war and Sylvia, living on the South coast of England, wrote beneath skies 'very noisy with bombers'[22]. Flying through the air with weapons, 'man's will to thwart nature' had taken a cruel new turn, yet the natural cycle continued; two days before she started writing 'a story about a medieval nunnery to be entirely taken up with their monetary difficulties', she noted in her diary that 'the wind is pure east, the moon is in her first quarter, we are at war.' The moon waxed, even as Britain's fortunes waned. It is, then, perhaps unsurprising that the stream Sylvia described,

and which inspired many of the projected titles for the novel[23] – Shadows on a River; A Slow Stream; A Winter Island; The Winter's Island; Time Like a River; Above Flood Level – is a small yet unpredictable one. It forms a stark contrast to 'the broadening stream of our national history.' Was it, perhaps, also a deliberate riposte to her father? When she writes about the effects of the Black Death – 'in one house, every monk had died. In another every monk but one' – she is actually quoting from one of her father's books, although she has removed the place names he gave[24]. Perhaps such 'small and unfruitful details' have no place in a novel about the past? It is a provocative thought, and one that I wish to leave unresolved. Nevertheless, this novel is far more than wartime England projected back onto medieval England. The novel that she described as 'A purely Marxian account of nuns' and 'not in any way a historical novel, it has no plot, no thesis'[25] (observe the contradiction of describing it to one person as being 'Marxian' whilst insisting to another that 'it has no thesis') is also about the matter of, the instability of, history itself. In it Sylvia displays a sophisticated grasp of historiography, of writing, and thinking about, how history is written, what it is based on.

The novel begins in high genre-fiction mode, as Alianor de Retteville lies in bed with her lover:

> She did not speak. She had nothing to say. He did not speak either. They were not alone, for in a corner of the room an old woman sat spinning, but she was no more than the bump and purr of her wheel (1[26]).

What a curious place for a Marxian account of nuns' financial difficulties to begin! And what a vivid picture, implying that the lovers had no need for speech because they too, like the spinning wheel, communicated in the language of 'bump and purr'. The erotic languor is rudely shattered by murder, as Alianor's husband and cousins sweep in to remove this stain upon the family name. But it is not just Giles, the lover, who must be killed. The old woman, the spinster, must be silenced and, with a 'so much for you Dame Bawd!' the possible source of gossip is thrown down the stairs to her death.

Brian de Retteville later repents these deeds and founds the nunnery by way of atonement (how ironic that a nunnery should be conceived by an act of carnality). But it is Dame Bawd who intrigues. Personified thus, she is far more than an anonymous woman; she becomes the figure of domestic tales, of the mother tongue, of the oral tradition, of the material that eludes the 'official' documentary record on which history is based. Later in the novel Sylvia will give us accounts of nuns frustrated by their inability to speak Latin and of a poet mocked for writing in his mother tongue. Sylvia has much to say about literary history as well as (for want of a better term) history history.

History history swiftly comes to the fore, as Sylvia fills in the years between the nunnery's creation in the twelfth century and the fourteenth century. Observing – tongue firmly in cheek – that 'A good convent should have no history. Its life is hid with Christ above.'(7) Sylvia proceeds to write the convent's history, condensing the passing of more than a century as she parodies the annals (lists of dates with an occasional important, usually awful, event written beside them) and chronicles (which introduce a certain element of narrative, as if to tell a story, but still break off *in medias res*) which she doubtless encountered amongst the musical manuscripts she worked on in cathedral archives. And thus:

> In 1297 the bailiff was taken in an act of carnality with a cow. Both he and the cow were duly executed for the crime, but this was not enough to avert the wrath of heaven. That autumn and for three autumns following there was a murrain among the cattle.(11)

A note here on cause and effect: that which, in George Townsend Warner's view, added value to history. Sylvia is at play here, knowing that, in thirteenth-century England, God was (ultimately) both cause of, and authority for, all action. And the Devil was his necessary counterpart in this. In this pre-modern frame of reference the act of carnality (with the cow) is seen as an act of the Devil (who is the ultimate cause of all such wrongdoings). This misdemeanour requires a retributive act of divine wrath, ergo the cattle plague (the final

effect). But consider it also, as Sylvia would have done, from a twentieth-century perspective. The Devil and God are eliminated from the equation, leaving us with, implicitly, act of carnality (cause), cattle plague (effect), suggesting the possibility of sexually transmitted diseases. It is a small and wicked point, swiftly made, swiftly passed over, for soon it is '1345, when Prioress Isabella choked on a plum-stone' whence follow 'four ambling years of having no history, save for a plague of caterpillars.' Caterpillars apart, those 'four ambling years of having no history' suggest, simultaneously, both that the nunnery was being very good (how dull!), its history safely 'hid with Christ above', and also that bizarre feature of the annals: the dates that have no events written beside them (signifiers without signifieds, as Hayden White puts it).

Echoes of this bravura pastiche of historiography are found throughout the remainder of the novel. There is much about the nun's monetary troubles, but whilst Sylvia might have seen this as part of a 'Marxian' approach, it is also an accurate reflection of the documentation available for this period. We know little of the lives of individuals in religious orders, but their account books remain. And we are shown just how inaccurate written records may be, how they are not always the unproblematical resources that some historians might take them to be.

In the episode entitled 'Chapter IX, The Fish Pond (July 1374 – September 1374)' (the chapter headings are textbook-like) we see an episode in history – a murder – which, though anything but good, remains hidden 'with Christ above' and also from the Bishop. As Bishop Walter records his views on the nuns and their finances, he views Dame Alice (murderess) as 'a plain honest good woman' and 'he noted and underlined her desire to leave Oby for some simple, God-fearing nunnery where she could live as inconspicuously as possible.'(181) And as we consider that it is records such as this that become the basis of history, let us also note a point to be borne in mind by palaeographers: 'his handwriting grew neater as his mistrust and indignation grew.'(180)

To return to the words of William Maxwell: 'if story-telling

had not appealed to her more, Sylvia Townsend Warner might have been a formidable historian'. I suggest that she was a formidable historian, one whose understanding and use of storytelling reveals the fictiveness of any single, historical 'real'. In Sylvia's fiction we are shown, playfully, with Sylvia's characteristic lightness of touch, the fiction (which is etymologically, the 'fashioning', from the Latin *fingere*, to shape) of historical fact.

1 One such school's website announces that its 'more able, keen historians' meet each week to prepare for the Townsend Warner History Prize. www.st-aubvns.brightonhove.sch.uk/history.htm 29 January 2002.
2 *The Harrovian*, vol xxix (1916) p96
3 Warner, Sylvia Townsend 'The Historical Novel' p50. 'The Historical Novel' is a transcript of Warner's lecture to the Third Congress of the League of American Writers and appears in Stewart, Donald Ogden (ed) *Fighting Words* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co 1940)
4 See the description of Sylvia's childhood in Harman, Claire *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus 1989) particularly, p20
5 Excerpts from a note that Warner wrote retrospectively (during the 1960s) about the composition of *Summer Will Show* (1936). The note is included in Maxwell, William (ed), *Letters: Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto & Windus 1982) p40
6 Warner, George Townsend, *Landmarks in British Industrial History* (London: Blackie & Son, Limited 1899) preface
7 Warner, George Townsend and CHK Marten, *The Groundwork of British History* (London: Blackie & Son, Limited 1912) p vi
8 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *Diaries* (edited by Claire Harman) (London: Chatto & Windus 1994) p98
9 Postgate, R.W. (ed), *Revolution from 1789 to 1906: documents* (London: Grant Richards Ltd 1920) pvii
10 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, 'The Historical Novel' p50
11 The tract that the heroine, Sophia Willoughby, begins to read at the end of the novel (and which the reader reads with her) reproduces the opening lines of the Communist Manifesto
12 Warner, George Townsend, *A Brief Survey of British History*, etc. (London: Blackie & Son, Limited 1899) preface
13 Warner, Sylvia Townsend 'A Love Match' in Tate, Trudi (ed) *Women, Men and the Great War: An Anthology of Stories* (Manchester University Press 1995). The story's first publication was in 1961
14 Butterfield, Herbert, *The Historical Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1924). Butterfield recognises that 'historians cry out

because a...[novelist] tampers with history' (p6) but argues that fiction has a 'peculiar virtue, as the gateway to the past' (preface) because 'it helps our imagination to build up its idea of the past.' (p2)

15 Trevelyan, George Macaulay, *The Present Position of History* (London: Longmans, Green & Co 1927) p28

16 Trevelyan 1927 p9

17 See, for example, Firth, C.H. 'Historical Novels' London. Historical Association Leaflet 51, 1922. Firth notes that both 'Board of Education and Army Education circulars' were recommending the use of historical novels. In the companion pamphlet on 'Foreign Historical Novels' Harold Temperley observes that novelists such as Thackeray and Scott were not 'composing real history' but, rather, 'they filter its white light picturesquely through their gorgeous fancy.' (p5)

18 In this novel there is a complex network of symbolic puns : 'Willowes' is the name of a family much concerned with its family tree; one which thinks of itself as dynastic and immemorial, as the 'house of Willowes' (p9). It actually turns out to be the contents of the Willowes houses (especially the furniture and the books) that regulate the Willowes traditions, even though the Willowes homes are, themselves, regulated in 'traditional' ways. Indeed, Warner even uses the family furniture to show how tradition is (literally) furnished. See Sykes, Rosemary 'The Willowes Pattern' in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2001.

19 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, 'The Historical Novel' pp50-51

20 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, *Lolly Willowes* 1926

21 Warner, Sylvia Townsend, 'The Historical Novel'

22 Diary entry for 17 March, 1941. See Harman, Claire (ed) *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (London: Chatto & Windus 1994)

23 These possible titles are listed in notebook held in the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive, held at Dorset County Museum.

24 In *The Corner That Held Them*, we are told that 'in one house, every monk had died. In another, every monk but one.' In *Tillage, Trade and Invention* George Townsend Warner states that 'At the monastery of Heveringland, prior and canons died to a man; not one escaped. At Hickling, one canon survived.' See Warner, George Townsend *Tillage, Trade and Invention*, (London: Blackie & Son 1912), pp53-54

25 Sylvia discussed the 'Marxian' origins of her novel in 'Sylvia Townsend Warner in Conversation', an interview included in the celebration of her life and work published in PNR 23 (1981)

26 Page references are to the 1988 Virago Press edition