

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Some Notes on Sylvia Townsend Warner (c. 1926)

Ben W. Huebsch*

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Editor's Note: Ben Huebsch (1876–1964) is mainly known to readers of Warner as her editor at Viking Press, which regularly published the American imprints of her works alongside the British editions brought out by Chatto & Windus. His interesting career as man of letters began in 1900 with the founding of his own publishing house, B.W. Huebsch, which issued the first American editions of various titles by Lawrence, Joyce and Sherwood Anderson. In 1925 he merged this house with the newly founded Viking Press, of which he became vice president and senior editor. He played a large role in introducing a wide American readership to such European writers as Stefan Zweig, Erich Maria Remarque and Thomas Mann. A man of the Left, he was treasurer of the American Civil Liberties Union from 1926 until his death.

Warner adopts the role of his guide with some gusto in these pages, as she does in other glimpses we have of her meetings with Huebsch. In August 1927 she writes earnestly to him to recommend Powys's Mr Weston's Good Wine for the Viking Press (Letters, pp. 12–13). One of her diary entries in summer 1931 sees her more mischievously introducing 'old English customs for poor Ben' on his visit to Dorset (Diaries, p. 86). When he died in 1964, she wrote to Joy and Marchette Chute 'I loved him dearly, and still see him in this garden, drinking a vin rosé and completely foxed by the phenomenon of the Parish Magazine, which he read with bewildered attention. It was an aspect of English life he had never encountered' (Letters, p. 214). No doubt Huebsch in his turn had introduced her to much she hadn't seen before as her host and guide during her spell as guest critic for the New York Herald in 1929.

These vivid notes seem to record Huebsch's first meeting with Warner. They are undated but the reference to Warner's 'new story ... of a missionary in the South Seas' places the meeting between the publication of Lolly Willowses at the start of 1926 and Mr Fortune's

Maggot in 1927. It is dark when they leave the Charterhouse, which suggests the days have not lengthened, so the notes may date from early 1926. It sounds as if Mr Fortune is still at an early stage, probably therefore earlier in the year than 4 August, when Warner told David Garnett that 'My missionary is an impossible length' (Letters, p. 9). He seems to be making the notes partly for himself and partly reporting back to somebody else who has a photo of Warner that Huebsch hasn't himself seen.

The last four paragraphs of Huebsch's notes include a number of gaps and blank spaces, and these are presented below as they appear in the typescript; evidently Huebsch had it in mind to do some final checks and tidying.

Some notes on Sylvia Townsend Warner, with whom I lunched and spent this afternoon.

Garlands Hotel
Suffolk Street
Pall Mall, S.W.1.

Miss Warner has quite the least forced humor I have met in many a day. She can and does discuss architecture and literature and music soberly, but even then there is a quality of liveliness, a sparkle that removes any possibility of dullness. Her imagination is constantly active as, for example, when someone spoke of the changing levels of ancient buildings in Italy and wondered whether the foundations were sinking or the soil rising, she was reminded of the Andersen tale of the girl who, seeking to save her red slippers, walked on the loaves and sank down with them.

Of course she believes in witches although 'L.W.' was written rather because she fancied the title than with a view to propaganda for her theories. She was among the Essex marshes and the sight of willows caused her to utter the word. From 'willows' she came to 'Lollie Willowes' and the combination of sounds kept going through her head. The title becoming fixed she decided to write the book.

She herself went out to the country for a month, leaving no clew to her whereabouts. She is evasive about a personal meeting with the devil but it may be surmised – well, who that reads 'Lolly' can believe it to be *entirely* a product of the imagination!

The war brought disappointment to her in that it interfered with her plan to go to Vienna to study composition with Schönberg. Her occupation is the deciphering of Tudor and other old musical MSS

and she holds that the hope of English musical development is not in imitating the Continental moderns but in reviving and applying the historic idiom. Notwithstanding her researches her musical taste is catholic. Among English composers she admires much of the work of Vaughan Williams.

Oddly enough the American author she mentioned with active interest was Mary E. Wilkins whose books she admires; she thinks they will 'come back'. But then her interest in American literature lies in depictions of the tiller of the soil, and if she were to go to America the farming section of the West would attract her. I think she said 'yes' to my inquiry whether she has read Willa Cather.

She hasn't travelled abroad since childhood but she loves to explore England, touring the country afoot. Evidently she has the instinct of an archaeologist – speaks almost with affection of a bit of mortar or the like, at the museum in Newcastle which bears the impression of a Roman's hand. One summer she followed the Roman wall from Newcastle to Carlisle. (Verify my geography.) In the vicinity of the ruins she discovered chives which grow nowhere else in England. That, she is convinced, dates back to Roman days and must have been brought over by the Spanish legionaries whom the Romans used in the manner customary to invaders of foreign lands.

She regrets the passing of the old London, the sacrifices to modernity, and it afforded her very evident joy to guide me through Smithfield to the Charterhouse, where, guided by her friend who is the custodian we wound in and out of its courts, examined its treasures books, halls, chapel, wainsco[t] carvings, . She feels a real affinity for this monument relic in part, of the xiv cent when it was the home of Carth monks, and later associated with Steele, Roger Williams, Wesley, Thackeray, Leech and other great Englishmen who were schoolboys there.

It was dark when we left the Charterhouse but she wanted me to see the fine example of the Norman that St. Bartholomew's. We had to control ourselves with the exterior for the gates were closed, which caused her to resent, humorously, the Protestantism is [sic] England.

A then [sic] narrow shouldered person with rather sharp features, wearing spectacles; not an imposing figure but with animation and a whimsicality that springs from within and is not assumed. The portrait of which you have a photo (I haven't seen it) makes her 'almost as aquiline as the American eagle,' she says.

– She enjoys the thought of her new story – to be perhaps words – of a missionary in the South Seas who, after seven years succeeds in making a convert. (More, later, if I should think of anything).

BWH