

CRITICAL ESSAYS ON  
SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER  
*Gill Davies, David Malcom, John Simons (eds.)*  
(Edwin Mellen Press, 2006, Hardback, £65)

The avowed intention of this collection is to ‘stimulate interest in Sylvia Townsend Warner and to confirm her reputation as an important and original twentieth-century writer’ (Introduction, 9), making this a welcome addition to the still relatively slender corpus of critical writing on this author.

The essays cover a range of Warner’s writing, with a bias towards her historical work: there are no fewer than three essays on the historical novels alone, and although there is little duplication, it would have been helpful to signal more clearly the close connections between the essays by Sykes and Hopkins to prevent the feeling of *déjà vu* when reading the latter. However, whether dealing with the historical, pastoral or epistolary the essays work well together as a collection, not least because they all tend to draw out Warner’s interest in, and skilful manipulation of, literary form in order to question society’s assumptions or undermine repressive power relations, be this within the family or society at large. Mary Jacob’s excellent essay, ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral

1925-1934' is a case in point, for she argues cogently that Warner gave a radical twist to the traditional and often conservative pastoral mode to create 'an approach in which class and gender aspects are subtly interrogated by means of stylistic and narrative experiment' (61).

On the whole these essays are lucid, well written and well argued, though they occasionally descend into the lumpishness that currently plagues some academic writing. The essays by Margaretta Jolly, Emily M. Hinnov and Frances Bingham are all affected by this problem, though for slightly different reasons. Hinnov's densely textured and very interesting essay, 'A Counter-Reading to Conquest: "Primitivism" and Utopian Longing in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Mr Fortune's Maggot*' includes quite extensive theorising which she fails to embed sufficiently within her argument, disrupting the flow of thought and making the essay less effective. Jolly's essay, 'A Word is a Bridge: Death and Epistolary Form in the Correspondence of Sylvia Townsend Warner and David Garnett' is similarly afflicted, with the additional problem that she assumes greater knowledge of the theory of letter-writing than is wise (though much depends, of course, on whether this collection attracts more than an academic readership). In Bingham's case the problem, I suspect, is the perennial one of too much material, and in her efforts to compress it the result is disjointed and fails to do her material justice.

Enjoyable though this collection is, there are a number of other problems, the first being careless detail. For example, errors in punctuation, almost certainly typographic, have crept into some quotations from Warner's works (see the quotations from *After the Death of Don Juan* and *The Corner That Held Them* on pages 6 and 7). Similarly, the emphases (signalled by use of italics) to which Jolly draws our attention have disappeared from the critical quotations she uses (14; 15), dissipating the point that either she or the critic in

question wishes to make. Other mistakes occur in reference to *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, for Maroula Joannou notes in the Preface that the authorship of each poem was indicated at the end of the book, although this was simply not the case. As Warner's and Ackland's 'Note to the Reader' makes clear, the anonymity of each poem was to be permanent. Frances Bingham goes astray here, too, by misattributing the poem 'Drawing you heavy with sleep' to this collection. Elsewhere John Simon's relocates the central character in 'Foxcastle' from the University of Aberdeen to Glasgow University. Of course these are minor matters, and one feels slightly ungenerous in identifying them, but they are an irritating distraction and readily avoidable.

Secondly there are annoying inconsistencies. Most contributors, for example, refer to Sylvia Townsend Warner simply (and properly) as 'Warner', but some favour 'Townsend Warner' or occasionally even 'Sylvia'. This last is perfectly acceptable to differentiate her from her father, George Townsend Warner (as Sykes does in her comparison of father and daughter as historians), but only then. Again, this is a minor matter. Similarly, it would be both helpful to the reader and good professional practice to have only one referencing style in use throughout the collection, rather than the variations favoured here by individual contributors. What this points to is the need for a firmer editorial hand; a need also demonstrated by the inclusion of John Simons' 'Note on Tortoises' at the end of his essay, 'On the Compositional Genetics of the *Kingdoms of Elfin*', for the lack of intrinsic connection between the two pieces merely weakens the main essay, which is a fascinating discussion of Warner's source material. In general, however, the editors can be pleased with their work for they have made an interesting and well ordered selection – in itself no mean achievement.

The real problem with this collection, however, and the reason I fear it will fail in its aim to stimulate interest in Sylvia Townsend Warner is its price, for at £65 this volume is

prohibitively expensive. Unfortunately academic libraries can only justify the purchase of books where they can be certain of demand; and demand comes from including authors in courses or modules, preferably at undergraduate level. However, authors can only be included when there is a body of readily available secondary material and books priced at £65 are hardly that. It seems, therefore, that Sylvia Townsend Warner will continue her twilight existence as an 'important and original writer' on the edge of the academic world – a position which may well have pleased this subversive writer more than the most secure canonical status would have done.

*Helen Sutherland*