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Book Review: Harriet Baker, *Rural Hours: The Country Lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner, and Rosamond Lehmann*

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The last few decades have seen an intensification of academic and general interest in life-writing and biography, an expanding understanding of the shaping importance of the everyday in the creation of art and a growing awareness of the politics of nature writing. Harriet Baker's new book lies at the intersection of these three domains of enquiry. In *Rural Hours*, she shines a spotlight on periods of transition in the country lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann. Her subjects were only tangentially friends: though they knew each other, and moved in overlapping circles, they 'did not form a group or belong to a coterie' (p. 5). But Baker's central concern is not with these women's mutual relations (interestingly though these are sketched in the margins): it is, instead, with their respective experiences of life in the countryside.

Rural Hours is the product of many choices which, were they less deftly realized, would risk seeming arbitrary. Why, the sceptic might ask, consider the country lives of these particular female writers? Why limit the biographer's purview to two-year periods in the lives of three women living in different places at different times? It is to Baker's credit that such stark selective pressures should have resulted in so original and coherent a tome. The book's lively, thoughtful, elegantly metaphorical prose succeeds in making its temporal and spatial dislocations seem illuminating rather than problematic.

Group biographies have enjoyed critical success in recent years, with volumes such as Lara Feigel's *The Love-Charm of Bombs* (2013) and Francesca Wade's *Square Haunting* (2020)¹ generating new perspectives by interlacing the narratives of several lives. This approach bears fruit here too, with each partial story gaining from being set within Baker's triptych. Woolf, Warner and Lehmann all had their own reasons for seeking refuge in the countryside; each did so at different stages of their literary careers; and each responded differently to the experience. The affinities and contrasts uncovered by Baker's tessellation effectively throw into relief the specificities of each woman's personality. Politics is a case in point. We meet Woolf, passionate about England and its rural life, but wary of its enmeshment within the political discourse of national identity; Warner, writing about the plight of women working in munitions factories in 1916, investigating rumoured abuses at the local domestic training college in 1930, joining the Communist Party in 1935 and volunteering as a medical aide in Spain; and Lehmann, relapsing into conservatism after years of supporting the left-wing activism of her second husband, lovers and brother. The structure of the book – its reliance on juxtaposition, repetition and variation – recalls the motivic texture of Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998), a novel which likewise unfurls the stories of three women (including Woolf) living in different places at different times.

The book unfolds in two parts. First, though, a quick-footed, kaleidoscopic prelude assembles the book's cast across chasms of time and place. Whimsically but also elegantly and even lyrically, Baker declares her purpose, which is to use the written records of these women's rural hours to 'trace the contours and gradations' of their days (p. 13). So far, so academic. But what follows clarifies that this biographer has in her sights a greater kind of intimacy than dour archival scholarship can afford. For Baker's aim is not only 'to map' but also 'sometimes to imagine' (p. 13). The project, in other words, is one of informed conjuring: 'I listened for their voices in country lanes, followed their footsteps home over the Downs. When I found them, they were busy, preoccupied with ordinary things, with bedding in, making home, or making do' (p. 13). The book is undertaken in sympathetic emulation of its subjects, being driven by the ambition 'to reconstruct their rural hours in the same spirit in which they documented them, attending to the everyday and the near at hand so as to find new ways of writing about how we feel, and how we live' (p. 13). Such an approach seems destined to appeal more straightforwardly to a

general than to an academic audience, but what is lost in terms of rigour is gained in pace and rhetorical vividness.

In the chapters that follow, chronology asserts itself as the dominant organisational principle. In Part I, 'Experiments' – much the longest – Baker delves into the lives of each woman in turn. The book focuses first on Woolf in 1917, recovering in Sussex from a serious nervous breakdown; then on Warner in 1930, settling in a cottage in Dorset and embarking on her life-long love affair with her lodger, a young poet named Valentine Ackland; then on Lehmann in 1942, establishing herself in Berkshire after her divorce and receiving visits from her married lover Cecil Day-Lewis. Part II, 'Afterlives', comprises a brief series of postscripts. Here we re-encounter Woolf, living at Monks House during the early stages of the Second World War – working on *Between the Acts* (1941), mixing ambivalently with the village community and descending into the despair that would lead to her suicide. We catch up with Warner, suffering from Valentine's affair with another woman and working on *The Corner That Held Them* (1948). We rejoin Rosamond Lehmann, abandoned by Day-Lewis in favour of a younger woman and dealing through spiritualism with the death of her daughter from polio at the age of 24.

Baker evinces a particular interest in writing not traditionally taken to have much to disclose – 'inventories, recipe books, gardening notebooks, scrapbooks and lists' (p. 13). The Woolf chapter centres primarily on the writer's 'Asheham diary', the text of which was left out of the edition of Woolf's diaries established by Anne Olivier Bell in the 1970s (it does, however, feature in an appendix to Granta's 2023 reissue of *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*). In these pages, comprising 143 entries and written at a time when Woolf was emerging from a written silence of two years, the writer's 'I' is effaced in favour of a practice of laconic notation. ('Trees of course quite bare, with an occasional patch of soft bloom on them. Prisoners at work in the ditches. Threshing machine on the road to Firle' [p. 59].) Baker makes large claims for this little diary, arguing that its 'quiet experimentalism' reads as a 'rehearsal' for the high modernism of Woolf's later writing (pp. 21, 20). For Baker, the notebook's clipped 'bulletins' and taciturn 'reporting style' represent a deliberate 'exercise in compression' and amount to a 'prose poem of sorts' (pp. 50, 55). Such descriptions are certainly ingenious and thought-provoking, even though they risk inflating what is, by other lights, a fairly humdrum record of domestic expenses, wartime rationing and the local fauna and flora. Yet the sheer proliferation of discrepant characterisations – the diary being

cast as 'a kind of private, neurotic writing', 'a tuning of deep feeling to a lower key', 'an experiment with a broadening discourse of curiosity and discovery' and a neo-Darwinian 'contemplation of an entangled bank' – raises questions as to their compatibility (pp. 66, 55, 66, 68).

The most compelling of the stories told in the book is Warner's, involving as it does an account of a radical transformation that was personal as well as political. Leaving London for a Dorset village in 1930, Warner set up house in a cottage which had neither electricity nor running water, and which the surveyor described as 'a small undesirable property, situated in an out of the way place and with no attractions whatever' (p. 94). With all the zest and non-conforming energy of Laura Willows (whose adventures she had published four years earlier), Warner embraced the labour and discomforts of rural life. Christening the cottage 'Miss Green' in tribute to its deceased former owner, she threw herself into its redecoration, cultivating a 'subversive aesthetic' which 'reflected her own sensibility'. For Baker, Warner's 'queer', 'charismatic' and 'irreverent' choices (to combine '[b]rick, timber, and pink paint', for example) represented a 'parody of heterosexual domestic life', one rendered the more resonant when she and Ackland became lovers (p. 101). Helped by the extensive records both women kept of their daily lives – in effect acting as 'documentarians of the domestic' and 'archivists of their own experiment in rural living' – Baker paints a rich and striking picture of their household arrangements (p. 154). On Saturdays, for instance, they took turns bathing in the back kitchen, in a copper tub which had to be 'filled with buckets of rainwater and heated by lighting a fire underneath' (p. 149).

The Lehmann section of the book is the least cohesive and satisfying in narrative terms, despite the drama of a tumultuous love life led in wartime. This may be related to the fact that this particular period of transition in Lehmann's life does not seem as intrinsically connected to the rural as others covered in the book. It also seems connected to the difficulty of accommodating so many characters: Lehmann's second husband Wogan Phillips, her lovers Goronwy Rees and Cecil Day-Lewis, her friend Laurie Lee, her brother John and her children Harry and Sally, all feature. The temporal to-ing and fro-ing entailed by this large cast is disorienting too. The chapter's formal choppiness seems to reflect a struggle to give shape to Lehmann's inconsistencies. Certainly, its effect is to emphasise her constitutive ambivalence – a tendency to equivocation manifest in her conflicted toleration of romantic

triangulation (the sharing of her lover with his wife) and her reluctant participation in her circle's left-wing activism. Still, out of such doubts and discontents, and out of the experience of wartime in rural Berkshire, emerged 'three introspective wintry short stories' – published in *The Gipsy's Baby* in 1946 – 'which would come to be recognized as some of her finest work' (p. 161).

Though Baker's tone is mostly that of a sympathetic admirer, she confronts some of the less endearing aspects of her subjects' dispositions – their class prejudices and their occasional failures of perspective and generosity. ('So much for writing', thinks Lehmann, when the arrival of 11 evacuated children wreaks havoc with her plans [p. 187].) It is a strength of Baker's study to contextualise rather than to obfuscate.

In her bracing prelude, Baker claims that *Rural Hours* 'bypasses already navigated ground' (p. 12). This is something of an exaggeration, and one in keeping with the book's dearth of reference to the work of foregoing biographers and scholars. Academic readers might also find themselves wishing for sharper and more sustained close reading – for the kind of literary analysis which could support Baker's contention that, for all three writers, new forms of living led to new forms of writing. Though no fault of Baker's, it is a shame too that chronology – Woolf before Warner before Lehmann – should agree so well with the established canonical ranking of these authors: nothing here argues against this implicit hierarchy. But, for all these caveats, *Rural Hours* is a laudable achievement – knowledgeable and full of crisp, evocative detail marshalled in ceaselessly engaging prose. Baker frames her material in fresh and revelatory ways, vividly conveying her subjects' fascination with the natural world and rural living and imparting compelling narrative rhythm to her capsule biographies.

Note on contributor

Scarlett Baron is an Associate Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at UCL. Her principal research interests are in modernist, postmodernist and contemporary literature in English and French, and in the history of critical theory. She is the author of *'Strandentwining Cable': Joyce, Flaubert, and Intertextuality* (2012) and *The Birth of Intertextuality: The Riddle of Creativity* (2019).

Notes

- 1 Lara Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Francesca Wade, *Square Haunting: Five women, freedom and London between the wars* (London: Faber & Faber, 2020). *Square Haunting* was reviewed by Hester Styles Vickery in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 1 (2021), pp. 91–4: <https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/stw/article/id/1035/> (accessed 11 November 2024).

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