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The Archive of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland

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The Archive of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland

Judith Bond

Abstract

This article recounts the history of the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive from its first location in the Dorset County Museum to its current housing in the Dorset History Centre. It describes Judith Bond's work in recording the thousands of miscellaneous items and describes some of the most interesting holdings and features of this Archive.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Valentine Ackland; Dorset County Museum; Dorset History Centre Archives.

Editor's note: Judith Bond is much too modest to blow her own trumpet, but I have wanted for a long time to shine a light on her heroic labours in the Warner and Ackland Archive, and I finally persuaded her to write this article describing the Archive's inception and telling the story of its cataloguing and Dorset locations. Back in 2001 Judith volunteered to create a computer database describing the entire roomful of boxes, books, photographs, papers and personal effects that Warner left to the Dorset County Museum. 'This was a mammoth task,' as she coolly relates, 'and it took five years to complete.' Everybody who has consulted the Archive owes Judith a debt for those five years well spent, along with a wider community of Warner's admirers, fans and scholars – and emphatically along with myself as Editor of this Journal, contributors to which have been able to draw freely on the writings that Judith did so much to make accessible and available. The more time I've spent in the Archive, the more I've come to admire the knowledge, care and stamina that went into gathering its holdings so lucidly and describing them

with exceptional accuracy and breadth of knowledge. Hoping sometimes to catch her out in a slip that would flatter my own credentials I've found time after time that Judith was correct all along. The work had to be its own reward, a tactful cliché to indicate there wasn't any money for it, and it was done wonderfully well.

Plans are promisingly afoot for a further and even more professionalised stage of digitising and cataloguing, as Sam Johnston, the County Archivist, describes in the article that follows this one. So now seems an especially apt moment to read about the story so far and to say another warm and admiring thank you to the author of this article, Judith Bond.

What exactly is an archive? One definition would be 'A collection of documents created or gathered by or about a person or institution and selected for long-term preservation as evidence of their activities.' In some ways, the Warner and Ackland Archive certainly fits this description. However, this particular archive is much more interesting than such a narrow definition might suggest. I was fortunate enough to have worked closely with the Archive for 14 years, after first visiting it in 2001.

On that first visit, Dr Morine Krissdottir,¹ who was the Honorary Curator of the Archive, told me of its history. Warner had expressed a wish that material of literary interest belonging to her and to Ackland should be looked after, and so William Maxwell and Susanna Pinney, her literary executors, came to an agreement with the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society whereby accommodation would be provided at the Dorset County Museum 'to store original works, copies, published and unpublished manuscripts and letters to and from Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland together with photographs, drawings and other personal items of interest'. Roger Peers, the Museum's Curator and a close friend of Warner, chose a suitable room in a quiet part of the Museum and prepared it to receive the material. On 27 June 1981 a ceremonial opening of the Archive Room took place. The Room was fitted with bookshelves and cabinets made by Septimus Waugh, son of Evelyn Waugh (Figures 1 and 2).

All the documents were packed into boxes and housed in the cabinets, along with a large collection of books from the two authors' library. In addition, several personal items were displayed in the Room, such as paintings, ornaments, photographs and embroidered works by their friend John Craske.



Figures 1 and 2. The Warner-Ackland Room, Dorset County Museum (Source: Reproduced with permission of Judith Bond).

How should this very valuable resource be administered? The first job was to record what was actually there. A museum volunteer had bravely tackled the job of making a card index of all the items as they had arrived from the house at Frome Vauchurch with a description and a location showing in which cupboard they could be found. This was an important beginning but more was needed to aid researchers. At this point in 2001, I volunteered to create a computer database so that researchers could key in the specific item they were looking for and find its location instantly, rather than having to search through the whole card index to find it. In a room full of cupboards bursting at the seams with material, this was a mammoth task, and it took five years to complete.

For me at least, these were the early days of using a computer. Later, specific programmes for museum databases became available, but in 2001 I had to devise my own for the PC in the Room. Microsoft Excel seemed to offer the best method. I constructed the format with field names such as 'date', 'type', 'description', 'location' and 'key words'. This last field was the most important, as it would enable researchers typing in a name or theme to the database to obtain a complete list of all the entries relating to that name or theme. For example, if a researcher typed in 'Spanish Civil War' or 'relationship between Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland', all the items in the database that related to that theme, such as particular letters, cards, poems or articles, would appear along with their locations in the Room.

The most numerous items in the Archive are almost certainly Warner's letters to and from friends. These include Joy Finzi, David Garnett, Alyse Gregory, Peter Pears, Arnold Rattenbury, Nancy Cunard, William Maxwell, Steven Clark and Leonard Woolf, among others. In many cases, there are literally hundreds of letters to and from a single friend. My difficulty was to know whether to enter each letter individually or as a batch. This is where I had to make editorial decisions that may not, over the course of my five years working on this project, have been consistent. In the case of some friends' letters the decision was helped by the readability, or lack of it, of their handwriting. Llewelyn Powys was the worst offender in this respect. If I had tried to decipher each of his many letters I would still be working on the database now, 20 years later!

Another major resource in the Archive is, of course, the collection of Warner's and Ackland's diaries. Warner's diaries, as we know from the selection edited by Claire Harman in 1994, are endlessly fascinating and they form a very important part of the manuscript holding in the Archive. In October 1927 Warner began recording in a large notebook the events

and thoughts of the day. She continued to do this until January 1978, a few months before her death. Having the opportunity to read these in her original hand was a great privilege. Warner's handwriting is very elegant and appears on first sight easy to read – until you come across a particular word that is indecipherable and which can keep you guessing for hours.

There are some significant gaps in the early years: there are no diaries at all for 1936 or 1938 or a large section of the 1940s. These diaries may have been lost, or perhaps they never existed. We know that Warner burnt some of her diary for 1949, the year of the Elizabeth Wade White crisis. From 1950 to 1972 she kept her diaries consistently; after this the entries become more spasmodic.

As the Archive represents the two authors and their joint lives, there is also a great deal of material relating to the work of Valentine Ackland. She also kept diaries and used them to write autobiographical pieces which shed light on her thoughts and interests.² They also contain her poetry and drafts of short stories. Most significantly, they contain her research for her polemical work of social history, *Country Conditions* (1936).³ The items belonging to her give a clear and vivid picture of her life.

Photographs make up a large proportion of the Archive. There are staged photographs, mainly of Warner, some of them possibly for publicity purposes, and more informal 'snaps' of both Warner and Ackland. Ackland loved gadgets and had several cameras, which she used to capture images of Warner and friends. Others have come from personal collections, such as that of Peter Haring Judd, the godson of Elizabeth Wade White.

There are of course absences from the Archive, some of which are surprising. Music was a large part of Warner's life and the Archive holdings reflect only a small proportion of this. There are several of the pieces Warner edited for the great Tudor Church Music Project but not a great deal of detail. However, the Warner and Ackland Archive does hold a copy of *Mr Fortune*, an opera in three acts, with music by Paul Nordoff⁴ based on the novel *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, which marked the beginning of the great friendship between Warner and Nordoff. Lynn Mutti's doctoral thesis⁵ on Warner and music is a brilliant resource for this aspect of Warner's life, but of course she had to search many other archives for information.

A further interesting aspect of the Archive is the personal life represented there. I understand that Antonia von Trauttmansdorff, Warner's close friend at the end of her life, selected some items to go

into the Archive Room when this was being set up, to represent the interests and lifestyle of Warner and Ackland. Thus, we have Ackland's gardening spade, Warner's gardening shoes, Ackland's typewriter, Warner's handmade dolls and collages, the jacket of many colours made for Ackland by Warner and a number of handmade cards they gave each other on birthdays and Valentine's Days. I suspect that a great many other items that found their way into the Archive were not particularly 'selected', such as Warner's Christmas present lists, notes to her cleaning lady and, most strangely, her death mask. It is items like these which make this Archive different from many others, and bring form and life to the two authors represented here.

The Archive Room in the Dorset County Museum was also unusual (Figure 3). In most university libraries, archives such as this would be kept in a secure storage area and individual items would be brought out for researchers on request. It was unique for visiting researchers to be able to sit in a room surrounded by so many traces of the presence of Warner and Ackland and to see so much of their lives.



Figure 3. Another view of the Warner-Ackland Room, Dorset County Museum (Source: Reproduced with permission of Judith Bond).

When the Dorset Museum and Art Gallery, as it is now, was closed for a major refurbishment, the Archive was transferred to the Dorset History Centre. This means that the advantage of the unique accommodation has been lost, but there are compensations. Researchers can visit the Archive at any time during the History Centre's opening hours and no longer have to arrange their visits around the diary commitments of myself or Dr Krissdottir. Now that access is easier, many more researchers can make use of this valuable resource.

There are of course several other archives that hold items connected with Warner and Ackland. One of the most important is the National Archives at Kew, which holds Security Service files on Warner and Ackland reporting on their surveillance by MI5 because of their Communist affiliation. These files were classified but are now available to view. Some universities hold letters: for example, the University of Reading, which holds Warner's correspondence with her editors at Chatto & Windus and her letters to Helen Thomas, and Leeds University, which houses her letters to Norah Smallwood. The Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, and the New York Public Library also have considerable holdings. In her work on Warner's music Lynn Mutti found many other resources, not least the Carnegie (UK) Trust Archive in Edinburgh.

What does the future hold for the Archive? I think it is important that it should continue to grow. Our own Society has done a great deal to find items to be added to the Archive collection. We purchased the letters from Warner to Oliver Stonor and a collection of very early poems by Ackland which she had sent to Bo Foster. We also purchased CDs from *The New Yorker* of their entire archive, including all of Warner's stories which they had published. Members contributed items, one of which is 'Azrael, song for mezzo-soprano and piano', Warner's poem set to music by Jonathan David at the request of Jay Barksdale to commemorate the Society's tenth anniversary. More recently, the Society enabled Harriet Hall's gift to the Archive of Warner's album-poem, 'Modern Times', printed in the 2023 Journal.⁶

Other members, and also non-members, have donated items they have come across in bookshops and in family collections. It may be that all the extant letters by Warner and Ackland have now been discovered and archived, but who knows? The Archive has only recently acquired a collection of Warner's letters to her friend Oliver Warner, with the aid of members of the Society. I hope there will be new acquisitions like this for many years to come.

The next stage in the life of the Archive is most exciting. The Dorset History Centre hopes to facilitate the creation of a professional archival

catalogue for the Warner and Ackland Archive, in accordance with internationally recognised cataloguing standards. This will be particularly significant as it will bring the Archive to the attention of scholars and devotees anywhere in the world. It will be satisfying to think that the work I have done so far will be a useful contribution to this great project.

So how does this Archive fit with the definition I mentioned at the beginning, ‘A collection of documents created or gathered by or about a person or institution and selected for long-term preservation as evidence of their activities’? It is certainly a collection of documents and it is evidence of the activities of Warner and Ackland. It represents two persons and is all the more interesting for showing their joint life as well as their individual lives. As for items being ‘selected’, I would say rather that a great deal of the material in the Archive is there more by happy chance, which helps to give a much more rounded picture of the lives of the two authors.

Note on contributor

Judith Bond has been a member of the Society since its inception in 2000. She was Membership Secretary and Treasurer for 15 years and constructed the database for the Warner and Ackland Archive in the Dorset County Museum, a task which took five years to complete. She now lives in Cornwall.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the reviewers during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

- 1 Morine Krissdottir, 'The Sylvia Townsend Warner/Valentine Ackland Archive', *Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter* 17 (2008), n.p. [14–15].
- 2 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Virago, 1994).
- 3 Valentine Ackland, *Country Conditions* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936).
- 4 Paul Nordoff, *Mr Fortune*. An opera written in 1936–7, revised in 1956–7.
- 5 Lynn Mutti, 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A musical life' (PhD thesis, UCL, 2019).
- 6 Sylvia Townsend Warner and Harriet Hall, 'Modern Times: A poem', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 23, no.1 (2023), pp. 3–51.

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