

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

On Publishing Sylvia Townsend Warner

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On Publishing Sylvia Townsend Warner

Kate Macdonald

Abstract

The author discusses her publishing and business decisions behind Handheld Press's editions of five titles by or about Sylvia Townsend Warner: *The Akeing Heart* (2018), *Kingdoms of Elfin* (2018), *Of Cats and Elfins* (2020), *Valentine Ackland* (2021) and *T. H. White. A Biography* (2023). She discusses her history of reading Warner's works, her choices of the Warner titles she decided to republish and the production processes for each of the new editions, with brief extracts from reviews on publication.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; publishing; marketing; print production; editions.

I first read *Lolly Willowes* in my early twenties, in a beautiful 1928 Chatto & Windus Phoenix Library edition. I had vaguely heard of the title, and the edition was so lovely, all its elements – the paper, the leading, the typeface, even the generous margins – speaking to me so loudly that I bought it, for about a pound, from one of the Charing Cross Road second-hand booksellers. I remember detouring to the Silver Moon feminist bookshop the next week to find a modern copy for my mother's birthday and sent her a Women's Press edition with the striped spine and iron logo. She admitted years later that she had avoided reading it for a long time, thinking it would be too stridently feminist, but when she did read it, she loved it.

After *Lolly Willowes* I began to try Sylvia's other novels. *Mr Fortune's Maggot* made me sad. *The Flint Anchor* was absorbing but disorienting.

Summer Will Show was intoxicating but I haven't read it more than twice. I don't think I finished *The True Heart*, but I also gave up on C. S. Lewis's much later novel *Till We Have Faces* (1956) – I blame the Cupid and Psyche theme, which I dislike. I don't know why I haven't read *After the Death of Don Juan* yet. I have reread *The Corner That Held Them* many times because I love it. In between these, over about 20 years, I read my way through Sylvia's short stories, finding that I preferred browsing in those collections rather than risk trying another of her novels that I might not like.

I realised that one of my favourite biographies, of T. H. White, was written by Sylvia, so I got her letters and diaries out from the library to find out why she had written it. I burrowed into the Chaldon mythology, I tried reading the Powyses, I read Claire Harman's biography of Sylvia. I remembered some dark and bewitching fairy stories I'd read as a teenager. I rang home. My mother put the book in the post to me (it was still in my old bedroom) and I rediscovered my 1979 Penguin paperback of *Kingdoms of Elfin* with a lurid Pre-Raphaelite cover that looked more suited to an album by Led Zeppelin. The book was falling to pieces since the glue in the binding had already failed. I had an anxious time collating the pages to ensure I hadn't lost any.

All that took place long before the internet and browser searching. I wasn't a Warner collector interested in value or rarity, only whether I owned a copy of the titles I liked to be able to read them whenever I wanted. I also didn't think of myself as a Warner scholar, just a casual reader, always delighted by her wit and intelligence and her joy in language – and occasionally bruised by her unrelenting truthfulness to character and human nature. However, many years later, by which time I had become an English lecturer in Belgium, I invited the editor of *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* to give a seminar in my department. I later submitted an article to that journal on Sylvia and witchcraft writing, which was published in 2012.¹ The research for this was based on a scrutiny of all the novels published in the UK in and around 1926 and 1927 that were about witches, which revealed that Sylvia did not write *Lolly Willowes* in a vacuum.

In 2017, after a career in editing, publishing, university teaching and academic research, I decided that I would become a publisher. I set up Handheld Press to republish forgotten books and lost authors, and began to plan which authors and which books I wanted to bring back to life. Sylvia wasn't forgotten in certain academic and feminist circles, but – much more importantly – not many of her works were in print. If an

author isn't in print, if a publisher isn't actively selling new editions of her works with attractive covers, keeping them in the bookshops, keeping stock available in warehouses and ensuring that the edition is in the book trade lists, now databases, then that author isn't available, and she won't be read, or taught or talked about or her work shared. My impression was that most of Sylvia's works were only available second-hand in the excellent Virago reprints, or in the older, more expensive first editions, and *Lolly Willowes* was the only one of Sylvia's works still available in bookshops. Clearly this had to change.

But first I had my eye on *The Akeing Heart*. Peter Haring Judd had self-published this excellent study of the love triangle between Sylvia, Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White in 2013, drawing on the correspondence he had inherited on Elizabeth's death.² I had reviewed it, recommending that it be picked up by an enterprising publisher and published properly. Four years later that time had come, and I was that publisher. As well as publishing new editions of lost classics, Handheld would be publishing new work in memoir, biography and letters, and *The Akeing Heart* would be the first in this list. I re-edited the text, sorted out the photographs and captions, removed most of the sub-headings, wrestled mightily with the references and gave the book a better cover using one of the outstanding photographs of Valentine from Elizabeth's archive (Figure 1).³ On (re)publication in spring 2018 the reviews were favourable: 'the most thrilling, romantic and heartbreaking accounts of a major 20th century literary love story'.⁴ *The Sylvia Townsend Warner Journal* stated that 'the well-judged and sensitive editorial interventions have created an entirely different reading experience: the distractions are gone and the women's voices can be clearly heard'.⁵ More satisfying to me, and Peter, was the fact that the book was properly available again and has sold well enough to produce some modest royalties.

Once *The Akeing Heart* was in production I could focus on *Kingdoms of Elfin*. This was one of Sylvia's least available titles, since it had never been republished since the 1979 Penguin edition, but I was rather nervous about my chances of securing the rights. My main concern was that the Warner estate would be more interested in selling the rights to the big publishers, who could offer bigger royalties and advances (prepayment of anticipated royalties and at the publisher's risk). However, I had not considered that as a collection of fantasy short stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin* counts as 'genre' in modern book-buying terms. You will hardly ever find *Lolly Willowes* (a novel about learning to be a witch, let us remember) shelved under 'Science Fiction and Fantasy', because *Lolly Willowes* is a whimsical and

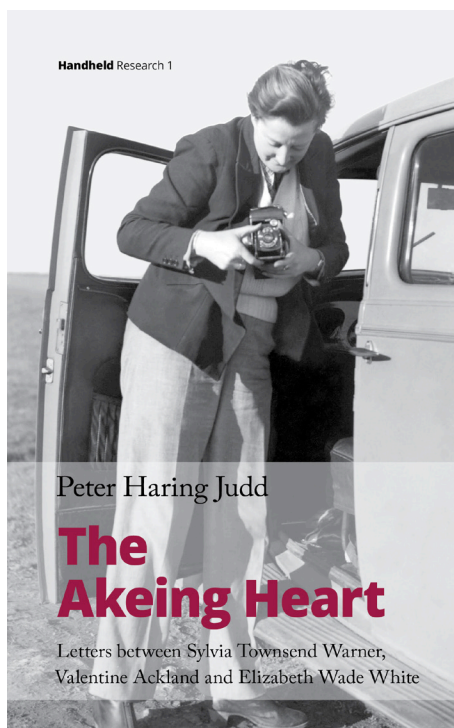


Figure 1. Cover of *The Akeing Heart* (Source: Reproduced with permission of Handheld Press).

literary title, whereas our edition of *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Figure 2) is likely to be on the ‘Science Fiction and Fantasy’ shelves in larger bookshops, as its title is quite obviously fantastical. Short stories are also less saleable than novels, so at that time the larger publishers had no interest in *Kingdoms of Elfin*. Tanya Stobbs, who runs the Warner estate, was happy to receive my enquiry, and we came to an agreement for *Kingdoms*.⁶

This would be our fifth Handheld Classic. I commissioned Ingrid Hotz-Davies to write the Introduction and the fantasy novelist Greer Gilman to write a Foreword. I would write the Notes on the text myself: this is something I’ve done with all 40 of the Handheld Classics, to explain the more archaic and regional terms used in these older works to a set of imagined readers, hoping to avoid all misunderstandings and puzzlements. Book-marketing preparation begins as soon as the contract is signed, when the cover and book details are entered in the book trade databases, which can take place sometimes up to a year before

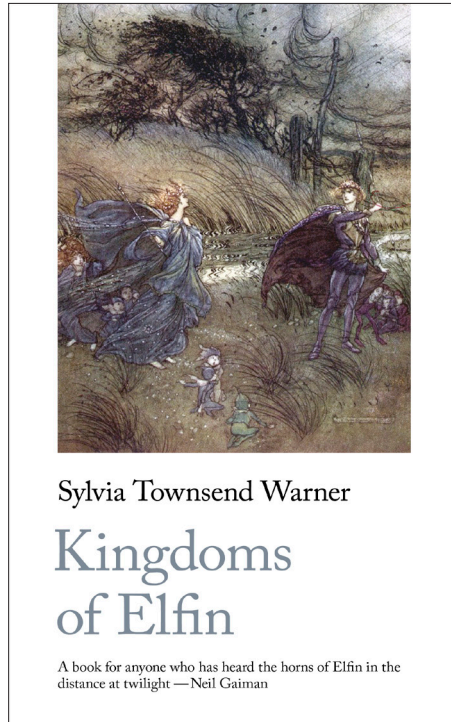


Figure 2. Cover of *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Source: Reproduced with permission of Handheld Press).

publication. So, long before I tackled the text, I needed to decide on the cover for this collection of stories about an amoral class-based civilisation of Elfin. I told my friend John Clute, the author, critic, editor and elder statesman of the science fiction and fantasy world, that we now had the rights for *Kingdoms of Elfin* and that I had found a terrific unsentimental Arthur Rackham illustration of Oberon and Titania for the front cover.

He said, 'Neil will be pleased, he loves that book.'

I said, 'Neil? Do I know him?'

John said, 'Well, I don't know. But you know Neil Gaiman.'

And so it was that later on a Saturday morning, quite close to our print production deadline, I received an email from Neil Gaiman, who was the best-selling British fantasy author at the time and whose name helped market books, with a fine endorsement for the cover of *Kingdoms*:

‘A book for anyone who has heard the horns of Elfin in the distance at twilight, as much as it is for readers who crave fine literature and are certain that elves and their kingdoms are bosh.’ He also wrote an anxious message asking if this would be enough.

Kingdoms of Elfin achieved the prized accolade of being a Book of the Month in the *Bookseller’s* paperback previews (the trade equivalent of a very good book review well ahead of the publication date). When it was published in 2018 it continued to attract praise. The *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)* said:

The subtlety of Warner’s vision, and ultimately of her empathy towards her fellow beings, is a refusal despite all inclinations to separate the rational and the irrational, the material and the immaterial, the earthly and the yearning for something else. She might have dismissed faith but she understood the impulse towards an elsewhere.⁷

While I was working on *Kingdoms* I had noticed that four additional Elfin stories,⁸ which had not been included in *Kingdoms*, might work well together with one or two other fantasy stories by Sylvia in a new collection. I had also been wondering what *The Cat’s Cradle-Book* was, since I knew it from Sylvia’s bibliography but had never seen it. I ordered a copy and read it with increasing amazement: how could this charming and highly idiosyncratic collection of fantasy fables have remained so little known for so long? It had been first published in the USA in 1940 by Viking Press. Chatto & Windus did not issue a British edition until 1960. The stories are very short, and mostly about cats, so I thought they would work well in a shameless marketing ploy aimed at a fantasy readership that has a bias towards cats. With some careful arranging I produced a running order of stories, beginning with Sylvia’s very early essay ‘The Kingdom of Elfin’,⁹ which was published a year after *Lolly Willows*, then the four remaining Elfin stories and finally ‘Stay Corydon, Thou Swain’, a strange story about a dryad which lurks in Sylvia’s collection *The Salutation* (1932). I had already decided on a title in which very few people seem to have noticed the pun: *Of Cats and Elfin: Short tales and fantasies* (Figure 3).¹⁰

Of Cats and Elfin came out in 2020, with a suitably fey Arthur Rackham cover of a deranged undine, and another nice endorsement from Neil Gaiman: ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner was one of our finest writers. I’m thrilled that Handheld Press are bringing some of her uncollected

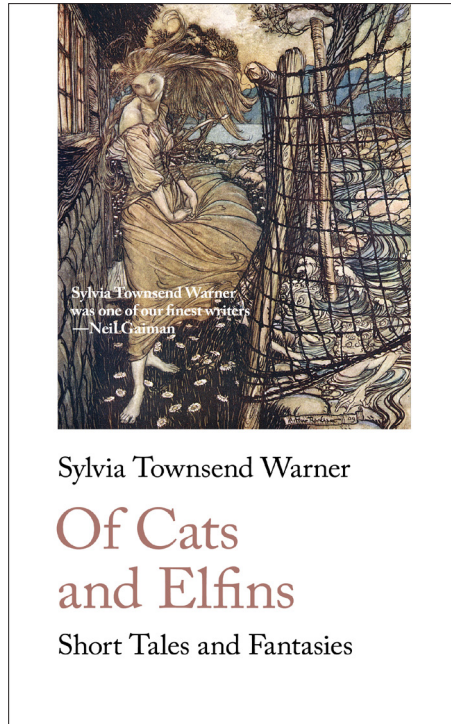


Figure 3. Cover of *Of Cats and Elfs* (Source: Reproduced with permission of Handheld Press).

fantasy stories back into print to delight and amaze a new generation.’ Reviews included praise from the *Guardian* (‘Each tale is a beautifully realised imaginative world, resonant with folklore and a rich appreciation of nature’¹¹) and the *TLS*, in which Elizabeth Winkler wrote that the stories are ‘cut from crystalline prose, they are strange, wonderful and often wickedly funny, as when Apollo responds to a farmer’s complaint: “Stupid prayers are often soonest answered, for no deity can stand them”. This is storytelling as enchantment and it feels like an answered prayer to fall under Warner’s spell.’¹²

While I was working on *Cats*, I happened to hear the beginning of a BBC Radio 4 play about Sylvia and Valentine,¹³ and sent a message to Claire Harman about it. She told me that the play’s author, Frances Bingham, had written a biography of Valentine some years earlier that might not actually have been published. I wrote to Frances introducing myself and asked about the biography. She sent me its first section,

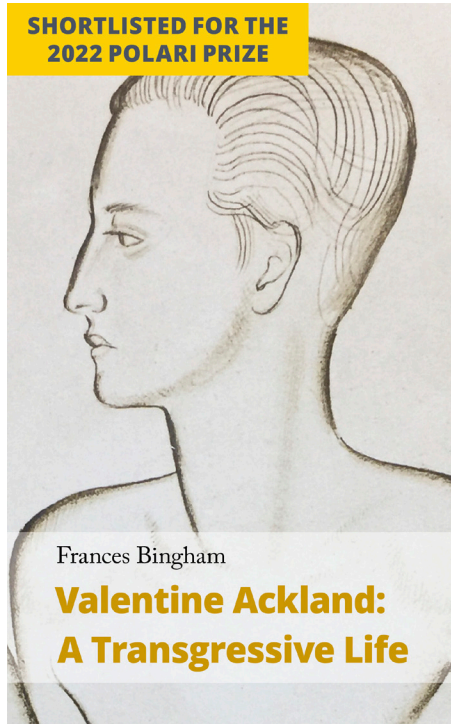


Figure 4. Cover of *Valentine Ackland: A transgressive life* (Source: Reproduced with permission of Handheld Press).

explaining that the biography had remained unpublished as part of the collateral damage after a publishing takeover and we came to an agreement to publish a revised and expanded version which became *Valentine Ackland: A transgressive life* (Figure 4).¹⁴

Despite catching Covid during the pandemic, Frances was able to revise her biography very satisfactorily. I worked with her on selecting the photographs she wanted to use and decided that the cover image needed to be of Valentine herself, but not one of the slightly fuzzy and rather intimate snapshots by Sylvia: these were reserved for the inside. The well-known and very arresting nude drawing of Valentine by Eric Gill (out of copyright) was my final choice for the cover, cropped as a head and shoulders portrait to avoid too much ogling on the bookshelves.

Valentine Ackland: A transgressive life was published in May 2021, and the good reviews just poured in. I was particularly happy about this, as this was the first biography I had commissioned (although it

already existed before I nursed it to its final form). We had a feature in *The Observer*, a long review in *The London Review of Books* by David Trotter and a short one in *The Oldie* by A. N. Wilson. The *TLS*, the *New York Journal of Books*, the *Georgia Review* and the *Gay and Lesbian Review* all liked the biography very much.¹⁵ I was particularly proud of its having bridged the political divide in the British media, with rave reviews from both the *Daily Mail* (right wing) and the *Morning Star* (hard left).¹⁶ But most marvellous of all, *Valentine Ackland* was shortlisted for the 2022 Polari Prize, a mighty accolade for its quality and seriousness.

At around the time that *Valentine Ackland* was published I received an email from Tanya Stobbs saying that the rights for Sylvia's T. H. White biography had finally reverted to the estate, and thus they were available if I was still interested. I love Sylvia's 1967 biography of T. H. White for many reasons: its quality as a biography, as a work of non-fiction, as a portrait and for her responses to White's letters and diaries. I also thought it was a good choice for a reissue, as there still has not been a later biography to succeed it. Sylvia's is the definitive life of the author of *The Sword in the Stone*, *The Once and Future King* and *The Goshawk*, a strange, difficult and brilliant man. I had bought a copy of the first edition, published by Jonathan Cape with Chatto & Windus, when I had visited Leakey's, the celebrated Inverness second-hand bookshop, and was very excited to see that all the photographs had been printed with reasonable definition on good quality gloss paper, unlike their dreadful reproductions in my old Oxford University Press paperback edition, which had been printed straight onto matt print stock along with the type. But even those photos were not of high enough resolution for modern printing, and the originals had long since disappeared, so I decided that we would not use any of the photographs or line illustrations by White from the first edition (Figure 5).

I was also nervous about permission fees. In 1967 Chatto & Windus had paid for and received permission to reproduce copious quotations from White's unpublished letters, diaries and his published works, as selected by Sylvia. Would the White estate now require an expensive repeat permission fee for our new edition? There was also the question of the cover: there are not many good quality images of White available. Black-and-white snaps of him as a young man (willowy and dashing), in his Irish period (bearded and unkempt) and as a rich and successful author (looking too much like Ernest Hemingway) do exist, but the originals are hard to locate. We needed the original prints if we could find them, to scan at high resolution for the cover.

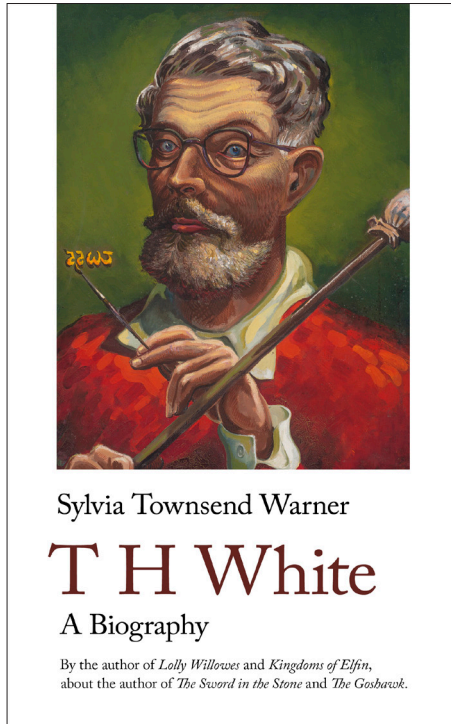


Figure 5. Cover of *T.H. White: A biography* (Source: Reproduced with permission of Handheld Press).

I was doing this picture research in early 2022 when lockdown restrictions were changing month by month. In Texas, at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Austin, librarians were not yet allowed to enter the stacks except by set, time-limited appointments. I emailed a librarian there to see if one of the early black-and-white snaps could be located in the White archive, but she couldn't send me any of the possibles I was considering. Then, in an online copy of a 2016 issue of the Harry Ransom Center magazine I discovered a self-portrait in oils that White had painted in 1955. It was absolutely stunning, and the Center still had the high-resolution digital copy used for the magazine on file. But as it was a self-portrait, I needed to gain permission to use it from the White estate, along with permission for all the quotations. I grimly wrote a formal email to his estate's agent and waited. Thankfully, she was generous enough to waive any extra fees for the quotations and charged me a sensible fee to use the painting. We had our cover.

I commissioned Gill Davies to write the introduction, which was a happy reconnection: one of my first scholarly publications had been an essay on White's only detective novel *Darkness at Pemberley*, which Gill had published in a collection of essays on White nearly 20 years earlier.¹⁷ While she was writing the introduction I was copy-editing the text. Our usual non-destructive practice for transferring old texts into digital form for editing is to scan them into pdf files and then 'clean' the pdfs with a photo-editing program to remove marks and scrawls, then tidy up the blurs that come from the original pages or from the scanning. Then the cleaned-up files are put through an optical character recognition (OCR) program, which produces an occasionally messy digital text file. My job then is to edit the text file, character by character, space by space, correcting all the random symbols, numbers and gobbledegook that the OCR program generates when it can't identify a letter, symbol or number in its memory. This is machine reading at its most crude, but it works, it's free and the corrections are easy enough to process while editing line by line. But editing Sylvia's own words in *T. H. White: A biography* was quite different from any other book I'd edited. I was treading extremely lightly and extremely carefully: not altering anything she had written and being trebly careful to not miss anything that our system had inadvertently introduced ('burn' might become 'bum', 'I' might become 'l'). Sylvia had placed footnotes throughout her biography: I had to devise a way of retaining her comments that still worked within our house style, while very respectfully correcting things when she had been mistaken. I renumbered and enlarged the original Chatto & Windus index, and I edited the bibliography thoroughly, adding White titles that Sylvia had missed and others that had appeared since 1967, including the continuation of *The Once and Future King* tetralogy, *The Book of Merlyn*. This had been discovered in White's papers after his death but it wasn't published until 1977 (Sylvia wrote its introduction, which was almost her last publication before she died).¹⁸

Sadly, we didn't get as many reviews as I had hoped for *T. H. White*. Claire Harman praised it warmly in the *TLS*,¹⁹ but the other reviews were largely from the fantasy blogging community: curious, interested, keen, but not widely read. White, too, is not a widely read author now that the book trade has moved on from the juggernaut of Helen Macdonald's *H Is for Hawk* (2014), which had brought his name back into the cultural conversation. Sylvia, too, is not widely read. She is widely *known*, like White, for one or two titles whose stars will never dim, but I don't think that there is solid awareness of Sylvia, or White for that matter, among today's readers. The best that publishers can do is keep her in print, to ensure that her books remain available.

Publishing Sylvia's works has been one of the highlights for me in running Handheld. Naturally, I love all the books I've chosen for publication, but I do love some of them more than others, mainly because they are passion projects, works that speak to me deeply. *Kingdoms of Elfin* was one of the first titles from my wish list to come into being and my inner bibliographer is satisfied that we have done Sylvia's fantasy writing justice by collecting the other pieces in *Of Cats and Elfin*s. I also took pleasure in inventing a title for that collection that I thought she might like. I wish I could have published more of her odder short stories: I am particularly fond of the Mr Edom antique shop stories, and I love the anarchism of the Finch family stories. But since these are scattered among different Warner collections, most of which are under contract to other publishers, Tanya couldn't let me have the rights for those. I shall just have to read them in the original collections instead.

Handheld Press published its last book in July 2024 and will close its accounts in June 2025. I decided in early 2023 that the time had come to climb off the treadmill, because running a small independent publishing house on very little money is unrewardingly hard, and I was getting tired of not seeming to get anywhere. In March 2023 I already had books scheduled for the next 18 months and I was determined that they were going to be my last trumpet of defiance at a fairly indifferent book industry that I am quite glad to be leaving. I have published 48 titles, mostly by women authors, and I have brought some absolute diamonds back into print. Publishing Sylvia has been a central part of Handheld's *raison d'être*: to republish the work of neglected and forgotten women writers. Publishing not just Sylvia's work but work about her life and her social and cultural context has made, I hope, a lasting contribution to the study of her writing.

Note on contributor

Kate Macdonald is a literary historian and a publisher. She trained as an editor at English Heritage in the 1990s and worked as a freelance editor for several years before moving sideways into academic teaching and research. She taught British literature and cultural history in several European universities and published widely on twentieth-century publishing history. She is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Oxford International Centre for Publishing at Oxford Brookes University and the Newsletter Editor of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society. She lives in Malvern, Worcestershire.

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 Kate Macdonald, 'Witchcraft and non-conformity in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowses* (1926) and John Buchan's *Witch Wood* (1927)', *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 23, no. 2 (2012), pp. 215–38.
- 2 Peter Haring Judd, *The Akeing Heart. Passionate Attachments and Their Aftermath: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White* (Peter Haring Judd, 2013).
- 3 Peter Haring Judd, *The Akeing Heart. Letters between Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White* (Reading: Handheld Press, 2018).
- 4 Anon, 'The Akeing Heart', *DIVA*, 18 May 2018, p. 49.
- 5 Helen Sutherland, 'Book review: *The Akeing Heart. Letters between Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland and Elizabeth Wade White* (Handheld Press, 2018)', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 19, nos. 1–2 (2020), pp. 110–14.
- 6 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Kingdoms of Elfin* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2018).
- 7 Sophie Oliver, 'A race akin', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 October 2018, p. 28.
- 8 'Narrative of Events Preceding the Death of Queen Ermine', 'Queen Mousie' and 'An Improbable Story' were first collected in Sylvia Townsend Warner, *One Thing Leading to Another, and Other Stories*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984). 'The Duke of Orkney's Leonardo' was first published in *The New Yorker*, 20 September 1976, pp. 38–44, and later included in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Selected Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988).
- 9 'The Kingdom of Elfin' was first published in *Eve. The Lady's Pictorial*, 5 October 1927, pp. 14–15. It was reprinted in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 16, no. 1 (2015), pp. 1–5.
- 10 Warner, Sylvia Townsend. *Of Cats and Elfin. Short Tales and Fantasies* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2020).
- 11 Emily Rhodes, 'Charming fantasies', *The Guardian*, 16 January 2020.

- 12 Elizabeth Winkler, 'Fairies', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 February 2020.
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- 14 Frances Bingham, *Valentine Ackland. A Transgressive Life* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2021).
- 15 Vanessa Thorpe, 'Gay, Communist and female: Why MI5 saw Dorset poet as threat to national security', *The Observer*, 4 April 2021, p. 17; David Trotter, 'The ultimate socket', *The London Review of Books* 44, no. 12, 23 June 2022, pp. 4–8; A. N. Wilson, 'Valentine's way', *The Oldie*, June 2021, p. 53; Janet Montefiore, 'Not only for ease and pleasure', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 February 2022, pp. 7–8; Joan M. Burda, 'Valentine Ackland. A Transgressive Life (Handheld | Research)', *New York Journal of Books*, <https://www.njournalofbooks.com/book-review/valentine-ackland-transgressive> (12 November 2024); Erica Goss, 'On Valentine Ackland. A Transgressive Life by Frances Bingham', *Georgia Review* (Fall 2022), <https://thegeorgiareview.com/posts/on-valentine-ackland-a-transgressive-life-by-frances-bingham/> (12 November 2024); Cassandra Langer, 'A poet among the butch babes', *Gay and Lesbian Review* (September–October 2021), <https://glreview.org/article/a%E2%80%88poet-among-the-butch-babes/> (12 November 2024).
- 16 Ysenda Maxtone-Graham, 'The cross-dressing Communist lesbian, her closet gay ex-husband and a love story like no other', *The Daily Mail*, 11 June 2021, p. 50; Anon, 'Revelatory biography of poet and political activist', *The Morning Star*, 21 June 2021.
- 17 Kate Macdonald, 'Darkness at Pemberley: T. H. White and the conventions', in *Critical Essays on T. H. White 1906–1964*, eds. Gill Davies, David Malcolm and John Simons (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 123–42.
- 18 Warner, Sylvia Townsend. *T. H. White. A Biography* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2023).
- 19 Claire Harman, 'Once and future: Continuing the revival of Sylvia Townsend Warner', *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 January 2024.

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