

## MARY ELIZABETH JACOBS

1954 – 2012

*Angela K. Smith*

In May 2012 we lost the important Sylvia Townsend Warner scholar, Mary Jacobs. Mary was also an inspirational teacher, a writer, a thinker, a wife, a mother and, I am proud to say, my very close friend. In February 2011, when Mary learnt that her cancer was terminal, she had one particular request for me. She asked me not to give her any flowers as she would have to watch them die, but instead to give her words, as words had been one of the most important things in her life. Mary had a passion for words, reading them, writing them and sharing them. Luckily for us, she spent many years focussing on the words of Sylvia Townsend Warner, whose many and varied works fed Mary's lifelong passion.

In 2003 Mary Jacobs embarked on a PhD exploring the political dimensions of Warner's writing. Mary believed that all Warner's work was political, that from her early novels and poetry of the 1920s, through to her

extraordinary long-term contribution of short stories to the *New Yorker*, she adopted multiple ways of interrogating a range of political agendas. Mary believed that scholarly attention to the political interpretation of Warner's writings, had been chiefly confined to her major works of the 1930s, those that corresponded chronologically with her joining the Communist party, embarking on her life-long relationship with Valentine Ackland and their direct involvement with social politics of the times. These included fierce campaigning both at home and abroad, as the couple wrote and published on the social and rural issues that surrounded them, whilst also engaging with significant international events such as the Spanish Civil War.

Mary, however, believed that all of Warner's works were innately political, and that to present her political ideas she adopted, converted and subverted existing genres; all carried hidden political messages. So in 'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral 1925-1934' (Davies, Malcolm and Simons (eds.), *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893-1978*, 2006) Mary argues that Warner was an established political commentator in the 1920s, using the genre of the Pastoral as a means to critique rural politics of the time. In 'The Politics of Disclosure and the Fable' (*The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2006, pp.17-35) she explores Warner's communist and feminist activism of the 1930s by tracing her use of fable and allegory in her novels of this period, with a particular focus on *Summer Will Show*, and her involvement, with Ackland, in the Spanish Civil War. Mary collaborated with Judith Bond to produce 'Nefarious Activities' (*The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2008 pp.40-58), an article that uses recently revealed MI5 documents that detail the surveillance of Warner and Ackland from 1935-1955; evidence indicating the seriousness of Warner's political works and the perceived threat that she may have posed to the establishment. While this threat was imaginary, it is testimony to the subversive nature of Warner's writing

throughout her career. Mary was in the process of exploring the clandestine political messages to be found in Warner's *New Yorker* stories when her illness overtook her.

The book that Mary would have written on Sylvia Townsend Warner would, no doubt, have tied all these strands together to give us an exciting new version of the writer, one that considered the real importance of the political thought and activism that were central to Warner's life. Even though the book did not come to be, the work that Mary has left us forms a profound legacy, a rich vein that scholars will be able to draw upon for future research. But Mary's legacy is much greater than this. As an active member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society from 2003, she made a great many friends among the members. The annual events organised by the society were a high spot in Mary's calendar, and I am sure she will be remembered fondly at these meetings for many years to come. She was a regular visitor to the archive in Dorchester which she considered to be a treasure trove. She was always very excited by each new discovery within Warner's papers and had great vision for how these discoveries could be used to promote and develop all aspects of Warner studies.

In March 2011 Plymouth University, where Mary had happily worked for almost twenty years, awarded her a PhD by publication entitled, *Gender, Genre and Politics in the Literary Work of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, which collected all the works listed here and acknowledged the contribution to knowledge that they make. It was an occasion of great joy for Mary and her family. In some ways it represented the culmination of her life-long passion for words. And it is this passion for reading, writing and sharing words that should be Mary's longest lasting legacy; one that will remain with us all for many years to come.

## MARY JACOBS' PUBLICATIONS ON STW

'Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Politics of the English Pastoral 1925-1934' in *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner, English Novelist 1893-1978* Ed. Davies, Malcolm and Simons, 2006.

'The Politics of Disclosure and the Fable', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2006.

'Nefarious Activities' (with Judith Bond), *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2008.

'Trees and Dreams: Sylvia Townsend Warner, the Pastoral and Fantastic Realism', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2011.

In 2011 Dr Jacobs was nominated for the Inspirational Teaching award under the auspices of University of Plymouth Students Union SSTAR (Students and Staff Teaching and Representation) scheme.