

EDITORIAL

Peter Tolhurst

The Society continues to flourish in what has been a quiet year for Warner enthusiasts. In addition to the May and September weekends which, together with the newsletters and the journal, are its lifeblood, we celebrated the 90th birthday of our patron Janet Machen. To launch the new edition of *Somerset* I gave what threatens to become the annual Warner lecture in Dorchester Museum as part of this autumn's Literary Lectures. Since then two members have stepped in to rescue a small but important collection of letters from Sylvia to Oliver Stonar seeking help and hospitality for refugee writers from the Spanish Civil War. If the enclosed appeal is successful the letters will appear in next year's journal with an introduction by Mary Jacobs.

Spring 2008 promises to be exciting with the publication simultaneously by Carcanet of Valentine's poems, edited by Frances Bingham, and an enlarged version of Sylvia's *Complete Poems*. Edited and with a new introduction by Claire Harman it will include some 90 poems new to the original 1982 edition. At the local level a selection of work by John Craske will appear in the 2008 Salthouse Art Festival on the north Norfolk coast. Hung in the parish church once clearly visible from Great Eye Folly they will, as Sylvia put it, 'be immensely enhanced in the sharpened light of a seaboard sky'.

This year's journal opens with one of Sylvia's few autobiographical pieces, 'The Way I Have Come'. Written while eliciting Oliver Stonar's help, it illuminates those early years about which little else is known; her growing sense of injustice while working in a munitions factory and her discovery that 'the pen could be used as a sword.' Her experiences of country living which soon led to the conclusion

that ‘The English Pastoral was a grim and melancholy thing’, chimed with the crusading tone of *The Countryman* in which the article appeared. The next pieces shed more light on two of those formative experiences. The archival fragment ‘The Essex Marshes’ captures with exhilarating immediacy Sylvia’s response to this strange new landscape and her discovery, ‘socketted in the universe, passionately quiescent’, that it was possible to write poetry. The Chaldon extract from David Garnett’s *Familiar Faces* places the Tomlin/Powys/Warner relationship at the heart of those early Dorset years.

Out of that time grew a lifelong ‘epistolary’ friendship between Warner and Garnett celebrated in their published *Letters* and examined with fresh insight by Margaretta Jolly in ‘A Word is a Bridge’. From here it is a short step to ‘Private Lives in Old Ink’, Sylvia’s 1969 *Spectator* review of the voluminous Verney correspondence from Claydon House in Buckinghamshire and the light it sheds on the outbreak of the Civil War when ‘both sides [were] inadequately prepared to hate each other’ and its aftermath when gentry like Sir Ralph were ‘busy restocking [their] pillaged woodlands.’

‘Scorched Earth Policy’ is another sombre tale from the edge of the fens (see ‘Poison’ in the 2006 journal) resurfacing for the first time since its appearance in April 1942 in the *New Yorker*. In it the austerity measures familiar to Sylvia in Dorset are given a neat twist as an elderly couple respond to the threat of invasion. Warner’s favourite novel, *The Corner That Held Them*, continues to intrigue academics. To her great relief Rosemary Sykes no longer falls into that category, having abandoned her Warner research in favour of Sylvia’s ‘knitting and unknitting’ while still contributing to the debate. ‘This was a Lesson in History’ approaches the novel via George Townsend Warner’s influence on his daughter while history master at Harrow. Sykes shows how Sylvia’s sense of the past and her ‘mock inventorial style’ were influenced by the ‘small and unfruitful details’ discarded by her father. ‘The Historical Novel’, Sylvia’s surprisingly brief lecture to the predictably lengthy Third Congress of the League of American Writers (1940) from which Sykes quotes, wraps up the journal for another year.