

EDITORIAL

Peter Tolhurst

In 2007 we celebrated Janet Machen's 90th birthday and now, at the end of a most eventful year, we mourn the loss of our Patron who died peacefully in October after a short illness. To the end, Janet's support for the Society remained hugely enthusiastic. She was always the brightest star at Warner events in Dorchester, she graced the Sailor's Return dinner each year at Chaldon and it was her generosity that helped recently secure an important cache of early Ackland poems. The Oxford concert organised by Claire Harman in May to launch Sylvia's *New Collected Poems* gave her enormous pleasure and, as Ray Russell's obituary makes clear, the Society owes its very existence to her 'steely determination'. We have lost not just our last link with Sylvia but, for those lucky enough to have known her, a wonderfully generous and joyous friend. Rave on Janet ... rave on ... rave on ... and thank you.

Thanks also to the generosity of members, the acquisition of the Stonor letters – what better way to celebrate Sylvia's life and work – has almost certainly plucked them from the dead hand of the collector. How appropriate that the correspondence, a persistent and persuasive attempt to secure accommodation for refugee writers in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, should have been initiated by Janet. The letters appear between *Barcelona* and *Soldiers and Sickles*, two of Sylvia's despatches from the front line which, as Mary Jacobs concludes, are among her best political essays. *Soldiers and Sickles* is no homespun eulogy for the dignity of peasant farming but a sober plea for the tractor to alleviate the 'ruthless fatigue' of hand labour and the 'delicate geometric beauty' of pylons 'most perfectly suited to the austere landscape of Castille'.

The article first appeared in *The Countryman* and the next two contributions recall the radical zeal of its founder Robertson Scott. Ronald Blythe's trip to Idbury Manor in 1959 is an eloquent prelude to Neil Philip's fascinating account of how Robertson Scott set about producing his magazine while attempting to revive the cultural life of Idbury in the 1920s. Among those who lectured in the village hall was a young Sylvia Townsend Warner who, having been impressed by Robertson Scott's pioneering articles in *The Nation*, had rented a cottage in the village. Quite how Edith Sitwell's *Death of Socrates* was received by the locals remains a victim of selective accounting.

Philip's article, which adds greatly to our understanding of Sylvia's attitude to rural poverty before her move to Chaldon, is followed by Judith Stinton's intriguing piece of research based on the chance discovery of a folder full of Valentine's poems – 'crafted apprentice pieces' – in a Dorchester auction room. It tells the story of Valentine's relationship with Bo Foster and the older woman's influence on her poetic development in the early '20s before the arrival of Miss Warner.

Next up is a forensic examination of the recently released MI5 files on Sylvia and Valentine, the result of surveillance instigated in 1935 to monitor their 'nefarious activities' on the strength of their Communist Party membership. The results of some impressive archival sleuthing by the Society's own Ladies' Detective Agency – Judith (the name's Bond, Judith Bond) and Mary Jacobs – show the efforts of the Dorset constabulary in sometimes hilarious light. Activities at the Seven Stars Hotel near Wool read like a Whitehall farce while Valentine's intercepted telegram to Elizabeth Wade White, its 'fatefully erotic biblical citation' and the reference to Craske pictures, managed to lay some Chaldonesque red herrings worthy of a T.F. Powys short story. The files do however shed important new light on Warner's and Ackland's beliefs, their political involvement and personal relations over a twenty year period.

For many the highlight of 2008 has been the release of Claire Harman's enlarged edition of Sylvia's poems and the first real selection of Valentine's verse, *Journey From Winter*, edited by Frances Bingham. Their simultaneous publication

by Carcanet Press invites comparisons and an appreciation of the inspiration each drew from their relationship. What Glen Cavaliero admires most about Sylvia's output, including some 70 previously unpublished poems, is 'her blend of unpredictable imaginative flights with a wit as tangy as quince'. *New Collected Poems* also contains 24 of Warner's contributions to *Whether a Dove or Seagull*, the ill-fated experiment with Valentine in non-attribution. Referred to by Harman as 'more of a dead duck', such was its reception in 1933, it sealed their own poetic anonymity although each continued writing verse for their own private pleasure.

Frances Bingham's decision to include the whole of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* is to be applauded, although it does form a sizeable chunk of *Journey From Winter* which also contains 170 of Valentine's poems whittled down from a huge amount of extant material. As Gillian Spraggs illustrates, the selection – short lyrical poems of love, war and death – provides the first real opportunity to assess Valentine's legacy. She is sometimes regarded as a lesbian who wrote poetry while Warner is the poet who happened to be gay; now thanks to the editors of these welcome new collections the reader can properly revisit these assertions.



Copyrighted image removed

Dust jacket design by Edward Bawden for the Dolphin Books series, Chatto & Windus, 1931. *Opus 7* is dedicated to Arthur Machen. The series also includes *The Only Penitent* by T.F. Powys