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Stephen Tomlin in Chaldon Herring (1921–3)

Michael Bloch¹ and Susan Fox^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: mab@bloomsburystud

¹Independent scholars

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Michael Bloch and Susan Fox

Abstract

This chapter from the new biography of Stephen Tomlin by Michael Bloch and Susan Fox details the years 1921–3, when Tomlin and Sylvia Townsend Warner knew each other best and saw one another most frequently.

Keywords Stephen Tomlin; T.F. Powys; David Garnett; Sylvia Townsend Warner; sculpture; Bloomsbury; bisexuality.

Editor’s note: This chapter from the new biography of Stephen Tomlin by Michael Bloch and Susan Fox details the years when Tomlin and Sylvia Townsend Warner knew each other best and saw each other most frequently. It is reprinted here by kind permission of the authors and publisher.

Bloomsbury Stud: The Life of Stephen ‘Tommy’ Tomlin can be bought via the website <https://www.bloomsburystud.net/>, which also gives further information about the book.

In September 1921, after a year’s training in sculpture with Frank Dobson in London, Tommy decided to move to Chaldon Herring, the magical hidden corner of Dorset he had discovered the previous Easter, which was to be his principal abode for the next sixteen months. One can but speculate as to his motives in withdrawing from London at the age of twenty to seclude himself for more than a year (including two harsh winters) in one of the most isolated villages in southern England. Was it to dedicate himself to his art? Or to recover from some kind of breakdown,

or from a disappointment in love? Or to indulge in the forbidden pleasures of homosexuality or narcotics? For £1 a week he rented the two-bedroomed, whitewashed, heavily thatched cottage (later known as Apple Tree Cottage) of the publican Mr Wallis, where he had already stayed on several short visits during the preceding months. Interviewed sixty years later, the Wallises' daughter recalled that he won the hearts of the village with his charm: 'he could lure the birds off the elm in the village green'.¹ Indeed, he became something of a local legend; when he returned there in May 1926 with the artist Dora Carrington, she wrote to Tommy's future wife Julia Strachey: 'It was rather like travelling with some dethroned King of Bavaria, returning to his long lost country. From every cottage old dames and worthies, children and half-witted hobbled out to kiss the hem of Tommy's corduroy trousers.'²

Soon after settling at Chaldon, on a return visit to London to collect his possessions, Tommy told Sylvia Townsend Warner: 'There is a most remarkable man living just beyond the village. He is a sort of hermit, and he has a very fine head. He reads Dostoevsky ... [and] I believe he writes.'³ This was Theodore Francis Powys (1874–1953), whom Tommy called 'Theo', one of ten gifted children of a wealthy Anglican clergyman who had married a descendant of the poet William Cowper. Along with his elder brother John Cowper Powys and their younger brother Llewellyn, Theo was to achieve fame as a novelist – but all three brothers only gained



Figure 1. Tommy at Chaldon (Source: By permission of M.A.B. Press).

recognition relatively late in life. Theo had been a farmer in Suffolk; but his farm failed and he returned to live in Dorset where he had been brought up, eventually settling in Chaldon, which he liked for its remoteness, buying a small redbrick villa he named 'Beth Car' (Hebrew for 'the house of the pasture'). In his thirtieth year he married a village girl of eighteen named Violet Dodds: they and their two sons subsisted on a small allowance from Theo's father. Like his siblings, Theo suffered from depression, and he was certainly reclusive: he rarely strayed far from home, only once went abroad (to see the French birthplace of Rabelais), and made just one visit to London (described below). Though his formal education had been patchy, he was formidably well-read, knew the Bible backwards (he wrote in a similar style to the Authorised Version), and was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Nietzsche with its bleak outlook on life. Every day, he wrote, and by the time he met Tommy in 1921, aged forty-seven, he had amassed a considerable corpus of novels and short stories, which combined vivid depictions of rural life with a grim view of human nature; but nothing of his had so far been published apart from *An Interpretation of Genesis*, an eccentric biblical commentary printed privately in 1907, and *The Soliloquy of a Hermit*, a book of philosophical reflections which appeared in 1916. In his *Soliloquy* he argued that, to achieve contentment, one had to lead a life of the greatest simplicity, rejecting not just acquisitiveness but all the excitements of the world. As he put it:

The simple life – so called – is not the simple life at all; it is the deeper life. The simple life is the life of motor cars, of divorces, of monkey dances, of hunting ... of shooting ... and playing games... All these things are the natural, the simple life of a man. Anyone can get pleasure in these ways ... The best joy is not got quite so easily. I want to cultivate the kind of mind that can turn stones into bread, a dull life into the life of a king. For what we call dullness is really the best soil we can dig in, because the gold that it yields is very precious and very lasting. I would like to know that I am getting rich, not by stealing from the poor, but by getting something more out of myself.⁴

It is not difficult to understand the attraction Theo would have had for Tommy. Here was a man who, like himself, had spurned both a conventional career and the gentry class from which he sprang; whose anti-materialist philosophy struck a chord with him; with whose melancholic tendencies he could sympathise; and who offered him the affection

and understanding he sought in vain from his own father. Tommy soon became a daily visitor to Beth Car. After seeing Theo in the summer of 1922, his elder brother John wrote to their younger brother Llewellyn that he had ‘never left Theodore ... in better spirits or better health, largely due to Mr Tom [*sic*] Tomlin the Sculptor, a bewitching, gipsy-like young William Blake, with a most caressing respect for Theodore ... who makes the old rogue laugh and chuckle till he’s red in the face.’⁵ Tommy had gone to Chaldon at least partly to work on his sculpture, and one of his first sitters was Theo, whose portrait head (though we know of it only from a photograph) seems to capture the older man’s handsome, brooding features. Tommy persuaded Theo to show him samples of his extensive unpublished work. He found this fascinating, though was puzzled that Theo’s fiction showed a disapproving attitude towards sex: in real life (as he wrote to Sylvia) Theo was ‘not in the least Puritanical, in fact just the reverse. He has a distinct streak of Rabelaisian humour and loves to surround himself with all the prettiest girls in the village.’⁶



Figure 2. Tommy at Chaldon with his bust of Theodore Powys (Source: By permission of M.A.B. Press).

Tommy set out to help Theo achieve the literary recognition he felt he deserved. He urged him to tidy up his work and render it fit for publication; and meanwhile he put him in contact with Sylvia – this was an inspired move, as Sylvia and Theo, despite their different interests and backgrounds, shared a sense of irony which made them natural soul-mates. At Tommy's suggestion, Sylvia sent Theo a play she had written; Theo responded by sending Sylvia the manuscript of his novel *Mr Tasker's Gods*. Though finding this work, in which most of the characters meet the goriest of ends, somewhat terrifying, Sylvia was 'enthralled' by it and recognised it as 'a work of genius', and soon she and Theo were corresponding enthusiastically. In March 1922 Sylvia visited Tommy at Chaldon and met Theo. This was a success: Sylvia appreciated the whimsical manner Theo adopted with strangers, while Theo, who had never met a bluestocking of Sylvia's type before, found her clever and attractive.⁷ Encouraged by the meeting, Theo completed a new novella on which he had been working, *Hester Dominy*, about a schoolmistress who moves from a coastal town to a village resembling Chaldon.* When Tommy next went to London he took the manuscript with him, hoping to interest a publisher in it.

It was during this London visit, in the summer of 1922, that Tommy met a man destined to become possibly his greatest friend – the Bloomsbury bookseller and novelist David Garnett (1892–1981). 'Bunny' (as he was known to friends, owing to a rabbit-fur cap he had worn in childhood) was then twenty-nine, eight years older than Tommy. He was handsome, with wavy hair, an athletic physique and a fine profile, and possessed an animal magnetism which people of both sexes found seductive. Only child of the publisher and critic Edward Garnett and his wife Constance, a celebrated translator of Russian novels, he had had an unusual childhood, during which he experienced little formal schooling but got to know a variety of fascinating people, including D. H. Lawrence and Rupert Brooke. All his life he was intensely romantic; though his dominant instincts were heterosexual, he regarded sex as arising naturally from loving friendship with either men or women. During the First

* The plot is typical of the author. The heroine is pursued by two suitors, a clergyman and a farmer, but continues to love a tailor she has left behind in the town. She is unaware that the tailor also loves her, and is so stricken by her departure that he has abandoned town life and become a shepherd, close to the village where she now lives. She eventually returns to the town to find him, only to discover that he has just died. Misery is the ultimate lot of all. The story unfolds through a succession of vivid word pictures, and many of the characters speak in dialect.

World War he had been a conscientious objector, working as a farm labourer in Sussex with his beloved friend, the Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant. They lived at Charleston, a farmhouse near Lewes, in a 'love-triangle' with another artist, Vanessa Bell, sister of the future novelist Virginia Woolf; Vanessa was in love with Duncan, and Duncan with Bunny; the bisexual (but men-preferring) Duncan slept with the bisexual (but women-preferring) Bunny and also with Vanessa, the latter liaison resulting in a baby, Angelica, who was accepted by Vanessa's husband, the art critic Clive Bell, as his own, and whom Bunny joked he would one day marry. This Bunny would in fact (to the horror of the girl's biological parents) do many years later; but meanwhile, in 1921, he married Rachel ('Ray') Marshall, an artist and book-illustrator with many connections in the Bloomsbury world: though he always professed to be devoted to her, he conducted numerous affairs, mostly with women but sometimes with men, throughout their marriage. After the war, Bunny ran a bookshop in Tavistock Street, Bloomsbury with his longstanding (and very homosexual) friend Francis ('Frankie') Birrell. He had published a novel, *Dope Darling*, which was considered so scandalous that it appeared under a female pseudonym, and was awaiting the publication of a second novel, *Lady into Fox*, which, though quite short, would make him famous overnight and moderately rich.

One afternoon that summer of 1922 an imperious middle-aged lady came into the bookshop, followed by a pale but striking young man with 'very broad shoulders, luxuriant fair hair crashed straight back from a fine forehead, a crooked nose and deep-set blue eyes. A delightful intimate smile played about his mouth.' Bunny came forward, and the lady announced: 'We want to look at some books on *modern art*. My son was told this was a good place to find such things.' Bunny produced some French periodicals on the subject. Tommy (for it was he) exclaimed delightedly that this was just the sort of thing he was looking for, and begged his mother to proceed on her own to the tea party to which he was accompanying her, where he would join her in half an hour. As Tommy escorted her out of the shop, put her in a taxi and waved her farewell, Bunny was struck by his affectionate manner towards her: 'He had treated her as tenderly as a lover.' (This suggests that Tommy suffered from an Oedipus complex.) This encounter (which opens the third volume of his memoirs) was clearly one of the great moments of Bunny's life; and though he wrote (in the early 1960s) at a time when homosexuality remained dangerously illegal, he makes little secret of how seductive he found his latest customer.

The young man's charm was obvious: it was the thing one noticed as soon as he spoke or laughed, and he was always laughing. When I got to know him well I realised that there was no one ... whose laughter expressed a greater range of emotions. Tenderness, indulgence, confession, apology, accusation, forgiveness, criticism: all such states of mind were expressed in laughter: besides which he would laugh long and loud and merrily, or with tragic bitterness.

At this meeting I was first aware of his charm, then of a penetrating mature intelligence. We were alone in the shop ... we at once forgot that he had come to buy ... and, by closing time, the talk had ranged from Maillol, Gaudier and Brancusi [the contemporary sculptors Tommy regarded as role-models] to Blake, Dostoevsky and the French unanimists.⁸

Bunny writes that he then went home to his wife, while Tommy went to join his mother an hour and a half late. But writing to Sylvia Townsend Warner in 1927, he recalled that he and Tommy met again for dinner that evening, 'at Gustave's'. As he says, they had become 'interested in each other'.⁹

Tommy then returned to Chaldon. Having learnt that Bunny had strong connections in the publishing world (and was himself the partner of a small firm specialising in reprints of the classics, The Nonesuch Press), he arranged for Sylvia to call at the bookshop with the manuscript of *Hester Dominy*. The encounter between Sylvia and Bunny was later recalled with amusement by them both. Sylvia remembered 'an extremely young-looking man whose hair was long and thick and untidy and whose suit was so blue that I felt he might blow his horn at any moment. When I entered he retreated behind a desk, like some innocent wild animal.'¹⁰ Bunny remembered 'an alarming lady with a clear and minatory voice, dark, dripping with tassels ... with jingling earrings, swinging fox-tails, black silk acorn hanging to umbrella, black tasselled gloves, dog-chains, key-rings ... speaking to me in sentences like scissors.'¹¹ They became instant friends. Bunny was impressed by *Hester Dominy*. As he later wrote in a review: 'The story is an absolutely satisfactory work of art ... and the author seems to me to be one of the very small number who take writing seriously and have some idea about it.'¹² He wrote to Theo to express his admiration of the piece, and his desire to help. This elicited a reply from Tommy: 'Dear Garnett, Theodore Powys came to see me very pleased and excited by your letter about "Hester Dominy". I am so glad you like it.' He invited Bunny to spend a weekend at Chaldon to meet the author and see

'this the most excellent village in England'.¹³ Bunny accepted, and visited Tommy in September.

In his memoirs, Bunny describes the weekend (probably the first of several) – but, writing forty years after the event, his memory is somewhat at fault. He says it took place in the depths of winter, whereas it was the late summer; he implies that Tommy had just moved to the village, whereas he had been living there for almost a year. Other details are probably accurate, such as Tommy meeting him at the station at Wool, their trekking over the downs to Chaldon, and the sparse furnishings of Tommy's cottage. He notes that Tommy was loved and cherished by the two most notable residents of the village, the rather comical Mrs Ashburnham at the Old Vicarage and the intensely serious Theo Powys at Beth Car, even though the latter could not abide the former. What fascinated him about Theo was the contrast between his evidently shrewd, censorious mind and the humble, polite manner he used to protect himself from the world.¹⁴ What Bunny does not say in his memoirs – but confided to Sylvia in 1927 – is that, during the weekend, his intimacy with Tommy blossomed: 'I was too much charmed and delighted with Tommy to consider Chaldon and its inhabitants as more than a setting fit for him.'¹⁵ Tommy's next letter to Bunny, dated 4 October, ends: 'There are lots of soul stirring things I want to say to you ... I am glad you liked being here. If you enjoyed it half as much as I enjoyed – you know the formula ... but I mean it. I like you. Love Tommy'¹⁶ (This may not sound effusive: but it should be borne in mind that men, when they wrote to each other lovingly, had to be circumspect in letters.) Certainly if the weekend did not mark the start of a love affair between Bunny and Tommy it paved the way for that development: for when, a few years later, his wife reproached him for his marital infidelity, Bunny reminded her that she had not been 'jealous about Tommy'.¹⁷ Though we have no details, it seems likely that they had further meetings that autumn, either in London or Chaldon: when, in the new year of 1923, Tommy took a studio in London, the first project on which he began work was a portrait head of Bunny carved in Ham Hill stone.

The fact that Tommy's dearest wish was to see Theo's work published was no doubt a spur to Bunny to advance this project; for though preoccupied with the publication of his own *Lady into Fox*, which appeared that October to some sensation, and with his wife's pregnancy, he went out of his way to help. He recommended *Hester Dominy* to the publisher of *Lady into Fox*, Charles Prentice of Chatto & Windus, who liked the piece but thought it too short to stand as a book. However, after

Theo had supplied two further stories, *The Left Leg* and *Abraham Men*, Prentice agreed to publish the three together. They appeared in May 1923 as *The Left Leg*: Theo dedicated them individually to Bunny, Sylvia and Tommy. The book (as with all Theo's subsequent books) was also taken by an American publisher, Knopf. And it was thanks to Bunny that the literary editor H. N. Brailsford, a friend of his parents, became interested in Theo's work and over the next four years published no fewer than twenty of Theo's stories in his periodical *New Leader*. Bunny also persuaded his father, the principal 'reader' at Jonathan Cape, to read Theo's novel *Mr Tasker's Gods*, which had so terrified Sylvia: Garnett Senior liked it but thought it too frightening for their readers and urged Theo to rewrite and modify it. (Theo did so, and the book was issued by Chatto and Knopf in 1925.)¹⁸ Writing to Roy Harrod in the autumn of 1923, Tommy declared himself 'very proud and pleased' to have achieved so much for his friend.¹⁹

Apart from his relationship with Theo we know little about Tommy's life at Chaldon. Presumably he spent much of his time working on his sculpture, though no work from this period appears to survive. He also did some writing: together with Theo, he contrived a one-act play, *The Sin Eater* (later performed privately, with sets designed by Tommy).^{*} Apart from Sylvia and Bunny, other friends came to stay with him in his cottage – his schoolmate Gerald Gardiner, now an Oxford undergraduate (known for his exceptional good looks) and a leading light of the university's dramatic society; Roy Harrod, completing his studies at New College with a 'double first' and on the threshold of a brilliant academic career; George and Bea Howe. We know of no local friends he made apart from Theo and Mrs Ashburnham, though there must have been some. He drank regularly at the village pub, *The Sailor's Return*; and he no doubt found pleasure with local maidens and swains. He certainly spent countless hours, if not days on end, rambling on the downs. From time to time he returned to London – which involved an hour's brisk hike to Wool, followed by a four-hour train journey – though there is no indication of how regularly these visits took place, or (except for the encounter with Bunny) what he did when he got there.

* Sin-eating was 'the consumption of a collection of cold scraps, peelings and bits of hair to dispose mystically of a dead man's sins'. Soon afterwards, Sylvia composed a play of her own on the subject: it is unclear whether this was based on the Powys-Tomlin script, or was an entirely new work, and whether the 'staged' version was Tommy's or Sylvia's. (Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner*, 54–5.)

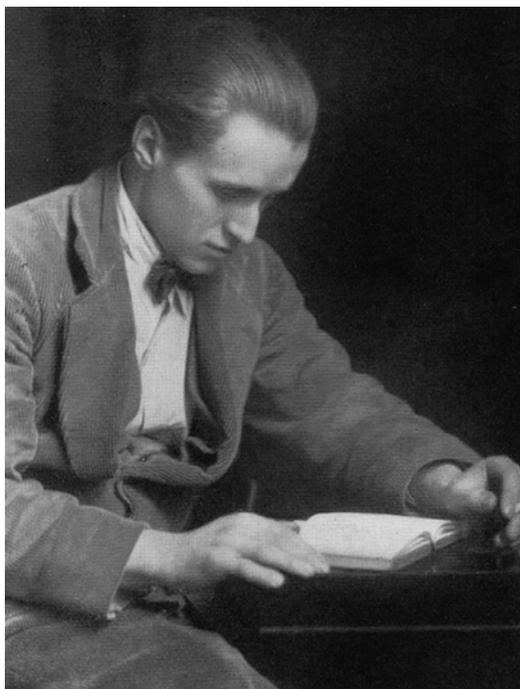


Figure 3. Tommy around the time of his twenty-first birthday (Source: By permission of M.A.B. Press).

However, Bunny was just one of several exciting new friends who now lured him back to the capital; and although he would often return to the village (starting the following Whitsun), in January 1923 he gave up his cottage to resume London life. 'I seriously do not suppose I shall ever again be so continuously happy, or tap such a deep well of contentment, as in my Chaldon sojourn', he wrote to Theo soon after his departure, 'and in a great part the happiness came from you.' Sadly, his bust of Theo 'fell irrevocably to pieces' in the course of the move to the metropolis.²⁰ Though it had lasted little more than a year, Tommy's residence at Chaldon had stupendous consequences for the village. The publication of *The Left Leg* put the formerly unknown Theo on the literary map, and was followed by three novels, *Black Bryony* (1923), *Mr Tasker's Gods* (1925) and *Mr Weston's Good Wine* (1927), which consolidated his reputation. In 1925, David Garnett published a novel, *The Sailor's Return*, set in a village modelled on Chaldon and mostly written while staying at the Chaldon pub of that name. (Also in 1925,

on Tommy's recommendation, another sculptor who had been apprenticed to Frank Dobson, the Canadian Elizabeth Muntz, came to work in Chaldon, renting and finally buying the cottage formerly occupied by Tommy.) And in 1930, Sylvia, by then a celebrated novelist, would settle there with her new partner, the young poetess Valentine Ackland, Chaldon subsequently providing the setting for much of her poetry and fiction. (Also in 1930, Tommy was responsible for the writer Gerald Brenan visiting Chaldon, where he met his future wife, the American poet Gamel Woolsey, who had been having an affair with Theo's locally living brother Llewellyn.) Previously unknown to the public, Chaldon became (and remains to this day) a magnet for literary tourists. As Tommy later wrote to Theo: 'It has been a joy to hear of Chaldon & its inhabitants... It now seems to be the best known village in England. Theo dear, we ought to have kept it a secret. But it would be hard to find a bushel sufficiently large and opaque enough to hide a light like yours.'²¹

There was a curious postscript to Tommy's 'Chaldon sojourn'. In December 1923 the Powyses' eldest son Dicky, having left Sherborne school, was due to sail for Kenya to work on the farm of Theo's brother William (where he would tragically die a few years later). Tommy persuaded Theo and Violet to visit London, where neither of them had ever been, to see him off at Tilbury docks. He did so with some difficulty, as the very idea of London filled them with 'black terrors': in particular they were appalled by the prospect of the London traffic, Violet declaring that the sight of a double-decker bus in Dorchester had made her feel sick. However, Tommy was determined that they should go, and to ensure they did so spent most of November with them in Chaldon, and escorted them to the capital, where they stayed in Chiswick with Theo's younger brother A. R. Powys, architect, writer and founder of the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. The visit was something of a nightmare for the poor Powyses. Being used to the simplest diet, they found the rich food of Soho restaurants indigestible; and having led an isolated existence, they were bewildered by the parties in their honour arranged by Tommy, Sylvia and Bunny. They nevertheless behaved graciously on these occasions, the highlights of which were a lunch to introduce Theo to Arnold Bennett and Lytton Strachey, a dinner given by Sylvia at her flat on her thirtieth birthday, and a huge party thrown by Tommy at his studio, at which Theo, to show that 'the pen is mightier than the sword', was invited to cut a cake representing a 'left leg' with a giant nib.²²

Tommy never forgot Theo. In 1933 he learnt that the Powyses, having been deprived of their small private income by Theo's father's death, had fallen into penury. Though Tommy himself was going rapidly downhill at this time, and had not long to live, he managed – through the influence of Augustus John and Bunny – to get Theo awarded a pension from the Civil List, which sustained the novelist for the remaining two decades of his life.²³

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Note on Contributors

Michael Bloch is the author of some twenty books, including biographies of Jeremy Thorpe, Ribbentrop, James Lees-Milne and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. He lives in London.

Susan Fox is a historical researcher with special interest in the Bloomsbury Group. The authors she has assisted include Nigel Nicolson with his father's diaries and letters, and Anne Chisholm with her biographies of Frances Partridge and Dora Carrington. She has also organised and catalogued numerous manuscript collections. Email: mab@bloomsburystud.net.

Notes

- 1 Judith Stinton, *Chaldon Herring: The Powys circle in a Dorset village* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1988), 69.
- 2 David Garnett, ed., *Dora Carrington: Letters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 339.
- 3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Theodore Powys and some friends at East Chaldon, 1922–1927: A narrative and some letters', *The Powys Review* 5 (Summer 1979) [TPSF].
- 4 Quoted in <http://www.hermitary.com/bookreviews/powys-tf.html>.
- 5 Malcolm Elwyn, ed., *Letters of John Cowper Powys to his Brother Llewellyn*, Vol. I (London: Village Press, 1975), 294.
- 6 TPSF.
- 7 TPSF; Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), 48–50.
- 8 David Garnett, *The Familiar Faces* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), 1–2.
- 9 Richard Garnett, ed., *Sylvia & David* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994), 35.
- 10 TPSF.
- 11 Garnett, *Sylvia & David*, 35.
- 12 Quoted in Richard Garnett, 'Theodore Powys and the Garnetts: Records of a friendship', *The Powys Journal* 10 (2001), 9–10 [TPG].

- 13 ST to David Garnett, undated, in Garnett Papers, Northwestern University; also quoted in *TPG*, 10.
- 14 Garnett, *Familiar Faces*, 3–6.
- 15 Garnett, *Sylvia & David*, 35.
- 16 ST to David Garnett, Garnett Papers, Northwestern University.
- 17 Quoted in Sarah Knights, *Bloomsbury's Outsider: A life of David Garnett* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 175.
- 18 The campaign to get Theo's work published is described in some detail by Richard Garnett in *TPG*.
- 19 ST to Roy Harrod, November 1923; British Library Add MSS 72763 ff. 73–4.
- 20 Quoted in Stinton, *Chaldon Herring*, 53.
- 21 Quoted in Stinton, *Chaldon Herring*, 70.
- 22 See ST to David Garnett, 1 November 1923, in Garnett Papers, Northwestern University; also quoted in *TPG*, 17; Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Theodore Powys at East Chaldon', in *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, ed. Belinda Humfrey (London: Peter Owen, 1980), 128–30.
- 23 *TPG*.