

A LIFE-LONG LOVE

Bo Foster and Valentine Ackland

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Earlier this year, the Society acquired a worn maroon folder containing poetry and other writings by Valentine Ackland: an unusual find in more ways than one. They came to the Society via Colin House, who was Sylvia's gardener and friend during her last years at Frome Vauchurch, and who still cherishes her memory.

Colin was at a viewing for a sale at Duke's auction house in Dorchester when he noticed a cardboard box, catalogued as 'sheet music and ephemera'. He stopped to examine the music, which was on top of the pile of material. Beneath it was a heap of papers in a handwriting which he instantly recognised as being that of Valentine Ackland.

He bought the papers – for a song – on auction day. No other bidders had shown any interest, and it seems likely that the papers would have ended up in some recycling bin had he not realised their worth.

Colin approached me with the papers, hoping that it might be possible to make a book out of them. I thought it unlikely. He then decided that he did not want to keep them (though he kept the music). On the other hand, he did not want them to leave the county, so the Society's committee agreed to offer him £500 for the papers, an offer he accepted. They were purchased with the surplus money (around £100) from the Stonor letters fund, plus a generous donation of £200 from our patron, Janet Machen Pollock. The remainder came from the Society's own funds.

The loose-leaf folder is divided into two sections. To the

back are about sixty typed poems, finished copies, on which are lightly pencilled in VA's hand the date of composition and, sometimes, the name of the person to whom the poem is addressed. The poems are nearly all early ones, dating from 1924 to 1930 (with a few later verses on the subject of Spain). Most are untitled; some are works in progress. They are evidently being prepared for a collection, but even now remain unpublished. They are probably not publishable, they are apprentice poems: Valentine would have been in her teens when she began writing them. They dwell on love, religion and death, seldom stepping outside the self except when empathising with plants or animals.

The poems are important, though, because they are Valentine's earliest extant writings and because they show just how intensely dedicated she was to her craft, revising her work constantly, paying careful attention to rhyme and metre – and being prepared to seek advice.

The provenance of these papers is traceable. They previously belonged to Bo Foster, Valentine's most significant lover before she went to live with Sylvia, and the person she was then regarding as her mentor. The disordered pages in the front half of the folder include a poem entitled 'To Bo 1924' and a number of notes to her, in which Valentine asks Bo's opinion or explains her own state of mind when she wrote some of the poems. At one point she asks Bo to type them out for her, and at another she asks her to set one poem to 'a melody'.

Bo emerges from these pages as the most important influence on Valentine's early poetic development. And Valentine knew it. One group of poems is inscribed 'For you dear Bo from Molly [VA] – who will be if she is not now, a Very Great Genius! (And some of it, if not quite all, will be very greatly owing to you – !) at anyrate my discerning of it! 24.1. 27.'

But Bo's influence on her went much further, a fact acknowledged by Valentine in that maddeningly elusive testament *For Sylvia*, written in 1949 – where Bo is referred to as 'X'. 'She introduced me to books, to modern pictures, to modern poetry.' Of Irish descent, Bo was a Catholic, and

Valentine soon began 'having Instruction from a priest'. Bo also taught Valentine the art of love-making, an activity Valentine somehow managed to square with her new faith. She remained 'quite serenely confident that what we were doing was legitimate', while at the same time was relishing the fact 'that it was extremely sinful and secret'. And 'in all innocence' Bo introduced her to drink, a taste which was to blight the younger woman's life for years to come.

At our first dinner together when I was seventeen, she had given me champagne and at all subsequent dinners we drank wine, and sometimes she gave me brandy or whisky; I felt released from shyness and timidity, when I was a little drunk...

Eleanor 'Bo' Foster (her brother's nickname was 'Boyo') was 28 when she first met Valentine. In an autobiographical typescript in the archive describing the events of 1924 -1925 (which has many similarities with *For Sylvia* and may have been written around the same time) Valentine recounts how fearfully old that seemed to her to be. The couple had met at the Young Conservative Union, of which Valentine was then a member. Bo was an official speaker and must have continued to represent the Tory Party, as Sylvia noted in her diary on May 25 1955. 'In the evening to the Eve of Poll meeting in Dorchester where Bo spoke with professional arts and graces, far beyond the Dorchester guffaws...'

Bo and Valentine became lovers in the cramped cabin of a P&O boat, en route for Spain. 'Every hour of the day,' Valentine wrote in her unpublished typescript, 'was exciting and terrifying, everything we saw was used by us to trim our love and every moment of the day promised us night. When my life became untidy and diffused this single life, this concentrate of passion invalidated everything else for me, every time.'

Among the events thus invalidated were Valentine's engagement to one man, her marriage to another, and that marriage's subsequent annulment (Valentine even used her trousseau to entice Bo.) Though Valentine had many other lovers, both male and female, Bo remained the important

figure in her life. It may have been slightly different for Bo. On their return to London from Spain they separated at the station: 'I went back to Saint James' Court alone. No one else was in. I rang up Bo. In the talkative excitement of meeting her parents she was hasty and distraite. I put down the receiver and sat down on my bed. I realised then that nothing was "All" to Bo. But I was eighteen and nothing but "All" existed for me.'

When the couple finally split up in 1931, Valentine repeated this charge against Bo in a letter, which she summarised for Sylvia in a further letter, dated 24th March. After confirming her total commitment to Sylvia, Valentine goes on to tell Bo, 'I do not want to hurt you. Our love was far too dear to me. But the last yielding was not there. You had a separate life.'

Thus was Bo dispatched. Although sensitive to the sufferings of animals – and also of the poor – Valentine could be ruthless, at least to other stronger, warmer women. Thereafter Bo, if referred to at all, is regarded as rather a joke.

In the 1920s, Bo had lived with her parents in London. During the Second World War she moved to Cattistock, a village two miles from Frome Vauchurch. Her house in Duck Street, which she shared with her brother Boyo, was (and is) called Markers, and had been the residence of the master of the hunt. Did she move there to be near Valentine? She may have wanted to escape the Blitz, but it was surely no coincidence that she chose so close a place. At first they did not acknowledge one another's presence. In the autobiographical typescript, Valentine wrote 'It seems grotesque to me that Bo should live two miles away and should not speak to me now, for I know that she remembers exactly as I do, so clearly and so exactly – but it has all gone from us'.

Relations seemed to have improved a little during the fifties, with Bo visiting Valentine's shop in the Frome Vauchurch house, ('all noise and anecdote and affability to the poor') in 1953, receiving a birthday nosegay in 1956, and in 1959 showing concern about one of Sylvia's and Valentine's cats. At Valentine's death in 1969 Bo wrote to

Sylvia: 'What can I say? Nothing adequate – except that I loved V.A. and bless you for giving her forty years of peace & happiness – She adored you – you were her haven & anchorage...'

It is surely revealing that Bo kept Valentine's poems until her own death. Some of her books were bequeathed to the Dorset County Museum in 1980, a handsome and informed collection. The cottage adjoining Markers was left to her housekeeper along with other items. It would seem to be on the latter's death that the poems and papers ended so precariously up at auction.

Unpublished sources for this article are all from the STW Archive:
G (right) 7/34 card from Bo Foster to STW on VA's death
STW/VA/Friends/37 photograph of Bo Foster and her brother
outside Markers
1924 –1925 R(SCL)/1/16b autobiographical piece by VA