

REVIEWS

DORSET STORIES

Sylvia Townsend Warner

(Black Dog Books, 2006, Hardback, £15.99)

The supply of Sylvia Townsend Warner's stories in the files of the *New Yorker* would seem – most fortunately – to be unlimited; and here are eight more which have not been reprinted until now. Editorial policy in the present collection is governed by the choice of Dorset as the location (in certain cases the unspecified location) of tales that range from 1932 to 1977, a year before the author died. We can therefore watch the development of her style from the mannered gnostic mordancy of her friend T. F. Powys, through the somewhat skittish tone of the earlier wartime pieces, to the full maturity of her art in stories from *Winter in the Air* (1955) and the four collections following it. Of the twenty nine tales assembled here, nine come from *A Garland of Straw* (1945) and *The Museum of Cheats* (1947), both of which are long out of print. Quite apart from its handsome format and the many illustrations by Reynolds Stone, this is a book that admirers of Sylvia Townsend Warner will be glad to have in their possession.

In addition to stories it also contains two pieces of non-fiction. One is an extract from the author's affectionate if slightly facetious (and thus unintentionally condescending) memoir of Theodore Powys, which was never completed – for the very good reason that she discovered (what she might have guessed for herself) that he did not like it. The other piece is very different, a sober but tart account of the rural poor as Warner observed them in East Chaldon during the

early 1930s. It is here, rather than in any party political statements, that her compassionate Marxism becomes apparent. Marxism shows up also in many of her lightweight wartime sketches, in which the instinctive bossiness of the well-to-do comes up against the matter-of-fact literal-mindedness of the opinionated poor. Many of these sketches are very funny indeed, and subtle also in their well-nigh complicit understanding of the outlooks of both parties.

In her Foreword Judith Stinton, an authority on Dorset and its past, provides a helpful account of local affairs and indicates that Dorset as such was the scene rather than the inspiration of these stories: East Chaldon apart, one feels that Warner's heart was really more at home in East Anglia than in the sheltering hills and social conservatism of the West Country: one notices in her guide to Somerset how her pen quickens when she reaches Sedgemoor. So too in these stories, the landscape of 'A Queen Remembered' is especially evocative. But whatever their settings, these stories are a source of continuing delight, told with all the author's inventiveness of phrase and command of fresh and suggestive simile; her humour is alert and swift as the fox which could well be hiding in more than one of Reynolds Stone's engravings.

Glen Cavaliero