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Notes on *The Corner That Held Them*

Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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Abstract

A draft manuscript essay in which Warner recalls the genesis of *The Corner That Held Them* and the stages of its composition.

Keywords *The Corner That Held Them*; prefatory note; Somerset; Eileen Power; medieval nunneries.

Editor's note: This untitled handwritten account by Warner of how she came to write The Corner That Held Them has not previously been published. It is roughly the same length as the notes on Mr Fortune's Maggot and Summer Will Show that she sent to William Maxwell and that he included in his edition of Warner's Letters (pp. 10–11, 39–40); Maxwell dates these to 'the mid-1960s'. The manuscript is written on three pages of a lined exercise book and is not a fair copy.

Titles¹ Isle Drury, Isle Drue, People Growing Old, Shadows on a river, the Corner that held them.

The 1st title and its variant remind me that in my first sight of The Corner the nunnery was a Somerset nunnery, and the river ran through Sedgemoor.²

The 3rd title is really the true one, for it was to this that I worked the story. Shadows etc, was brought to life by having to fill³ in a preliminary contract, and a glance back to another title I'd forgotten – Flat Country, which dates back to my 1st book of poems, and David Garnett dissuaded me from it in a letter of Mephistophelean⁴ concern about my sales. Pointed alps, he said, would sell, but not Flat Country.⁵ The final title was found by chance, because Valentine in 1948 filled the house with

holy writs, and drew my attention to the Wisdom of Solomon left in the bathroom.⁶

The book began in 1941. I was in a doldrum. I had tried the beginning which remains as *Hamlet in England*,⁷ I had planned and begun a reconstruction of the first G.T.W. and the holy Townsends.⁸ The first bricks were the feeling of how white Ely must have looked across the 14th century fen, and how intimidatingly, tyrannically large, to the 14th century peasant, coming out of his smoky hovel to stare over the fen; and a wish to write Marxianly about the ages of faith.

The first piece of writing was a scene in the convent garden. Dame Alice was weeding shallots, a fat novice called Amy was helping her, and two nuns walked to and fro, talking about the convent's finances and at one end of the walk looking through a gap in the reed fence onto the fen, and then turning to see the brand-new tower which had plunged them in debt. One of them was to become prioress; and to mislay her spirituality in the rough and tumble of administration, be neither Martha nor Mary, and hated for her incompetence. This nun split into Dame Alicia, and Dame Liliias. The Dame Alice of this date was discarded, because she showed every sign of being one of those homely herbal Anglocattish⁹ favourites. Her name and her housewifery went on to Dame Alice of the novel. There was also a tinge of the Corner's Prioress Matilda in the haughty prioress of this period, who had been scolded by a bishop in visitation.

I think this was written before I sent to the L.L. for Eileen Power's *English Nunneries*¹⁰ for re-reading. The next piece of writing was after. This was the arrival of the custos, then called Henry Fenscher, to quarrel with the bailiff and – then, violently, with the nun's priest, Sir Ralph. The expedition to Esselby was in this draft, but minus the leper house and *Ars Nova*.¹¹ A great deal of this draft¹² (none of the other) went into the book: the Egyptian Day, the quarrel with the bailiff, the spire, and the departure on the morrow of S. Pancras day.¹³

So far the book was still intention, very clear, with no plan. But saying to myself I must begin it somewhere, I wrote the opening of *Brian & Alianor* straight off. This opening showed me that the manor must be moved into a harsher climate, and the Waxle stream is the Hundred Stream of Waxham Cobley.¹⁴ To find an East Anglian name for the nunnery was imperative, and I put this off till the book was in its third draught, for the imperative can safely be postponed. With the move to East Anglia it was natural to use John Powles for William Holly: and the innkeeping woman at West Somerton, Mrs Pitchers, gave me Mary

Kettle. A little thought about architecture obliged me to change the original tower to a spire. This is the stage of *People Growing Old*: Sir Ralph settling down in his iniquity, Dame Alicia losing¹⁵ her élan about the spire, Dame Matilda aging in her sojourn as treasurers, Bishops dying (in this draught Bishop Giles died too), and the old Marie de Blakeborn at the christening. But one can't have people growing old without the young coming up to push them off the scene.

Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive,
Dorset History Centre; DHC reference number 'D/TWA/A05'; previous reference
number at the Dorset County Museum 'STW.2012.125.1779'

Notes

- 1 The first word is not quite legible and is therefore conjectural; it may be an abbreviated version of 'Titles', the reading which is given here on the grounds of its obvious sense. An unpublished entry in Warner's diary for 12 April 1942 refers to 'the Isle Drury beginning', and an entry on 2 July 1942 is still using Isle Drury as the title. My thanks to Claire Harman for these references to Warner's diary.
- 2 There is a River Brue in the Sedgemoor area, but no Isle Drue or Isle Drury. Warner's guidebook *Somerset* (1949) includes a long section on Sedgemoor (pp. 62–85). She describes it as 'so open to inspection and yet so mysterious and remote', with a 'particular air of secrecy and import' (p. 62). The final page of the section evokes its atmosphere of fragrant air and water: 'For of all things on Sedgemoor the most persuasive, the most personal to the place, is the air. It seems to have traversed a world-without-end of solitude, and all the smells it carries, the smell of the wild peppermint that grows along the ditches, the smell of a hay-stack, the bitter willow-scent, are qualified by water, just as the tone of a stringed instrument is qualified by putting on a mute' (p. 85).
- 3 Corrected from 'the fill' in the manuscript.
- 4 Corrected from 'Mephistopheles and concern' in the manuscript.
- 5 Negotiations around the title of what became *The Espalier* (1925) are recorded in *Sylvia & David: the Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters* (1994), pp. 12–16.
- 6 See Wisdom of Solomon 17:4: 'For neither might the corner that held them keep them from fear: but noises as of waters falling down sounded about them, and sad visions appeared unto them with heavy countenances.' The epigraph on the title page of the book gives the first half of the verse (up to 'keep them from fear').
- 7 The Warner–Ackland Archive contains the 20-page typescript of an unpublished story titled 'A Sea-Change', amended to 'Hamlet in England'. The story starts with Hamlet not enjoying the company of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on board the ship sending him to England. When the ship is attacked by pirates, Hamlet boards the pirate vessel and becomes the captive of its captain, Francis Firebrace of Fovant, Wiltshire (his ship is called 'The Nonesuch of Fovant', Warner's playful tribute to David Garnett's Nonesuch Press). Hamlet contemplates staying with Firebrace, but his father's ghost appears rebukingly

on the deck. Hamlet persuades the captain to land him back in Denmark, and is pleased to find that ‘for the first time in his life he had been able consistently to assert himself’ (p. 19). Early in the story Hamlet reflects on nunneries: ‘It is no wonder that man has invented the cloister, and that girls, the most desperate variety of humankind, should scratch and claw their way out from a destiny of motherhood, rend the pearly bobs from their ears, and cast themselves, bleeding and breathless, on the leeward side of the nunnery wall. To get out of the wind, that is the motive. To get out of the wind, and sit down in the present tense’ (pp. 2–3).

- 8 Sylvia’s great-grandfather, the Reverend George Townsend Warner (d. 1869).
 9 That is, ‘in the Anglo-Catholic manner’.
 10 The ‘L.L.’ is the London Library, from which Warner borrowed Eileen Power’s *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (1922). The book is freely available online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39537/39537-h/39537-h.htm>. Francesca Wade discusses Power, with some reference to Warner, in her article ‘A Good Convent Should Have No History’ (*The Paris Review*, 6 February 2020). Wade notes that Eileen Power’s ‘attention was drawn not to expressions of spiritual devotion or the behavioural codes imposed by the distant ecclesiastical authorities but to the intimate workings of a human community. Drawing on sources including nuns’ account books, bishops’ registers and popular songs, she reconstructs in intimate detail the material life of 138 English nunneries operating between 1270 and 1536. These were not only houses of prayer, but also landlords, employers, merchants and philanthropists, and invariably experienced a “constant struggle with poverty”.’ Francesca Wade’s book *Square Haunting: Five Women, Freedom and London Between the Wars* (Faber & Faber, 2020) will be reviewed in the next issue of the *Journal*.
 11 The draft to which Warner refers must predate the later piece of writing she describes in an unpublished diary entry for 4 April 1942: ‘I rode with Henry Fitchett, at present Fensher, to the leper house to sing *Ars Nova*: just as I was wandering to bed I realized why: it would detach his faith from the Bishop.’
 12 The third page of Warner’s manuscript begins here. On the verso she has written two couplets, numbered ‘8’ and ‘7’ respectively.

Without a glance, without a smile 8.
 They passed each other at Carlisle

Engaging in a sterner fray 7.
 Rob left for London the same day.

- 13 ‘the Egyptian Day’: ‘An Egyptian Day, thought Henry Yellowlees, a day blasted in the calendar’ (p. 191); ‘the quarrel with the bailiff’ (see p. 190); ‘the spire’: see especially chapter IV, pp. 80–113; ‘the departure on the morrow of S. Pancras day’: this is the day when the custos Henry Yellowlees sets off to collect the rent at Esselby (see pp. 199ff.). Page references from the Virago Press 1988 edition of *The Corner That Held Them*.
 14 Warner is probably thinking of the ‘Hundred Stream’ that runs through East Ruston in Norfolk, about six miles from Frankfort Manor, the house she and Ackland rented in 1933–4. The source of the stream is about seven miles from Waxham on the Norfolk coast.
 15 Corrected from ‘loosing’ in the manuscript.

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