

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

Letter to the Editor

John Lucas¹

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Abstract

A letter about Sylvia Townsend Warner's friendship with Arnold Rattenbury and Rattenbury's role as an advocate of her work.

Keywords Arnold Rattenbury; Sylvia Townsend Warner; enabling; advocacy.

Dear Editor,

I greatly enjoyed Janet Montefiore's essay 'The Critical Reception of Sylvia Townsend Warner' in the 2018 *Journal*, though I do have a quibble – or perhaps it's more accurate to say a note of regret. I'm always saddened when writers on STW don't make mention of the important part Arnold Rattenbury played in sustaining and, indeed, advancing her reputation. This may be because he was a very self-effacing man, but I think credit needs to be given to him for all he did for her. Though he published her in *Our Time* and they became good friends, as a result of which he was able to give a cache of their correspondence to the archive at Dorchester, it was after her death that he really did a good deal to keep her name and work alive. There is, for example, the essay he wrote in the collection I edited, *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy*, there are the lectures and talks he gave where her name was invariably woven into the subject whenever at all relevant; and Arnold also put himself at the disposal of a number of research students who chose to work on STW. Some of these were students I supervised and who'd become interested in STW through lectures and talks he gave about her. He was certainly a great help to me when I was writing an essay on her poetry (which first appeared in the *Journal* in 2000 and was then reprinted in *Starting to*

Explain), as well as the chapter ‘Women After the War’ in my book, *The Radical Twenties*.

Quite apart from being a good poet and by far the best exhibition designer I’ve ever known, Arnold was a wonderful enabler of the work of others. If you think of the writers, artists, musicians, etc. of any one period forming a kind of wood where different trees grow and thrive in ‘order in variety’ (though Pope’s phrase ought probably be amended to ‘disorder in variety’), then people like Arnold are part of what Richard Mabey calls ‘the wood-wide web’ of inter-connecting roots by means of which often very different trees draw sustenance. Connections are made, information passes along soi-disant underground and often weirdly unpredictable routes, and further connections are made. ... It’s how it happens. I discovered much about STW I’d never have known had I not been a friend of Arnold’s; I was able to put my student, Andy Croft, in touch with him; and so on. Perhaps there’s no satisfactory way of accounting for or recognising this wood-wide web, no way of writing about it, but I wish there was.

With best wishes
John Lucas

Note on contributor

John Lucas is a poet, critic, biographer and literary historian, as well as the founding publisher of Shoestring Press. His most recent books include *A World Perhaps: New and Selected Poems*; *The Radical Twenties: Writing, Politics, Culture*; *The Good That We Do*; and *92 Acharnon Street*, winner of the Dolman Award for the Best Travel Book of 2008.