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Sylvia Townsend Warner*

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*(1893–1978)

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Abstract

Warner's draft of a preface to her novel *The True Heart* probably dates from the mid-1960s. It includes details about the background and composition of the novel that were not included in the shorter version of this piece that appeared as the preface to the 1978 Virago Press edition of the book.

Keywords *The True Heart*; Sylvia Townsend Warner; preface.

Editor's note. This note on The True Heart *is not dated but its method resembles the notes on* Mr Fortune's Maggot *and* Summer Will Show, *which Warner gave to William Maxwell 'in the mid-1960s' and he included in his edition of her* Letters *(pp. 10–11 and 39–40). The typewriter she used, the paper and the single-spaced typescript also accord with this date. The note has handwritten revisions and is not a fair copy, so Warner is unlikely to have sent it to Maxwell. But she must have drawn on this draft or a later version for her preface to the 1978 Virago Press edition of* The True Heart *(many of the sentences are identical). However, the draft includes much that didn't make it into the Virago preface, including details about what she was reading, the locations in the book and the dates of composition. It concludes with a paragraph (included below) that has been crossed through but not made illegible; this gives further details about the biographical sources that went into the writing of the novel.*

In July 1922 I was in Whiteley's Bargain section (where I was already buying blocks of writing paper ruled feint), and on the stationery counter I saw some ordnance maps. I bought one of Essex, because I did not know

Essex even by map. The green marsh spaces on the map, and the blue creeks, and the marsh names, pleased me. On August Bank Holiday I went to Southend, took a bus out of the town to a name on my map, and spent a long slow day walking about. I came to a creek, running slowly, and beyond it was an island with a white horse on it and some farm-buildings. This was the genesis of The True Heart. Later that summer I went to Drinkwater St Laurence, again by my map, and spent a month in the marshes, walking, reading Freud, writing poetry, reading Villon, writing (I think, a play about sin-eating). All the landscape of The T. H. comes from that summer: the wild orchard, the sea-wall, the saltings, Dannie (except the winter church, which I passed on a walk with David Garnett, near Dengie, a couple of years later). The second farm was made up from the country near Maldon, and a little from by Dunmow.

In 1924 I was thinking enough about writing (I had begun Lolly Willowes then) to say to Bea Howe that it would be a good exercise to take a folk song or a fairy story and re-tell it. This idea was the beginning of Eleanor Barley and of The True Heart, a re-telling of Cupid and Psyche. But as far as the scene in Dannie churchyard and the return was written at this time, on blocks of writing paper ruled feint.

In 1927 I went for the summer holiday to Box Cottage in Wiltshire, and there I went on with The True Heart, revising the first pages; but I did not get going with it till I was back in London. It was after writing the cockerel scene that I went out for my chow's midnight walk under an umbrella, obsessed with my storm; to discover presently that it was a mild warm autumn evening. The scene[s] in Covent Garden and Buckingham Palace were written at Penally, the following summer, and I finished the book that autumn.

[The passage that follows below has been crossed through.]

the childbed pages being written on the same night after Oliver and I had taken Dorothy to lie-in.

Other material was the card of cab-fares in London, from the Tomlins' hall; the True Secret, which I have never seen, but my mother talked of it; my chow, William; Geoffrey Sturt for Constantine Melhuish; the frozen birch-trees which came out of Kensington Gardens; Mrs Keates (Sukey's letter, the chow being called Master Muff, and some of Sukey's traits, and her build and colouring); and marsh ways and people learned about from my landlady at Drinkwater St Laurence, Mrs May – who also supplied a good deal of Mrs Leake in Lolly Willowes. Prudence

had something from my unpleasant nurse Florence Gregory. Sukey's own earliest feeling about marshes was my own, dating from childhood, and perhaps Great Expectations – and which must have had a good deal to say in my choice of the map of Essex from the bargain counter.

The vignette was drawn for me by Ray Garnett, the choice of a tea-pot being mine.

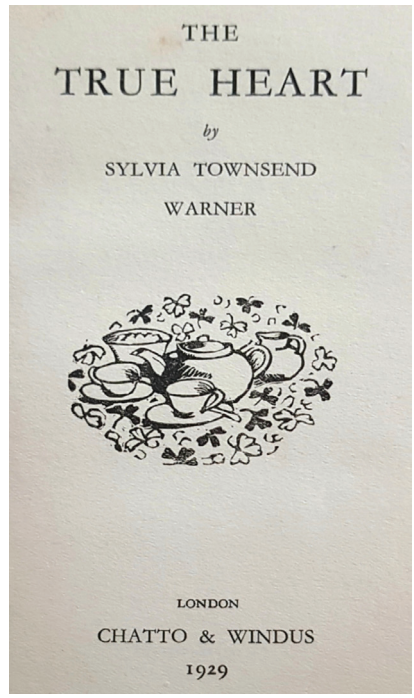

Figure 1. Ray Garnett's vignette for *The True Heart*.

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.2012.125.1775'