

## EDITORIAL

*Peter Tolhurst*

Admirers of Sylvia Townsend Warner owe a great deal to Claire Harman who has done more than anyone to introduce Warner to a new generation of readers. Her edition of the *Collected Poems* (1982) led directly to an acclaimed biography (1989) and then to the equally daunting task of editing Warner's diaries. In between times she wrote introductions to several of the novels reissued by Virago. Having moved on to other Lives she has recently paused to ask 'Who is Sylvia?'. In this retrospective piece she reflects on becoming engrossed in the life of one of the 'warm dead' - even sleeping in the death bed - and on what has flowed from that Life, not least the group that - sounding more like a coven than a literary society - 'performs ceremonies around the grave [grove?] on the anniversary of Warner's death'.

Continuing this slightly macabre theme 'Poison', first broadcast in 1934, is another fine short story to have escaped anthology. Set in a flu-ridden market town in the Fens Warner's choice of location may have been prompted by visits to David Garnett at Hilton Hall. It also tacitly acknowledges the influence of M R James who still haunted the corridors of Kings' College, Cambridge when Warner dined there with her lover Percy ('Teague') Buck in 1930.

Near the end of her life having, in her writing, 'grown tired of the human heart', Warner produced one last extraordinary collection of stories unlike any that had gone before. Geoffrey Grigson's pithy review of *Kingdoms of Elfin* for *Country Life*

illustrates the author's 'sting in the tail' inventiveness and provides a curtain raiser to Helen Sutherland's 'From Elphame to Otherwhere', a paper given at the Society's Dorset weekend earlier this year. From a close reading of *Elfin* Sutherland shows how Warner constructs a convincing world of faery by creating a set of plausible locations and characters before considering how she explores themes of exile, punishment and love already familiar to the novels.

Next up is an early piece written for the *New York Herald Tribune* in which Warner evokes the time and place of Defoe's infamous heroine 'twelve times a whore, five times a wife, twelve years a thief', choosing with mischievous intent to praise Moll Flanders' respectability, probity and ingenuity.

2006 promises to be exciting with the publication of Frances Bingham's biography of Valentine Ackland, Warner's *Dorset Stories* (Black Dog Books) and the first collection of critical essays devoted entirely to her work. Gill Davies' introductory essay 'The Corners That Held Her' considers the importance of both time and place in Warner's fiction and offers a Marxist perspective on the role of society in each of the novels.

The selection of letters to the American poet Samuel Menashe continues the series of correspondence between Warner and friends acquired in her later years. Those in the Berg Collection shed light on Warner's generous advice to the aspiring poet and include a few of her own short verses .

Finally *Narrative Settlements: Geographies of British Women's Fiction between the Wars*, reviewed here by Glen Cavaliero, revisits some of the authors, including Warner, and some of the territory already mapped out in *Step-Daughters of England*. Of greater concern is what Cavaliero regards as the 'jargon-ridden obfuscation of currently fashionable academic prose'. A welcome development is that many articles in the journal are written by academics, including the author of *Narrative Settlements*, but the revival of interest in Warner's oeuvre generated by Harman and others is in danger of being marginalised by the exclusive language of academic orthodoxy. Fortunately the brilliance of Warner's prose remains the yardstick for us all.