

COUSIN AND FRIEND: LETTERS TO RACHEL 1950-1952

Sylvia Townsend Warner

Ed. Rachel Monckton-How and Moira Rutherford.
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Just when we thought there could not possibly be any more undiscovered letters from Sylvia Townsend Warner to her friends, given the huge number now stored in the Warner/Ackland Archive, along comes a totally unexpected collection of letters written by Warner to her cousin Rachel Monckton-How between 1950 and 1952, edited by Rachel herself and Moira Rutherford. As these are family letters we should not expect any startling revelations about Warner's life, but this collection does illustrate some fascinating aspects of her character that might otherwise not have come to light.

Rachel tells us in her introduction that she had not met Warner since she was three years old but their acquaintance was renewed when Rachel's mother, Warner's cousin Cecily, died suddenly: 'Sylvia had dropped everything in order to come to me within hours of the telephone call telling her of my bereavement.' From now on, Warner generously devotes much of her time and effort to help Rachel, a young girl just making her way in the world, to cope with business arising from her mother's death. Warner personally tackles a How cousin on Rachel's behalf, eventually persuading him to give financial help to Rachel. Warner herself tactfully offers some occasional financial support to Rachel: 'it

would not be because I supposed you had asked for it, it would be purely to please myself.' This generosity with her time and resources comes over clearly in this correspondence.

She also, in a gentle way, offers advice to Rachel on her life choices, especially when Rachel contemplates the idea of converting to Roman Catholicism and becoming a nun. Warner tries to persuade her to join an Anglican order: 'There is something to be said for fruiting in one's native orchard.' She also has advice on matters of the heart. Later, when Rachel is considering a proposal of marriage Warner says: 'to talk about friendship to a man who is in love with one may be all right once; but don't do it again. It's like offering someone a lift to Putney when their heart is set on going to Paris.' Warner is clearly acting on behalf of Rachel's late mother and doing it in her own inimitable style.

These letters strongly indicate Warner's interest in and concern for family. She shows detailed knowledge of the Warner family tree and its off-shoots in her answers to Rachel's queries about the Warner ancestors. She is aware of important family possessions, such as her grandmother's manuscript memoir, family trusts and items which should by right come to Rachel on the death of 'Aunt Effie'. It is perhaps no coincidence that she was, at the time of this correspondence, writing her own great family novel, *The Flint Anchor*.

Cousin and Friend would have benefitted perhaps from more information for the reader on the family relationships, perhaps a family tree. Some references, especially to the How relations, are unexplained. However, this does not detract from the inevitable enjoyment of the chance to read more of Warner's epistolary style and to see her acting *in loco parentis* to her young relative. The published correspondence ends in September 1952, but there is more - enough perhaps for another volume at some time in the future?

Judith Bond