

A FRIENDSHIP REDISCOVERED

Sylvia Townsend Warner & Ruth Scott

Peter Tolhurst

In October 1950 Sylvia and Valentine went to stay at Great Eye Folly on the north Norfolk coast. The nearest market town is Holt and each time I go there I am reminded of Sylvia's lament for the place in a letter to William Maxwell (March 1951) towards the end of their stay:

... I am much more a social success in East Anglia than in Wessex, and I don't look forward to being just that peculiar Miss Warner again, after being loved and laured all the way down Holt High Street, and knowing the christian names of every one's cat.

Today the main street is far too busy for laurelling and even the back alleys too gentrified for cats. The only unleashed pets are a pair of Staffordshire dogs that gaze from the window of Richard Scott's antique shop in the forlorn hope of a passing stray. On a recent visit I happened to mention Sylvia's affection for the town; there was a slight pause and the owner said quite calmly 'I think she fancied my mother'. The woman behind the till, the owner's ex-wife Judy, then added that she had once been in possession of Sylvia's overcoat, at which point I replaced the lustreware jug I had been admiring and sat down abruptly.

It transpired that Sylvia, and Richard's mother, Ruth Scott, (née Moorson) had first met at Harrow where their fathers were both house masters. According to Claire Harman, Sylvia, the older of the two, taught Ruth the piano and 'retained a uniquely protective and maternal affection for "Puss"'. Richard's father Anthony Scott was educated at

Harrow and while there he met and later married Ruth, by which time he was employed by a firm restoring church organs while striving to make his way as a composer. Although his close friend and mentor Gerald Finzi, and Vaughan Williams, both admired his work, Scott's music received little attention. Years later the lapsed friendship between Sylvia and Ruth was rekindled by Joy Finzi and on their reunion at Frome Vauchurch Sylvia was struck by how like her mother Ruth looked:

She had the same outlook, alert and demure, the same tune of voice, the same regard; she gives the same impression of a person who succours, who shelters, who comprehends. and who is incapable of trespass or exploitation. (*Diaries* 20: ix: 58)

Valentine became equally close; her poem 'An Alzheimer Case' was prompted by Ruth's slow decline and in Anthony she found a kindred spirit whose talent, like her own, had gone largely unrecognised. 'Forgive the Sleeping Man' with words by Valentine and music by Anthony Scott was to be their tribute to Joy Finzi, repayed when Joy came to draw Valentine on her deathbed.

There is already a handful of letters to Ruth in the STW/VA archive but, tucked away in the attic of Richard's farmhouse among his father's papers we found another 20, a few to 'Tony' but mostly addressed to 'Darling Puss' spanning the years 1965-74. They may not be laced with the stylistic flourishes or brilliant wit that flavour Sylvia's most memorable correspondence but these are the letters from one old friend to another. Affirmative and affectionate they offer support and advise throughout Ruth's sometimes difficult marriage; they record the pleasure of visits to Frome Vauchurch by Ruth and then by Richard and his Mary (MacCarthy), 'as elegant as a dragonfly', and of course the devastating blow of Valentine's death.

In the aftermath Sylvia bequeathed Valentine's Renault to the Scotts and, as it turned out, the long grey coat that had been hers. Eventually it came to Richard and his wife who, when it became too moth-eaten, used it to mulch the young fruit trees in her cottage garden beside the church. In 2003,

following his father's death, Richard organized a celebration of Anthony Scott's music – two concerts in London and one in Salthouse church. Rising above the village, it looks out across pantile roofs and the grazing marshes to a grey-blue sea and, between them, the shingle ridge where, 50 years or more before Great Eye Folly had perched 'like a hooded hawk on a clenched fist'. Here, according to Sylvia, 'the east wind sobs like a Bronte in the kitchen' and, judging by the flotsam people on this coast 'did nothing but eat coconuts and clean their teeth'.

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My dearest puss, my friend and almost my daughter.

She [Valentine] felt such affection for you, reposed so much trust in you, that it was very sad for her that you could not see her again. But it was too late. She was already under morphia, had been for a couple of days; and all I could do was to sit by her and hold her restless hand and say over and over poems which we loved - which she could not hear, yet I felt some intact inner part of her could recognise and be glad of.

Even more positively, I now feel that she watches over me, holds me up, faithfully loves me, prompts me to this and that, even sends tokens to me. Who else could have sent a beautiful young white cat to repose on the threshold of the crematorium when we arrived there? But what I miss, Ruth, are the *practical* services. I cannot cook for her, make her bed, bring her fresh flowers, amuse her with this or that ridiculous oddity. My hands hang idle at my sides.

Joy was a kind creature to have with me, and with an interesting kind of shrewdness, experienced shrewdness, about bereavement. She drew all the day, and the drawing she took off with her was a true one. I did not want her to fake it, but she rightly said that the base of the drawing needed to be slightly darkened from its paper-white. Heaven send[?] she had not given way to second thoughts – as she exasperated Valentine by doing with that portrait of me.

In any case, she saw the extreme beauty of Valentine's

post-mortem countenance. ... I wanted her as a witness quite as much as an artist.

For the moment, I am supported through the days by the Demon Efficiency, sorting, seeking, writing, arranging and clensing; and as a result sleep like a hard-working animal. But like an animal, I am dumb; drained of all words except the duteous speeches. This is mainly shock & reaction and wont last. When this dumbness leaves me, I will tell you & invite myself to your arms and to Tony's music.

It is forty years happiness I grieve for, remember; and forty years happiness I have to shine on me. I praise the Lord & forget not all his benefits.

With my love

Sylvia