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At War: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Maiden Newton

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Abstract

Sylvia Townsend Warner's 1958 poetry collection *Boxwood* is an unusual book with an unusual genesis. This article examines how Warner and her neighbour, the wood engraver Reynolds Stone, collaborated on the project. It explores Warner's meditations on rural life, storytelling and human mortality in the wider contexts of her own poetry and the history of British wood engraving.

Keywords *Boxwood*; wood engraving; collaboration; Reynolds Stone; photopoetry; illustration; Sylvia Townsend Warner.

Maiden Newton, home to Sylvia Townsend Warner for 40 years, has more recently been at war. Three major events were organised for the years 2008, 2010 and 2012, recreating life in the village during the Second World War. They were called 'Maiden Newton at War' and proved very successful.

On the festival weekends heavy guns were fired, which rattled cottage windows and doors, while sirens wailed, old photographs and memories were rediscovered and discussed, and war-gamers crouched in khaki in fields among the nettles, awaiting an unseen enemy. The village was packed with appreciative spectators (though some of the inhabitants were less enthusiastic about this invasion).

Maiden Newton's real war was rather different, as Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland were to discover after they moved from West Chaldon to 'Riversdale', Frome Vauchurch, in August 1937. They liked their new house – though they never used

its name – and loved the River Frome which flowed beneath their windows. On 6 September, Sylvia wrote to Steven Clark: ‘It is a most accommodating house, took our furniture to its bosom without any cavillings. The cat likes it, we like it. The river is full of trout ... and chirrups with moorhens and their broods and contains a water-rat who swims under our windows looking like a half-submerged bulrush.’¹ In a further letter of 11 May 1938 she is even more enthusiastic:

This place is most beautiful. We love it far more than we thought we should. The river is an incessant pleasure, and is always handing us small nosegays of beauty or entertainment. The latest nosegay is a posy of three fat young water-rats who have just learnt to swim ... Now the nightingales have just arrived. They came on a night of sharp frost, it was curious to hear their passionate excited voices singing of summer on that rigid silence of frost.²

They were not planning to stay long in Maiden Newton, and began by renting the house, which they eventually bought in 1946. ‘The village was ugly but practical,’ Sylvia wrote. ‘It contained a railway station [and] some shops.’³ In fact, the village was (and is) exceptionally well supplied with shops. In the 1940s there were grocers, a bakery and a butcher’s, an ironmonger, a bank, two tailors, shoe repairers and a supplier of paraffin. Though they liked these village amenities and the house, they did not take so wholeheartedly to the natives.

This is rather surprising. As Communists, Sylvia and Valentine should have felt at home in a working-class village. Although primarily agricultural, Maiden Newton possessed, along with its important railway junction, a milk factory, a mill, a tannery, a large quarry and an iron foundry. The villagers were able to choose, if they so wished, to take up work other than agricultural labour in a county notorious for its low payment of farm workers.

Dorset is a county of great estates, and Maiden Newton was surrounded by them. Neighbouring estates included the entire village of Frampton, which belonged to the Sheridan family (whose members had included the eighteenth-century playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan), and the extensive Ilchester estates around Evershot. Although the Sheridans owned land in Maiden Newton, they did not own many of the houses: the village is an open one. As a result, and because they were not wholly reliant on agricultural work, the inhabitants tended to be more independent and free-thinking than those of the villages nearby.

In Maiden Newton, Ackland and Warner were known to be Communists and were thus regarded with some suspicion: Sylvia suggested that they were thought to be spies. Whether the villagers knew they were lesbians is less likely, as the idea probably would not have occurred to them. One reason for the couple's isolation was geographical. Riversdale is in Lower Frome Vauchurch, still separated from Maiden Newton by a field, and surrounded by water meadows. Their only neighbour was Mrs Hawley Edwards (or 'Polly' as she was known to the villagers), who lived in a collection of four log cabins along the river, comprising bedroom, bathroom, kitchen and dining room. There was also a garage on the far side of the bridge, crammed with wine that had been left behind by Polly's errant husband. Since his departure, Polly had lived alone; her daughter had retreated to Harrogate.

The detached garage was slowly being emptied as Polly 'liked a drink'. She also liked a cigarette. Her gardener Brian Lemon recalls going out to buy packets of Du Mauriers for her. She would fill her apron pockets with cigarettes, then light up the first one of the day. One match would suffice. She smoked continuously, lighting each succeeding cigarette from its predecessor.

Polly seldom went out. She refused to budge, her gardener did her shopping and her diet was enlivened by the brown trout she baited from the river – much to the fury of the village's 'river man'.

The two households had a mutual arrangement: Sylvia would feed the hens in Mrs Edwards' absence, and in return Mrs Edwards would feed the Riversdale pets. From the letters and diaries it seems that Sylvia found her rather a nuisance – although in some ways their lifestyles were not dissimilar, they evidently had little in common, other than the fact that they were both well-heeled incomers (and heavy smokers). When Polly did venture out she required lifts, as her garage held only wine, and her hens, too, could be troublesome.

Sylvia, however, treated Mrs Hawley Edwards more gently in fiction. In the short story 'Boors Carousing' from *The Museum of Cheats* (1947), Polly becomes Miss Metcalf, an elderly spinster seeking assistance in the rescue of her rabbits from the flooding river. Mr Kinloch – a portrait of Sylvia's writing self – helps her and resigns himself to taking her on, thereby embracing the humanity he has previously managed to avoid.⁴

About five years after this story was published, Mrs Hawley Edwards was dead. One night, following a violent gale, the police came round to Polly's house to find her drowned. Fatally, she had refused to

flee the flood, climbing on to the kitchen table instead. As the water levels rose, she drowned beneath them.

Flooding is a fact of life in Maiden Newton, situated as it is at the confluence of two rivers. Sylvia and Valentine were accustomed to damp conditions: their previous house at 24 West Chaldon was oozing with damp; water came from a well which crawled with rats. Riversdale was often flooded, but remained comparatively comfortable, though it lacked the romantic associations and sweeping scenery of Chaldon, where Warner and Ackland had fallen in love. No. 24 West Chaldon – ‘ye olde communists’ rest’ – had been much visited by comrades from London and was close to the house of their much-loved friend, the writer Theodore Powys. Although in the middle of nowhere, they must have felt at the centre of events. What is more, Riversdale soon began to have unhappy associations for Sylvia, being the place where in 1938 Valentine Ackland began her affair with the American Elizabeth Wade White.

It took a war for Sylvia to engage with the natives. In 1940, on her return from accompanying Valentine Ackland on a visit to Wade White in America, she began working for two days a week in the Dorchester office of the Women’s Voluntary Service (WVS) at 27 High West Street. Now an art shop, this was ‘a nice office in an old house with Portland Flag floors and soothing proportions’.⁵ The job was to provide her with much raw material. Dorchester – or ‘Dumbridge’ – is the setting for several wartime stories. There was a serious shortage of paper at the time, and Dorchester had its own Book Mile of volumes donated for salvage, an act of patriotic vandalism which appalled both Sylvia and Valentine – but particularly the latter, as she was working for the Civil Defence Unit on the ground floor of the same building, which was where the books were collected. Warner wrote, ‘[o]ne day I found her glittering with fury. She had been visited by a breathless mother, boasting that she had carried in for salvage all the books of her fighting son.’⁶ This was the starting point for Sylvia’s story ‘English Climate’, which also appeared in *The Museum of Cheats*. Returning home on leave from his barracks, Edwin Brock walks up Dumbridge High Street and sees a ‘long meandering trail, a dingy caterpillar whose meaning became clear to him as a woman’s voice behind exclaimed “Just look at the book mile! Where on earth have they all come from?”’ Edwin soon discovers where some of them have come from, when he sees his own copy of the poems of Edward Thomas among the titles on the ground, a book proudly donated by his zealous mother.⁷

Poetry was evidently dispensable, but there had been a certain amount of unease about destroying Bibles and prayer-books, ‘and a

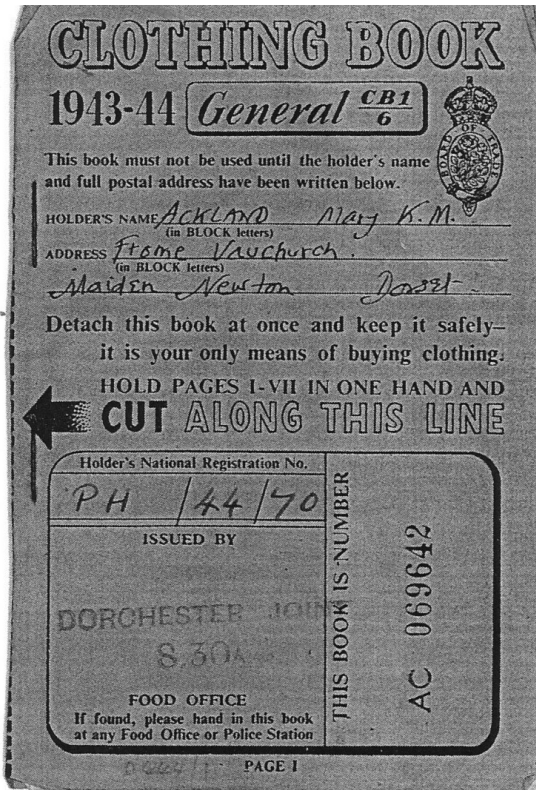


Figure 1 Valentine Ackland's clothing coupon book. Image courtesy of the Dorset History Centre.

soothing legend was put about that these were done in a separate vat', Sylvia recorded.⁸ She and Valentine succeeded in saving the more valuable titles – including a Bible of 1620. A portfolio of contemporary drawings of the Indian Mutiny was also rescued. And, in her influential role as Secretary in the WVS office, 'Miss Warner' ensured a future for some of the other volumes. Boxes of books were sent to the troops, or sold in the office's shop window which fronted the High Street. Thirteen crates of books were sent to bombed libraries. Sylvia advised her colleagues on how to sort the donated books, suggesting that titles such as *Sunday Kindergarten for Children under Nine* could safely be discarded.

The following information comes from the wartime Day Books of the WVS that Warner preserved and which she donated to the Dorset Record Office (as it was then) in 1973, accompanied by an assortment

of official papers (she claimed to be the only person in the office who liked forms).⁹

The entries in the three Day Books, written with energy and at great speed, often in Sylvia's hand, reveal the many duties undertaken by Dorchester's WVS. Nets were repaired, herbs were grown, dartboards were collected for the troops, socks were darned and a constant stream of enquiries were answered. Sylvia noted in 1973 that '[o]ur section had one constant responsibility: Rest Centres for evacuees, and one constant activity: knitting and mending for the Army and the Merchant Navy'.¹⁰

The evacuees in their care, mainly from London, were bored and lonely in the country and reacted badly to their new surroundings. Warner wrote that '[t]hey were geared to the terror and excitement of London, and country peace and quiet nauseated them. And they had nothing to do, and so they expected everything to be done for them'.¹¹ In the very funny story 'It's What We're Here For' one especially difficult evacuee, Mrs Leopard, succeeds in eluding the persistent kindness of the WVS ladies, while profiting ruthlessly from it.¹²

Empty by 1941, the Rest Centres were not a great success, at least not in Cattistock, a village a mile away from Maiden Newton, as a Day Book records. 'Exercise at Cattistock Rest Centre most unsatisfactory. Helpers all huddled. Refugees neglected. Information bad. Book lost. Entrance blocked by trailer. No one knew what to do with a broken arm. Hurricane lamps had not been filled nor storm tested.'¹³

Warner's story 'The Proper Circumstances' (*New Yorker*, 9 September 1944) comes from one of her personal experiences of sheltering evacuees. During the first influx in 1941, Sylvia and Valentine had got away lightly by receiving people they already knew. Her London charwoman Mrs Keates arrived with her family in 1939, and in 1941 the couple took in a former servant of theirs from Frankfort Manor, with her young son. Even so, Sylvia complained to Nancy Cunard that 'the first set made the house stink of breast of mutton, it stank so for months after they'd gone. I've forgotten what was wrong with the second lot, nothing I think except they were here.'¹⁴

When the second mass arrival of evacuees came in 1944, and the Rest Centres had to be reopened, Sylvia felt obliged to offer her home to some of them, as she related in the same letter.

... I shall have two women in the house from this weekend onward. A big melancholy woman, a little like the searching Demeter, and her eighteen year old daughter who has asthma, not improved by stifling in an Anderson [shelter]. It is so shameful, so disgraceful,

that one is expected to *choose* them, to pick as in a slave-market. I don't feel as if they could ever forgive me for having been chosen.

I expect it will be hell. The two previous lots, full of virtues, irreproachable, were hell.¹⁵

In 'The Proper Circumstances' the two women are portrayed as the over-large Mrs Moor and her equally large daughter Evie who has 'a valve' and is bronchial, consequently spending much of her time glumly upstairs in bed. Undaunted by these weighty presences, Sylvia does her best to brighten their stay.

When, in my W.V.S. capacity, I have to cheer reluctant hostesses about receiving evacuees, I lay stress on the importance of arranging some sort of programme for their first few days. Day 1, a trip to the county town to register at the Food Office and choose a butcher. Day 2, a stroll around the village: 'This is our church. This is our ironmonger. Good morning Mrs. Doe. This is Mrs. Rowley from London.' Day 3, a visit to the doctor. Day 4, with any luck, is Sunday. If not: 'perhaps you would like to do a little washing.' Under this treatment, talents and proclivities unfold and confidence is established. Naturally I applied it to the Moors. Mrs Moor responded most flatteringly. Before the end of the week she had rearranged her furniture, launched into making jam, and found herself a part-time job at the paper mills. But with Evie the method was a total flop.¹⁶

Nothing could be done with Evie. She remained 'something resentful in a bedroom', while all around her domestic life unravelled. A plague of wasps was rapidly followed by an overflowing cistern which baffled the plumber. Clothes moths burrowed in the woollens and magpies ate the green garden peas.

As narrator, Sylvia develops a theory to explain these domestic disturbances. Evie, she decides, might actually be a poltergeist. 'The proper circumstances to develop poltergeistism include being adolescent, preferably female, far from home, dull-witted, oppressed, and resentful. Dull-witted girls who are far from home and don't like it can achieve quite remarkable feats of poltergeistism.' She suspects that Evie has not finished yet.¹⁷

In this comic tale Warner shows a resigned sympathy for the evacuees. But the villagers themselves could suffer corresponding difficulties. In 'Rainbow Villa' (the name of an actual house in Maiden

Newton, variously a Dame School, a bed-and-breakfast establishment and a nursing home, now converted into flats) the owner returns from a long absence to find her home wrecked. Dismayingly, Miss Ensor discovers that the house has become 'the mammoaked billet of thirty-five freezing soldiers, that Aunt Sally of evacuee children, that doss-house of tramps ...'. By way of consolation she is encouraged to cheer up, and is told that it could have been worse: 'it might have been a bomb'.¹⁸

By 1942 the threat of invasion was considered serious enough for tank traps – known as 'dragons' teeth' – to be built around the village, protecting its railway junction. (The stone blocks are still in place, overgrown with brambles, but stolidly intact.) Should the Germans have succeeded in circumventing these obstacles, Riversdale would have been used as a machine-gun post. Further protection was provided during the war by local volunteers, of whom Sylvia Townsend Warner was one.

When Warner donated the WVS archive to the Dorset Record Office in 1973, she included an explanatory note.

In the summer of 1942 we were told to prepare for a possible invasion of the Dorset Coast. Official recommendations to civilians (evacuation of *bouches inutiles*, care of wounded and prisoners, burying the dead, etc.) were on non-combatant lines.

Colonel Barnes [grandson of the poet William Barnes] of The Maiden Newton Home-Guards unofficially started a 'Ladies' Shooting Class'. We learnt how to load, aim and shoot, and how to throw hand-grenades. Meanwhile we were employed in cleaning and refilling machine-gun belts.

This was an unproclaimed move towards forming a local Resistance Group. I suppose it was frowned upon by authority: we were disbanded – except for machine-gun belts – by the end of the summer.¹⁹

Both Sylvia and Valentine were involved in the training – Sylvia as one of the Ladies, Valentine as an instructor. Sylvia wrote that although 'Valentine could throw a well-placed grenade ... she was surpassed by the quiet young woman from the grocery shop, who seemed to have come into the world for that special purpose'.²⁰ These irregular activities, typical of squireless, sturdily independent Maiden Newton, had one further outcome. They formed the basis of Sylvia's short story 'England, Home and Beauty' published in the *New Yorker*, 10 October 1942.

In this fanciful-sounding tale, John Sillery and Major Puncheon of the village Home Guard hold Ladies' Shooting Classes for the local women. A machine gun is already waiting for them as, fresh from throwing hand grenades, they enter the room. It resembles 'a pet alligator'. The women take to this dangerous beast with an enthusiasm that alarms their male mentors. They soon learn to load bullets into machine-guns belts 'with dexterity and thinking how like pins they were'.²¹ The two men had been half-expecting that the ladies would choose milking as their contribution to the war effort. But milking was a peacetime skill they had already acquired. What they would really prefer was to take on that bigger monster, a Sten gun ...

The story slyly chronicles the temporary suspension of the sex war for the sake of the greater conflict. The women take to their new opportunities with zest and vigour, employing their own disregarded domestic skills for a different purpose. In the real-life episode, 'Authority' intervenes. In the fiction, Mr Sillery and Major Puncheon look set to put an end to the classes themselves: matters are not turning out as they expected.

However, I was told by Maurice Harvey, late chairman of Maiden Newton Parish Council who was involved in the training, that in fact the ladies did not surrender the guns, but instead took them home and slept with them under their pillows.

Given such anecdotes, and the fact that many of Warner's wartime stories are in a humorous vein, Maiden Newton's part in the Second World War could easily be underestimated. Dorset has always been vulnerable to invasion from the sea, and Maiden Newton was a 'Restricted Area', designated as one of the 'last places' on the coastal strip. The tank traps, together with the railway lines and the road ditches, were intended to make any further movement inland impossible. In the event of an emergency, people from the surrounding villages were told to seek shelter in Maiden Newton. A hut was put up in a tree at the top of Wardon Hill by the A37. This was meant as a look-out post for parachutes, though its main sightings seemed to be of 'chattering girls' making their way home from the dances in Sydling St Nicholas, a village in the next valley.²²

Home Guard duties were performed twice weekly. Fire-watching, one of the tasks performed by Warner and Ackland, was once a week. 'It is a most pastoral and contemplative pursuit', Sylvia wrote to Paul Nordoff in 1941. 'We walk up and down a section of quiet country lanes awaiting the descent of possible incendiary bombs. If they did, it would become our duty to blow a series of short blasts on our

whistles ... Valentine's whistle is just a whole tone lower than mine, and the same interval exists between the male and female owl, and we might have such lovely conversations.'²³

In November 1940 an incendiary bomb had fallen through the roof of the spare room in Riversdale. It had 'eaten up a piece of a bed and a very nasty bookcase that came to us by accident'.²⁴ Two of the West Chaldon comrades, Kit and Pat Dooley, were staying at the time. They flung the burning bedding out of the window into the river, and put out the fire in ten minutes. In December of the same year Sylvia wrote to Oliver Warner that 'we are constantly flown over, and guns bark around the house, and we dug up an incendiary bomb from the artichokes'.²⁵

No one in the village seems to have been killed, though some pilots lost their lives when their planes crashed nearby. Sylvia often makes light of the war, as she does with the Riversdale bomb, but this was the characteristic attitude of civilians to the conflict. She observed, once again to Paul Nordoff, that working people 'have almost endless fortitude, but whenever they get involved in some act of obvious or showy bravery they instantly begin to disinfect it by saying it was a bloody nuisance, or that they would never have done it if they'd have time to think, or that they've never felt such fools in their lives'.²⁶

This apparently did not apply to Valentine. Sylvia was indignant on her behalf because she had to work eight hours a day, six days a week, 'at the beck and call of self-important non-entities ... From this she came home with her extreme sensibility leaping at the stimulus of release, a poem dazzling before her; and was too jaded to secure it'.²⁷

Perhaps as a result of her office work, Valentine appears to have produced very few poems during the war; Warner, however, was more productive. In addition to her two days a week in the WVS offices, she was doing other work arising from it, as well as lecturing for the Workers Educational Association to 'a college of young secretarial ladies near Bridport'.²⁸ She walked there and back from Maiden Newton, a distance of about 10 miles each way.

At the start of the war Warner completed the collection of tales published as *The Cat's Cradle Book* in 1940 and began writing her novel *The Corner That Held Them*, which is about another kind of female community: medieval nuns, who live together in a Benedictine convent at Oby in Norfolk. Their lives are often under threat, especially from the Black Death, and Warner concentrates on how they deal with the physical discomforts of lice, dirt and diseases, and with the practical difficulties of maintaining the convent's buildings, rather than exploring their spiritual experiences.²⁹

The Corner that Held Them was published in 1948 (*Portrait of a Tortoise*, a selection from the journals of Gilbert White, was published in 1946). Warner also produced the *New Yorker* stories and pieces for other journals. If anything, wartime conditions were an inspiration to her.

After peace came, she wrote very little about Maiden Newton and she and Valentine continued to keep themselves apart from the village. Warner had felt this distance from the start, as a letter to Steven Clark about the couple's first viewing of the house in May 1937 makes plain.

While we were walking round the outside of the property with Mrs West her upper-class eye caught sight of that innocent picnic bottle, lying where we had laid it. And she immediately broke into a bristle, How did it get there, What impertinence, enquiries, trespassers, lower classes (in the face of that elegant bottle, too, the idiot!)³⁰

Sylvia could be very *grande dame*. But the couple seldom seem to have felt at home in Maiden Newton. There are few references to the villagers in Warner's diaries, while there continue to be affectionate mentions of people such as Granny Moxon or old Mrs Smith in Chaldon Herring. Yet, although they considered buying houses in other places and lived for a while in Norfolk (Sylvia wrote that she preferred Norfolk people), Maiden Newton is where they both stayed and where they died. And there could be moments of mutual acceptance. On 23 December 1956 Sylvia wrote in her diary:

[A] group of elderly carol-singers came round – their voices were sweet and tuneable, their conductor conducted with his electric torch, its light flashing over wet spectacles and wet faces. It was pretty; and kind of them to come so far, and in Mrs Slemeck's teeth. Perhaps they are Chapel carollers. Anyhow, they were friendly in their merry Christmasses. By dint of long residing, and never interfering, perhaps we are mellowing into popularity.³¹

Note on contributor

Judith Stinton is a founder member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society and was the newsletter editor for 14 years. She is the author of ten books, including *Chaldon Herring: Writers in a Dorset Landscape* (1988 and 2004). Her latest book, *Beyond Chesil Beach*, will be published in Spring 2020.

Notes

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982); letter to Steven Clark, 6 September 1937, p. 49.
- 2 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Steven Clark, 11 May 1938, p. 51.
- 3 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *I'll Stand by You. The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 163.
- 4 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Boors Carousing', in *The Museum of Cheats* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), pp. 137–46.
- 5 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Bea Howe, 4 December 1941, p. 75.
- 6 Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, p. 187.
- 7 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'English Climate', in *The Museum of Cheats*, pp. 53–61, p. 56.
- 8 Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, p. 187.
- 9 Dorset History Centre: D-4444 Women's Voluntary Service, Dorchester Rural District: D444/1 Bundle of wartime literature; D444/2-4 Daybooks, 1943, 1943-4, 1944-5. Note: The Dorset History Centre reference numbers for the WVS are not completely clear, as the papers have not yet been sorted.
- 10 Dorset History Centre: D444.
- 11 Dorset History Centre: D444/6 Description of the work of the WVS in wartime.
- 12 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'It's What We're Here For', *New Yorker*, 20 February 1943.
- 13 Dorset History Centre: D444.
- 14 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Nancy Cunard, 26 July 1944, p. 86.
- 15 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Nancy Cunard, 26 July 1944, p. 86.
- 16 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The Proper Circumstances', in *One Thing Leading to Another* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), pp. 140–7, pp. 143–4.
- 17 Warner, 'The Proper Circumstances', p. 147.
- 18 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Rainbow Villa', in *A Garland of Straw* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1943), p. 28.
- 19 Dorset History Centre: D444/6 Description of the work of the WVS in wartime.
- 20 Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, p. 188.
- 21 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'England, Home and Beauty', *New Yorker*, 10 October 1942.
- 22 Dorset History Centre: DSA/S1/1/1 Interview with Vernon and Harold Drewer-Trump, 'Memories of Maiden Newton in the Second World War'.
- 23 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Paul Nordoff, 27 February 1941, p. 70.
- 24 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Paul Nordoff, 12 September 1940, p. 66.
- 25 Dorset History Centre: D/TWA/A26 Letter to Oliver Warner, 16 December 1940.
- 26 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Paul Nordoff, 17 November 1940, p. 68.
- 27 Warner, *I'll Stand by You*, p. 190.
- 28 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Bea Howe, 4 December 1941, p. 75.
- 29 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Corner that Held Them* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948).
- 30 Warner, *Letters*; letter to Steven Clark, 16 May 1937, p. 44.
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