

Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters: Where Are They Now?

*Peter Tolhurst**

Warner's death in 1978, 'unmourned by any major critic'¹ in the USA, attracted respectful obituaries in this country, but at the time the attention of the literary world was elsewhere. 1978 saw the publication of the second volume of Virginia Woolf's *Diaries* and the fourth volume of her *Letters*, a monumental undertaking that had begun three years earlier and was to run to another two volumes and a total of 3,800 letters. Taken together, the publication of the *Letters* and *Diaries* represents one of the major literary undertakings of the period – a posthumous exercise in self-representation that triggered a revival of interest in one of the century's great modernist writers.

Warner, who chose a quiet life in Dorset with her lover Valentine Ackland, never courted the limelight and her politics never endeared her to a wide reading public. Unlike Woolf, she had neither the luxury of a private press (the Woolfs set up the Hogarth Press in 1917) nor the extended family of editors, biographers and willing helpers that Bloomsbury could muster. There was never a chance Warner would be honoured in the same way as Woolf even though William Maxwell, her editor at the *New Yorker* for forty years, thought her letters made Woolf's seem 'very poor reading'.²

Again unlike Woolf, for whom thoughts of death and literary repute were never far away, Warner's letters were written not with one eye on posterity but for the sheer joy of entertaining her friends. Nonetheless, towards the end of her life she made it clear to Maxwell that she was not averse to the idea of publication. 'The people who were attached to me might, however, like a collected volume of my letters. I love reading Letters myself, and I can imagine enjoying my own.'³ Maxwell accepted the invitation with Warner's blessing, with the proviso

that ‘You must either cut or select. It is not as if I were Fitzgerald,’⁴ and the plea not to be modest when choosing from her many letters to him. Armed with a list of friends Maxwell set about the daunting task of identifying the many institutions and private collections where Warner’s letters were known to be held.

The correspondence is voluminous. In addition to Maxwell some of her most important friendships were with Americans she rarely saw, notably the composer Paul Nordoff, the novelist Anne Parrish and the writers Joy and Marchette Chute. She often wrote several letters a day, not always waiting for a reply to a previous letter, such were the frustrations of transatlantic correspondence. These epistolary relationships were sustained over many years because, as Claire Harman has suggested, Warner ‘loved, and needed, the uncluttered intellectual intimacy which depended on distance and separateness and which such correspondence allowed’.⁵ As Warner herself reflected, correspondence of this kind ‘is a bridge which with every letter seems more elastically reliable. But it is a bridge that only carries the weight of one person at a time. When the correspondents meet it collapses...’⁶ This may explain why she sometimes preferred to exchange letters with friends in England, for instance with Joy Finzi and the Anglophile illustrator George Plank who lived in Sussex. She appears to have met Plank just once but, on learning of his death in 1965, could still declare ‘we shall lie down together in Yale University Library’⁷ – where their letters now reside.

From the outset Maxwell knew that a single volume would not suffice – he alone was in receipt of nearly 800 letters. He knew too that neither Chatto nor Viking, Warner’s American publisher, would agree to a multi-volume edition and so he began to select and cut, a task made only slightly easier by the disappearance of letters to Anne Parrish that had been returned after her death at Warner’s request and which Maxwell believed had been destroyed. The love letters between Warner and Valentine Ackland that Warner arranged with a linking narrative for publication after her death had been entrusted to her executor Susanna Pinney; a selection was edited by Pinney as *I’ll Stand by You* (1998). Other letters unavailable to Maxwell at the time include those that record her late friendships with Peter Pears and the American poet Samuel Menashe (selections were published in the *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* in 2004 and 2005 respectively⁸) and her fraught relationship with Ackland’s lover Elizabeth Wade White (extensively cited in Peter Judd’s biographical study *The Akeing Heart* (2013)). Although Maxwell contacted Stephen Clarke it is not clear whether he had full access to the large cache of letters – nearly

300 – subsequently presented to the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland archive in the Dorset County Museum.

Although long out of print, Maxwell's 1982 edition remains the only general selection of Warner's letters. It draws on some 432 letters to forty-seven recipients. There is a numerical bias – well over half – towards that small group of American friends in which Maxwell himself, reflecting perhaps on Warner's advice against modesty, is by far the most prominent. Of great interest too are the letters that celebrate friendships nearer home – with Bea Howe, Alyse Gregory, Llewelyn Powys and David Garnett among others, and with a restless Nancy Cunard living out of a suitcase in a series of European hotels. The constraints of a single-volume edition inevitably mean that the letters included represent just a fraction (about one tenth) of those available to Maxwell at the time. Most are reproduced in an abridged form, usually without the endearments that make receiving letters a uniquely personal experience.

Faced with a total correspondence of some 1,300 letters, Michael Steinman in his edition of the Warner/Maxwell letters, *The Element of Lavishness* (2001), faced the same need to compress. He chose to include excerpts from eighty Warner letters that in one form or another had already appeared in Maxwell's own selection, the only advantage being that in some instances the excerpts chosen read like quite different letters. In many ways, the Warner/Garnett correspondence, *Sylvia & David* (1994), edited by Garnett's son Richard, is the most satisfying epistolary dialogue, with all the warmth, wit and sensibility of old friends in conversation. The 'narrowly literary focus' of these letters, which Margaretta Jolly has examined in some detail,⁹ is spread over a fifty-six-year period, interrupted by a sizeable twenty-three-year gap. This hiatus appears to have come about not through the vagaries of time but through what Richard Garnett regarded as Ackland's jealousy of Warner's friendship with his father.

Allowing for some overlap between Maxwell's edition and those in later selections, the result of this somewhat diversified publishing history is that approximately 1,075 letters have so far appeared in print, either in full or in an abridged form. So what of the rest? How many remain and where can they be found? Unsurprisingly, much of Warner's important correspondence was with her publishers, both in Britain and America, notably with Ben Huebsch, her editor at Viking, and with Daniel Menaker at the *New Yorker* following Maxwell's retirement. In her long and fruitful relationship with Chatto & Windus Warner's dealings with a succession of editors blossomed into friendships, initially with Charles Prentice and Harold Raymond, latterly with Ian

Parsons and Norah Smallwood. Warner's decision in 1964 to write T. H. White's biography led to a ten-year correspondence with the head of Jonathan Cape, Michael Howard.

By far the largest collection of unpublished Warner letters, either in original manuscript form or as photocopies, is held in the Warner-Ackland archive in the Dorset County Museum. It contains the many letters omitted from the Maxwell, Garnett and Ackland selections together with large numbers to the Chute sisters, to Stephen Clarke, Joy Finzi, and Bea Howe. There are, in addition, important holdings in America: the letters to Nancy Cunard at the University of Texas, to her distant relative Roy Hudleston at Harvard, to Paul Nordoff at the New York Public Library, and to George Plank at Yale. There are undoubtedly more letters in private hands that may one day come to light. There are also those that Warner wrote to *The Times*, and what of her correspondence with Robertson Scott at *The Countryman*? Were they lost when *The Countryman* moved from Burford? One thing is certain, that 'Not since the epistolary geniuses of the eighteenth century can a woman of comparable talents have laid herself out to give pleasure in this way, or have succeeded so brilliantly'.¹⁰

One outcome of this survey has been to establish the huge number of letters that have survived – an estimated 4,500 in total (1,075 published so far and an estimated 3,425 that await publication). If we are to enjoy more of Warner's remarkable gift as a letter-writer then perhaps the best way forward is a series of occasional monographs dedicated to those individuals who appear tantalisingly in the pages of Maxwell's selection; to her oldest friend Bea Howe, to Paul Nordoff, and to Nancy Cunard about whom, despite her peripatetic life, Warner was moved to write 'our friendship was instantaneous, secure and detached; we exchanged opinions, never confidences'.¹¹

Location Guide to Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters

Published letters (listed in order of publication)

Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982)

The most comprehensive selection of Warner's correspondence yet published. Almost one quarter of the letters (107) are to Maxwell, and another quarter are to a small group of American friends she rarely saw

including Paul Nordoff (42), Joy Chute (31) and Marchette Chute (31). British recipients include David Garnett (27 letters), Alyse Gregory (24) and George Plank (21).

The Living Curve: Letters to W. J. Strachan, 1929–1979, ed. Christopher Hewett (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984)

Strachan was Head of Modern Languages at Bishop's Stortford College. We come to know him in this volume through his correspondence, notably with Nancy Cunard (53 letters), and Warner (26), mostly from the late 1940s. If Cunard is more fully represented, then nonetheless, according to William Anderson's 'Foreword', 'Warner is the born writer. An effortless gift for arresting phrasing allied to a most powerful mind makes her letters vividly funny and fundamentally serious'.¹² The letters are held in the John Rylands Library, Manchester University, and copies are in the Warner-Ackland archive.

Sylvia & David: The Townsend Warner/Garnett Letters, ed. Richard Garnett (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994)

The two met in 1922 when Warner visited the London bookshop where Garnett was working. Their friendship lasted until Warner's death in 1978. The imbalance of their surviving correspondence held in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library – 250 letters from Warner and only 115 from Garnett – may reflect the fact that Garnett kept more of Warner's letters. To help redress this imbalance Richard Garnett has reproduced in full most of his father's letters (103) and represented 162 from Warner, including most of the 27 abridged letters to Garnett in Maxwell's selection.

I'll Stand by You: Selected Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland, with Narrative by Sylvia Townsend Warner, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico Press, 1998)

After Ackland's death Warner arranged their letters written between 1930 and 1969 and provided a linking narrative to give a deeply intimate picture of their relationship. As Pinney makes clear, the two often wrote to each other more than once a day when apart and the correspondence had to be cut by almost two thirds for the Pimlico Press selection. The 171 letters included here, 93 of them from Warner, are reproduced in their entirety. The number suggests that something in excess of 500 letters are held in the Warner-Ackland archive.

The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1938 – 1978, ed. Michael Steinman (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001)

The Warner/Maxwell correspondence, comprising some 1,300 letters written during a 40-year friendship, is by far the most voluminous. This selection includes excerpts from around 340 of Warner's letters, of which 80 were in some form included in Maxwell's selection. The editor has restored some passages Maxwell omitted through modesty from his own selection. Copies of the letters are held in the Warner-Ackland archive.

'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters to Peter Pears', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2004), pp. 32–44

A late friendship (1970–78) prompted by Warner's proposal to donate her collection of Craske's wool paintings to Snape Maltings as a memorial to Valentine. The selection includes 17 of the 45 letters held in the Britten-Pears Library, Aldeburgh, each one reproduced in full.

'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters to Samuel Menashe', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2005), pp. 47–60

The 31 letters held in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library, trace the friendship between an established writer and a younger aspiring poet. They cover the period 1960 until Warner's death. Seventeen letters are here reproduced in full.

'Sylvia Townsend Warner's Letters to Oliver Stonor', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2008), pp. 9–16

Eight letters to Stonor, a family friend, acquired by the society in 2008. All written in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War when Warner was attempting to locate Spanish and Hungarian refugee writers in England.

Cousin and Friend: Letters to Rachel 1950–52, ed. Rachel Monckton-How and Moira Rutherford (Durham: White & Co., 2011)

A selection of 33 unabridged letters, including several from Ackland, to Rachel Monckton-How, the young daughter of Warner's cousin Cecily. The correspondence is confined to the first two years of their friendship, beginning just after the death of Rachel's mother. Fifty-one letters in the Warner-Ackland archive.

Peter Haring Judd, *The Akeing Heart: Passionate Entanglements and their Aftermath: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland, and Elizabeth Wade White* (New York: Peter Haring Judd, 2013)

The Warner–Ackland–Wade White entanglement is explored by Judd through a selection of letters between the three women. Reproduced in full, they include 55 from Warner, mainly to Wade White, covering the period 1929–50. The correspondence forms part of the Elizabeth Wade White papers in the New York Public Library.

Unpublished letters (listed alphabetically by recipient, drawing on information from the Warner-Ackland archive catalogue prepared by Judith Bond)

Elling Aanestad. Aanestad was a young American editor whom Warner met on the boat home from New York in 1929. There are 22 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive; 3 appear in Maxwell's edition.

Martha Bacon Ballinger. Warner had briefly exchanged letters with Ballinger's father, the American poet Leonard Bacon. Following his death in 1954 Warner corresponded with Martha, his daughter, herself a poet and writer. Copies of 105 letters to Martha in the Warner-Ackland archive.

Joy and Marchette Chute. The Chute sisters were American writers. Marchette Chute, a biographer and literary historian, had first written to Warner in 1949 but from the early 1960s Warner's letters are often addressed to both sisters. In total 385 letters and cards in the Warner-Ackland archive; 62 are in the Maxwell selection.

Stephen Clarke. Brought up in Somerset, Clarke met Warner and Ackland in Barcelona in 1936 when they helped nurse him through a bout of influenza. A long friendship with Warner lasted until her death. Clarke gave 291 letters to the Warner-Ackland archive, including some written to Clarke's wife Marianna; 7 letters in the Maxwell edition.

Nancy Cunard. There are 119 letters in the Cunard Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas. There are copies of 24 in the Warner-Ackland archive and 15 in Maxwell's selection. All are probably copies of those in Texas. Warner's letters in Maxwell's selection are confined to the late 1940s.

Joy Finzi. Artist and wife of the composer Gerald Finzi. The couple met Warner in 1954 through their mutual friends Reynolds and Janet Stone, Warner's neighbours in Dorset at Litton Cheney. Warner's friendship with Finzi grew after her husband's death in 1956. She drew Warner in 1960 and Ackland on her deathbed. There are 212 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive; 9 are in the Maxwell selection.

Alyse Gregory. American writer, editor of *The Dial* and wife of Llewelyn Powys. They lived at Chydyok, Chaldon Herring, where Gregory first met Warner in the 1920s, but their correspondence began after Warner and Ackland's move to Frome Vauchurch in 1937. It continued until Gregory's death in Devon in 1967. Thirty letters in the Warner-Ackland archive, including the 23 in Maxwell's edition.

Michael Howard. As head of Jonathan Cape, Howard wrote in 1964 to see if Warner might write a biography of T. H. White. The two packets of copied letters in the Warner-Ackland archive deal mainly with matters relating to the biography, which was published in 1967, but the correspondence continued until Howard's death in 1974.

Bea Howe. Warner's first meeting with Howe in 1919 marked the beginning of a lasting friendship. Howe, a writer, later married the composer Mark Lubbock. The 165 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive spanning almost sixty years illuminate the longest of all Warner's friendships; 7 are in the Maxwell selection.

Roy Hudleston. A distant relative, journalist and antiquary. The letters, written between 1936 and 1956, deal mainly with the estate of Warner's parents; Hudleston was co-executor. There are 101 letters in the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Ben Huebsch. Warner's editor at Viking Press, her American publisher, until his death in 1964. The Huebsch papers held in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. contain 5 folders of correspondence. Copies of 98 letters are in the Warner-Ackland archive; 8 letters are in the Maxwell selection.

Janet Machen. Daughter of the novelist Arthur Machen, she was Warner's younger cousin and president of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society until her death in 2008. There are 52 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive; 6 are in Maxwell.

Margaret (Peg) Manisty. She was Warner's solicitor and became one of the trustees of Warner's estate. She lived in Sussex. There are 235 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive; 3 are in Maxwell's selection.

Daniel Menaker. Warner's editor at the *New Yorker* following Maxwell's retirement. Menaker handled Warner's final collection of short stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin*, and also the posthumously published *The Music at Long Verney*. Thirty-three letters in the Warner-Ackland archive.

Paul Nordoff. Warner and the young composer met in New York in 1937, having corresponded when Nordoff wrote an opera based on Warner's novel *Mr Fortune's Maggot*. The letters continued until Nordoff's death in 1977. There are 237 Warner letters in the New York Public Library Archive and 54, probably copies, in the Warner-Ackland archive; 42 appear in Maxwell's selection.

Ian Parsons. Joined Chatto & Windus in 1926 and later became Warner's editor alongside Norah Smallwood. The collection includes several letters to Parson's wife Trekkie, later Leonard Woolf's companion. There are 106 original letters in the Warner-Ackland archive; 11 are included in Maxwell's selection.

Roger Peers. Peers was the curator of the Dorset County Museum and set up the Warner-Ackland archive there. Forty-seven letters are in the Warner-Ackland archive.

Robin Perry. Journalist on the *Belfast Telegraph*. There are 79 letters from 1942–77 in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. Maxwell was unable to discover anything about Perry except that he had died. The letters were presumably donated to Yale sometime after the publication of Maxwell's *Letters* in 1982.

George Plank. American artist and illustrator. There are 182 letters between Warner and Plank held in the Beinecke Rare Books Library, Yale University. The correspondence began in 1957 and ran until just before Plank's death in 1963. He had moved to England in 1914 and from 1927 lived in East Sussex in a house designed by Lutyens. The 27 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive and the 21 in the Maxwell selection may be copies of those at Yale.

Llewelyn Powys. Writer and brother of the novelists Theodore and John Cowper Powys. Like Theodore he lived at Chaldon Herring until his death in 1939. Some of Warner's letters from Norfolk concern the libel case in Dorset in which she was involved with Powys. Fifty-two letters in the Warner-Ackland archive, 8 in Maxwell's selection. Originals are in the Powys Collection at Exeter University.

Charles Prentice. Head of Chatto & Windus, he first published both T. F. Powys and Warner's collection of poems, *The Espalier* (1925). The letters span the period 1924–39 when Prentice left Chatto. He died in Africa ten years later. Copies of 93 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive, the originals probably in the Chatto & Windus archive, Reading University.

Harold Raymond. Known as 'Chatto', he worked at first under Prentice at Chatto & Windus. In 1937 he suggested the firm should publish a selection of Warner's *New Yorker* stories. Sixty letters in the Warner-Ackland archive, 8 in Maxwell's selection.

Arnold Rattenbury. Poet and, after World War II, editor of *Our Time*, the left-wing periodical that published several articles by Warner. Thirty-one letters in the Warner-Ackland archive together with 10 to Rattenbury's wife Sim.

Norah Smallwood. Warner's editor at Chatto & Windus from 1939. In total 197 letters to Smallwood, covering the period 1947–77, are held by Leeds University Library and 274 are in the Warner-Ackland archive, presumably including copies of the letters held in Leeds. Six letters in the Maxwell selection.

Genevieve Taggard. Socialist, poet and American academic who died in 1948. Warner's letters contain accounts of life in wartime Dorset. Nineteen letters in the Taggard Papers, New York Public Library.

Helen Thomas. Widow of the poet Edward Thomas. The letters, written between 1962 and 1966, were prompted in part by Joy Finzi's drawings of both Thomas and Warner in 1960. Thirty letters in the Gerald and Joy Finzi Collection, Reading University; copies of 38 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive; 3 in Maxwell's selection.

Ursula Vaughan Williams. Poet, wife and biographer of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Eighteen letters in the Warner-Ackland archive written after the composer's death in 1958, 3 in Maxwell's selection.

Oliver Warner. Not a relation, but a reader at Chatto & Windus when, in 1928, he and his wife agreed to purchase 114 Inverness Terrace, London, together with Warner. Forty-nine letters in the Warner-Ackland archive, 14 in Maxwell's selection.

Leonard Woolf. Writer and widower of Virginia Woolf. At Woolf's invitation Warner gave a lecture on French literature to the Monday Club (Lewes Literary Society) in 1960. Thirty-two letters, from 1957 until Woolf's death in 1969, in the Leonard Woolf Archive, Sussex University Library. Copies of 21 letters in the Warner-Ackland archive, 2 in Maxwell's selection.

Various. A miscellaneous group of 'minor' recipients with letters in the Warner-Ackland archive: American publishers Ben Hellman (13 letters), James Laughlin of *New Directions* (11) and Marshall Best (16) at Viking Press; fellow Communists Julius and Queenie Lipton (10) and Edgell Rickword (6), the editor of *Left Review* and *Our Time*; George Painter (12), biographer of Proust and Chateaubriand; friends Ruth Scott (13), Janet (8) and Reynolds (3) Stone, Ackland's sister Joan Woollcombe (17); English publishers Carole Stallings (14), secretary to Michael Howard, and Michael Schmidt as editor of *PN Review* (5) and as editor of Carcanet Press (4); Ernest Dawe (17); Susanna Pinney (9), Warner's typist in the early 1970s and her literary executor along with William Maxwell.

Notes

- 1 Eleanor Perenyi, 'The Good Witch of the West', *The New York Review of Books*, 18 July 1985.
- 2 *The Element of Lavishness: Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and William Maxwell 1935 – 1978*, ed. Michael Steinman (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 308.
- 3 *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. xvi.
- 4 *The Element of Lavishness*, p. 321.
- 5 Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 309.
- 6 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *T.H. White: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 219.
- 7 *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, p. 218.
- 8 *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2004*, pp. 32–44; *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society 2005*, pp. 47–60.
- 9 Margaretta Jolly, 'A Word is a Bridge: Death and Epistolary Form in the Correspondence of Sylvia Townsend

- Warner and William Maxwell', *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* (2007), p. 22.
- 10 Eleanor Perenyi, 'The Good Witch of the West', *The New York Review of Books*, 18 July 1985.
- 11 Sylvia Townsend Warner, in 'Notes on Nancy Cunard', Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland archive, Dorset County Museum (quoted in *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 197).
- 12 *The Living Curve*, p. xx.

*Note on contributor

Independent writer. Peter Tolhurst is a Norfolk-based writer and publisher (Black Dog Books). Warner's life and work feature prominently in his *East Anglia: A Literary Pilgrimage* (1996), *Wessex: A Literary Pilgrimage* (1999) and his edition of *Knowing Your Place: East Anglian Landscapes and Literature* (2009). His publications also include a new edition of Judith Stinton's *Chaldon Herring: Writers in a Dorset Landscape* (2004), a selection of Warner's short stories, *Dorset Stories* (2006), a new edition of Warner's *Somerset* (2007), and *With The Hunted: Selected Writings of Sylvia Townsend Warner* (2012). His *Virginia Woolf's English Hours* came out in 2015 and *This Hollow Land: Aspects of Norfolk Folklore* is due out in 2017.