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A Dilemma and a Narrow Escape

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A paper in the *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* for 2013 has reminded me to put the following episodes on record.

STW left me an index card offering me the chance to choose for the collection of the Dorset Natural History & Archaeological Society (which owns the Dorset County Museum) any books from the library in her house at Frome Vauchurch, and also for myself. She left a similar card for her cousin Janet Machen. STW had been an enthusiastic supporter of the DNH&AS for many years, along with Valentine Ackland.

In her will STW had left Antonia, Gräfin von und zu Trauttmansdorff, the use of her house. In due course I spoke to Antonia, an old friend, and showed her my card. She asked to be allowed to keep all the books in the house during her lifetime. I agreed, reluctantly.

Several years later Antonia died, so I wrote to Alban Wylde, STW's executor, and spoke to Soo Pinney, her literary executor, to ask if I might have access to the house to make a basic record of all the books, at the same time following up STW's original instruction to make the choice for the County Museum and myself. Alban and Soo willingly agreed, adding that the work needed to be done at once, before the house was put on the market.

Knowing how unfortunate it had been that no record of the books at Max Gate had been made when Thomas Hardy, and later Florence Hardy, had died, it seemed to me essential we should get our skates on. I turned to John Ruston, an old friend and member of the DNH&AS, and an antiquarian bookseller of distinction in Bournemouth.

For ten days in the autumn of 1986 we arrived at dawn and left between 10.00 p.m. and midnight each day, steadily working our way

through several rooms, plus a landing, filled with books, the majority annotated. Any treasonable thoughts I might have held about John's abilities were exploded as he solved ten days of constant bibliographical problems without a falter. It was a skilled and exciting experience – and one which he gave for nothing. In the process we put aside all the copies of STW's and VA's books, all the presentation copies of other authors and a great many books of significance and reference, as well as shopping lists and drafts of poems.

On the day we started the job, I found outside the back door of Sylvia's house a large plastic rubbish bag waiting to be collected by the dustman. Having had the experience a few years before of finding a dustbin outside a Dorset manor house full of family photograph albums besides important letters from the 1870s onwards, I dived into the bag and found, mixed up with everyday rubbish, the manuscripts of STW's musical compositions which are now in the STW Room in the County Museum. (The remainder of the contents of the rubbish bag were deposited in the Dorset County Record Office since they were relevant to Dorset, but not to STW.) Thanks be to heaven we arrived when we did. But what had gone before?

Once John Ruston and I completed our job we realised that there were omissions, notably of the material to do with the Spanish Civil War which I would certainly have kept in 1978 had I carried out STW's original instructions, but at least we know where the Spanish Civil War material went.

Note on contributor

Roger Peers is the former Curator of the Dorset County Museum and between 1959 and 1992 the Secretary of the Dorset Natural History & Archaeological Society, of which Sylvia Townsend Warner was a strongly supportive member. During his time the museum was twice a prize-winner in the Museum of the Year Awards. He is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London and a Fellow of the Museums Society. He is a traveller, a dog-lover, a Dorset lover, fond of music up to 1850 and a collector of the work of Dorset artists.