

## The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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**Book Review: R.B. Russell and J. Lawrence Mitchell, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A bibliography* (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2020; ISBN: 979-8-64612-618-5)**

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# Book Review: R.B. Russell and J. Lawrence Mitchell, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A bibliography* (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2020; ISBN: 979-8-64612-618-5)

*Janet Montefiore*

First of all, it is a pleasure to welcome the publication of this long-awaited bibliography, which up to now has only circulated as an electronic manuscript – of which, thanks to Ray Russell’s generosity, I for one have been a grateful user. It contains splendidly full information on Sylvia Townsend Warner’s published writings from *The Espalier* (1925) to *Kingdoms of Elfin* (1977) and the posthumous collections of her poems, her letters and her diaries. The materiality of her work, especially the early publications, is covered in exact and loving detail. Russell gives not just the basic information of title, publishing house, date, but also book measurements, dust jacket designs, fabric and colour of cloth binding, title page and letterpress, as well as the number of first print runs: 1,000 copies for *The Espalier*, 2,000 for *Lolly Willowes*, 6,750 for *Portrait of a Tortoise* (1948) and 2,700 for *Kingdoms of Elfin*. The bibliography has interesting information about *The Maze* (1928), *Some World Far From Ours* (1929), *This Our Brother* and *Elinor Barley* (both 1930) and *A Moral Ending* (1931), all of which first appeared separately as pamphlets *de luxe*.

The authors end several of their entries with a short, italicised paragraph of information about the texts’ composition. One of these describes the original ending of *Lolly Willowes*, which is darker and more ominous than in the published version, and is given in full (though without reference to its previous publication in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* for 2002, presumably because this appeared after their cut-off date of 2000). I learned that the *Cat’s Cradle-Book* has

two different descriptions of the stylish, seductive young Mr William Farthing, obviously based on Warner's lover Valentine Ackland; in the 1940 American edition he is 'wearing a pair of ready-made corduroy trousers still smelling of the shop, and a strawberry-coloured cotton shirt that must have been bought either in Harlem or in the wilder branches of Cent Mille Chemises', whereas in the 1960 edition, less glamorously, 'like a hunting cat, he was on his guard ... but there was ownership in every inch of him – ownership of house, and trees, and cats, and privacy, and solitude'. It was also news to me that *Boxwood* (1957) had a second printing from Monotype in 1958, before Chatto & Windus published the second enlarged edition with five more engravings by Reynolds Stone, accompanied by Warner's verse 'illustrations'.

It is also very useful to have Warner's many publications in the *New Yorker* listed in chronological order, with titles, dates and page numbers (although I would have liked some distinction between Warner's fiction and her more journalistic sketches, such as 'Undressing the Bishop' from 1939). I also learned that editions by Warner of music by William Byrd, Thomas Morley, Robert Whyte and George Kirby for *Tudor Church Music* were issued by Oxford University Press in the 1960s, presumably as pamphlets. It would be interesting to know if these reprints are mentioned in Warner's diary for 1964. For all this information and much more, including the late Glen Cavaliero's sympathetic and elegant introduction, Ray Russell and Lawrence Mitchell deserve hearty thanks from all Warner scholars.

However, their book has a lot of frustrating gaps. As Ray Russell explains in his Foreword, he did not take his bibliographical research beyond 2000, so that the book 'does not contain any information after 2000'; it should thus properly have been entitled *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A bibliography 1925–2000*. For anything later, the bibliographers refer the reader to 'Janet Montefiore's *Literature Compass* publication of "Sylvia Townsend Warner Scholarship 1978–2013: An Annotated Bibliography with Introduction" 11/12 2014'. This is unsatisfactory, not only because of the two-decade overlap between our bibliographies, but because mine is only available to scholars who either have access to university libraries subscribing to *Literature Compass*, or are able and willing to pay Wiley Publishers \$18.00 for online access or £42.00 for a printable pdf.

Furthermore, making the cut-off point 2000 produces some weird gaps in the bibliography's information. The posthumous publication of 'The Music at Long Verney' (*New Yorker*, 1971) by the Leiden Academic

Press in 1992 is mentioned, but not the fact that it is the title story of the collection edited by Michael Steinmann (US Counterpoint, UK Harvill, 2001). The collection *Dorset Stories* edited by Peter Tolhurst (Black Dog Books, 2006) is likewise ignored; and though Warner's many journalistic contributions are listed, there is no mention of Tolhurst's generous selection of these in *With the Hunted* (Black Dog Books, 2013).

It must also be said that although this book's coverage of Warner's work up to the 1960s deserves the highest praise, the same cannot be said of the later works, whose treatment is rather skimpy. Warner's four selections of Valentine Ackland's poetry between 1957 and 1977 are described, but their contents are not itemised. And although the contents of Claire Harman's *Collected Poems* (Carcenet, 1982) are listed, there is no mention of the poem 'Drawing you, heavy with sleep, to lie closer' being reprinted in Claire Harman's 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Celebration' in *PN Review* 23 (1981), or in my own book *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), which quoted it in full. *The Faber Book of Love Poems*, edited by James Fenton in 2008, of course falls outside the bibliographers' self-imposed time limit, but it would have been useful for readers to know that this beautiful poem, which John Lucas said in his lecture on Warner, published in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2001, 'ought to be in all the anthologies and isn't', is now being recognised.

Another puzzling omission is Warner's short memoir 'Nancy Cunard' in Hugh D. Ford's book *Nancy Cunard: Brave Poet, Indomitable Rebel* (1968), although Warner's contributions to Anne Chisholm's biography *Nancy Cunard* (1989), which drew on her 1968 essay as well as her letters, are mentioned under 'Contributions'. This section also lists 'The Bear', Warner's political fable about the Soviet Union (*New Masses*, 1940), but not its reprinting in the 1981 *PN Review* 'Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Celebration'. This important magazine anthology, which introduced me (and probably others) to Warner the writer, gets only a brief mention under 'Criticism and Commentary', and no contents description. *PN Review* 23 is credited with several poems, but not the interview of Warner by Michael Schmidt and Val Warner which appeared there. The bibliographers have made no attempt, anywhere in their book, at cross-referencing.

Listing these omissions makes me feel like a guilty curmudgeon. After all, it is very much better that Warner scholars should be able to read this imperfect bibliography than having to rely on my own incomplete (and expensive) coverage of Warner's posthumous publications and of her critical reception since her death. Yet as Ray Russell rightly says in his 'Introduction', a bibliography is like a spade, 'an object that

may be well made, but which is only of value if it is to be employed in digging'; and this book would have been a much better tool for research if it had had a longer handle, instead of breaking off short 22 years ago. I regret that the bibliographers apparently never thought of amalgamating their own work with mine (admittedly far less detailed). That said, they have nonetheless given readers of Warner a thorough and loving account of her publications up to 1960, albeit a somewhat sketchy one thereafter. I hope that both their book's excellences and its shortcomings will stimulate future scholars to compile a definitive bibliography of Sylvia Townsend Warner in the near future.

## Note on Contributor

**Janet Montefiore** is Professor Emerita of the University of Kent, where she taught English Literature and Women's Studies from 1978 to 2015. Her books include *Feminism and Poetry* (1987, 1992, 2004), *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996), *Arguments of Heart and Mind* (2002), all of which contain substantial discussion of Sylvia Townsend Warner's writings, and *Rudyard Kipling* (2007); in 2016 she published *Shaping Spirits 1948–1966*, a memoir in sonnets. She is also a founder member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society, and since 2003 a contributor to *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*.