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# ‘She whom all / Think witch’: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Grannie Moxon

Judith Stinton[1,*]

[1]Independent scholar
*Correspondence: judithstinton@mypostoffice.co.uk

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## Abstract

The article describes Mrs Anne Moxon, ‘Grannie Moxon’, who was neighbour to Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland in Chaldon Herring. It goes on to discuss the ways in which Grannie Moxon featured in Warner’s poetry, first in *Opus 7*, and then after her death in two elegies. The first of these, ‘Wintry is this April, with endless whine’, was published in *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1933). The second, ‘Lament for Anne Moxon’, is previously unpublished.

**Keywords** Sylvia Townsend Warner; pastoral; elegy; witch; poverty

# ‘She whom all / Think witch’: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Grannie Moxon

*Judith Stinton*

In the summer of 1930 Sylvia Townsend Warner bought ‘the late Miss Green’s’, a small cottage in the Dorset village of Chaldon Herring, which she was to share with her lover Valentine Ackland (Figure 1).

Warner immediately set to work on improving the cottage. The walls of the once dingy house were brightened with ‘milk-white’ wash, and the windows with coral pink paint. Among the new furnishings were a scrolled oval mirror and, from Valentine, two papier-mâché chairs, a *bonheur du jour* (small desk) and a set of Regency teaspoons, to which Warner added her own egg-shell porcelain coffee cups.[1]

Apart from the church and farms, the village had no electricity. And Miss Green’s also had no water, except that supplied by a water butt. The living-room floor was stone-flagged. Their neighbours were a redundant Methodist chapel and the village inn, the Sailor’s Return. Hidden behind the inn was number 22 East Chaldon, the home of Mrs Anne Moxon, ‘Grannie Moxon’.

As Warner remarked, Miss Green’s was not in the least bit pretty. It was plain and slate roofed, but did have the advantage, in an estate village, of being freehold. Mrs Moxon’s was a tied cottage, described in the sale catalogue of 1929 as ‘very picturesque’ with ‘a good garden and a productive orchard’ (Figure 2). Water came from a well in the village.[2] Decidedly detached, Mrs Moxon’s eighteenth-century house had two rooms on either floor and a single-storey extension to the north. The garden still looks fecund; in Grannie’s day even the thatch was sprouting, and adders sunned themselves on the bank below.

The sale had come about after a catastrophic fire at Lulworth Castle forced the landowners, the Welds, to put their village properties up for sale. However, the year of the Great Crash was not a propitious one and the sale was unsuccessful, much to the relief of Chaldon’s inhabitants.

**Figure 1.** Inside Miss Green's cottage. Jean Starr Untermeyer seated at the table (Source: reproduced with permission of Judith Stinton)

No reference was made in the sale catalogue to the dark rooms of the cottages whose small windows kept out the cold – obscuring the views so desired by potential purchasers (but of little interest to weary farm workers). Grannie's dark living room, shared with her caged goldfinches, had an earth floor which she stained with reddle (sheep dye). Like most of the village properties, the house was plagued by rats. Not surprisingly, but unusually for a village woman, she spent many of her evenings out at the pub. Though little more than an ale house, the inn sold spirits as well as beer. And Grannie was fond of gin – when she could afford it. At the inn she told tales and cracked bawdy jokes. Sometimes she sang, accompanying herself on her concertina.[3]

She was a good neighbour to Sylvia from the start. Sylvia wrote that 'our dearest visitor was Grannie Moxon, that loving, giving and doing character, who lit the first fire on our new hearth.'[4] More oddly, she offered the couple a bunch of blue roses and what Valentine called 'other strange sly plants'.[5] Mrs Moxon was thought to be a witch, one of several in Chaldon. Benign old women, they may have accepted the title as an honour, preferable to simply being called 'Grannie'.

Witch or no, Anne Moxon remained a distinctive character with her dark-rimmed eyes, brilliantly blue, and her battered hat. Her laugh, Sylvia wrote, was 'sudden and screeching like the cry of a jay'. She was

**Figure 2.** Photograph of Grannie Moxon by Valentine Ackland, *c.* 1930 (Source: reproduced with permission of the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive at the Dorset History Centre [item 2242, STW.2012.125.2858, D/TWA/A48, STW/VA/friends/13])

not tall – her husband George, a blacksmith, had towered above her – but she was strong and a seasoned gardener. She was green-fingered too, her plants always flourished, and her bees made plenty of honey that she would sell, or make into mead.[6]

Anne Moxon was to be an important figure in Warner's and Ackland's lives during their time at Miss Green's. Valentine, who once said that Grannie was 'like a mother', wrote several magazine articles about her. She was more often commemorated by Sylvia in verse.

Warner's *Opus 7* (1931)[7] was strikingly different from her two earlier volumes of poetry. She decided 'to try to do for this date what Crabbe had done for his: write a truthful pastoral in the jog-trot English couplet'.[8] It is a poem of more than 1,300 lines in rhymed couplets, and it draws widely on English poetic precursors, in particular Alexander Pope. Pope was a poet Warner admired: in a review of Edith Sitwell's biography in 1930 she had remarked on Pope's 'superb and sensitive' technique and the 'perfection' of his writing.[9]

*Opus 7* features Rebecca Random, a solitary old woman who finds overnight fame by growing a glorious garden full of flowers, produced from stolen cuttings and Woolworth's seeds. She immediately uses her profits to buy gin, her evening tipple. I described its denouement in my book on Chaldon Herring.

> Such is her success that two mortally ill villagers vie with one another to die first, as Rebecca's garden has flowers enough to bedeck only one grave. Rebecca strips her garden for the winner, Bet, then goes, on a wild night, to the public house to buy four bottles of gin with her earnings. Returning, she visits the graveyard ... and finds her flowers gone. There, among the tombstones, Rebecca teaches Bet and God a lesson by drinking herself to death.[10]

One of the finest and longest poems in Warner and Ackland's joint collection *Whether a Dove or Seagull* (1933) – the one beginning 'Wintry is this April, with endless whine'[11] – is once again inspired by Mrs Moxon. If April is the cruellest month of the year, it is also here perhaps the most crucial one, a time when winter and spring do battle in the whirling weather.

> Wintry is this April, with endless whine
> Squeaks the inn sign –
> And that, the drinkers say, is token of rain.

But no rain falls, nor will, till the wind changes,
And still it ranges
North to northeast, blackening with cloud on cloud,
Or baring suddenly its fangs with the brightening
Of hail-pelt lightning.
Patient rump to weather the cattle mope,
And stare and stare, and snort a shuddering sigh,
Or disdainfully
Twitch at the winter grass, and turn away.
Nowhere is growth, the willows lock up their green,
The blackthorns lean
Closer under the wind with their clenched blossom,
And though the cowslips bloom under the hill
Their breath is chill,
A hapless sweet, soon rifled and dispersed
To wander through the gusts with the broken clue
Of Cuckoo, Cuckoo,
Tossed to and fro among the leafless trees.
Shrugged against the blast, glum and unlit,
As tinkers sit
The storm out, chewing a dead pipe, the land
With all its life seems to sham dead, enduring
What's past curing
With sudden biding of time. Yet need still drives,
Howsoever the April, birds must build
And ground be tilled.
For come the cuckoo, garden earth must be laid
Under fork and spade,
Turned and trenched and combed of winter weeds,
And with Christ aloft on cross and combed out our sin
Potatoes in.

On this stormy April evening, Warner recalls another battle, closer to home.

So has this day's fierce dusk remembranced me;
Since, walking homeward on the volleying wind
With half my mind
Countering the gusts, and half lost and enlaced
In the wild vespers cried from the bare boughs,
I passed the house
Where under sagging thatch dwells she whom all

Think witch, and call
Grannie – though she goes light-foot as a girl
Under her threescore years and ten. There,
With wind-wisped hair
Straggling under hat rammed down, and roughshod
Small foot on spade, obstinate to the blast,
The ill day's last
Opponent, she worked her winter ground for spring.

The following 83 lines in the poem pungently describe Grannie's determined digging, her wrenching of clods from 'the sullen hold of earth'. She battles on, disregarding the 'implicit spring'. She is defying death. The poem concludes:

There, since I hate digging, fear death,
I would have left it. But as I turned on
The lateral sun
Surged through a chink of cloud, awoke the air
With wave on wave, O, with peals of light glowing
Like a trumpet blowing.
But not for long. Already, as I looked back,
Wondering what had befallen, the ebb had begun,
And one by one
Meadow and roof, hillock and hedge and tree
Died from that glory, emerged lank and cold
From the tide of gold.
Scarcely to be received, to be reconciled
Into the texture of a day so smutched
This glory touched
Off, explosion of splendour, buffet of light,
As though a Pentecost hawked down achieving its prey
Of hodden grey,
And earth's glum looks and true for an instant changed
To the burning fiery furnace where men's frail dirt
Might stroll unhurt
And talk with angels. Scarcely to be received –
Imposed on sight as meaningless and clear
As etched on ear
Some brief and lovely phrase in a language unknown:
A chance-cast net as idly trawled over flesh
As the bright mesh

Of bird-song, woven a seamless garment that man
May never shape, piece, suit to his wear of word.

So ebbed, so blurred
That light out of my mind as from the place –
A hazard of cloud and wind, a show of air
That could but declare
On bleakness its own brightness and whisk hence.
And now like a dream's survival I behold
Her in that gold
Surprised, standing above her broken ground,
As though at that trump, at that summons shining and fervent,
*O faithful servant*
*Enter now into the reward of thy labours,*
Not she, not she, but earth's very spirit
Rose to inherit
Light everlasting, the manifested coronal
Of long darkness, of long-ploughed patience,
Long acquiescence
Of the nourishing breast, of the receiving lap;
As though the *Be fruitful* since far creation obeyed
Were now repaid
In that fierce dusk, so wild with singing and storm.

It is an extravagant poem, full of coinings and conceits, in which Grannie, spotlit, becomes not just herself alone or even the spirit of the village, but the 'very spirit' of the earth.

After Anne Moxon died, Valentine wrote that 'the village was like the dead body she had talked of, laid by in a hole in the ground; for she had been the spirit, incomprehensible, irreplaceable; gone no one knows where'.[12] Mrs Moxon did not believe in life after death, nor was she afraid of dying. As she told Valentine, it did not frighten her.

> When Grannie Moxon was dying, almost was dead, I stood by her bed and held her hand. I was alone with her and she was conscious, and I said are you all right, Grannie? And she said, in that kind of rough tenderness of voice that she used towards me, which was a solace and comfort to me – 'I be all right' – and I asked if she was afraid, and she said No. And, greatly daring because I trusted her courage, I asked if she thought of God and she said 'Not I!'[13]

Her death, from cancer, was a cruel one poignantly described by Valentine Ackland in her book *Country Conditions*, a social study of many aspects of village life.

> The fact that sick people die sometimes does not seem to be known to the authorities ... One old woman was returned, without warning, to a cottage as damp and airless as any I have seen (which is saying a good deal) where she was alone and without any person within earshot. She was completely helpless, in savage pain and needing constant attention, because she was being sick almost every half-hour. The roof leaked, damp ran down the wall of her bedroom, the thatch leaned over the tiny window, excluding both light and air. Into this rat-infested, dirty hole she was carried by the ambulance men, and there she was left.[14]

The East Chaldon shepherd, George Dove, was another villager much loved by Sylvia and Valentine. He too died painfully of cancer: this was just before Christmas in 1933, from a tumour which was said to smell so foul that no one would go near him. In her poem 'Advent', published in *The Countryman* in 1939, Warner imagines the Chaldon villagers preparing for the long-awaited joys of Christmas, with crackers and figs, potted meat and bottles of port.

> And he, the old shepherd, dying in the infirmary,
> if his cancer live till then, will keep Christmas too.
> His bed will have holly tied to it, the cottonwool ermine
> will loom and deposit an orange, amid creaking of shoes
> and clatter of plates he will be made partaker in the due
> spirit of Christmas. Strange, then, and distanced as a dream
> those former vigilling Christmastides will seem,
> in the rustling sheepfold, tending the anxious ewes.[15]

Both Anne Moxon and George Dove are buried in unmarked graves in Chaldon churchyard. In death they remain near neighbours of Warner and Ackland.

* * *

Among the papers in the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland Archive there is another, previously unpublished, elegy to Grannie. It

survives as a typescript, a faint carbon copy, at times difficult to read. This 'Lament for Anne Moxon' was written in the winter of 1933 when Warner and Ackland were living at Frankfort Manor in Sloley, Norfolk. They had moved there in the previous June, the month of Grannie's death. The full text of the poem follows below.

Lament for Anne Moxon[16]

Now every day through our dishevelling trees
Look closer the enemies –
The bright cold cloud, the sky's sharpened blue.
Time goes its true stride again, our day of the thieved
Last hour bereaved
Fails suddenly, quelled by the sunset's flare.
Frosty is the silence beyond the window-pane,
Fires dance again
In the darkened garden, on the nipped bushes and bowers,
And I at this metre's remembrance in this hushed room
Bethink me of her on whom
This winter falls not even a coverlet,
So far lies she from weather, so deep-doused the flame
No cold could tame.
Louder against the wind her voice would ring,
Not skies than her eyes a more whetted blue could stare
At winter in the air,
Up at that challenge her menaced cunning would flaunt.
Cold, aye, let the cold swoop, let the bully domineer!
What knew she to fear
Whose magpie claws could snatch from wayside hedge,
From neighbouring fuel-houses, from coal-carts leasings,
Her chimney's seizings? –
Yes, and should these fail, her brave blood never;
At her heart's hearth she'd warm, as we have seen her
To her concertina
Singing shrill and stamping her polka bird-alone.
She had been young, and was old, yet had not seen
Herself lack-lean,
Being to herself righteous, to her north needle-tree –
By her fierce heart warmed, with her sharp sap fed …
She, the six months dead.

How fares the inn without her? how lame must lag
Down liquor, how flag
The draughty evenings there, smoke heavy within,
The wind battering without, the rain invading
With the heavy treading
Of each cold comer, with each flap of the door.
Who'll raise a laugh there now, who to the tambourine's jar
Pirouette in the bar,
She'll aim each throw of the dart, spice each swallow?
She is gone, she is gone, the curfew that did her dout
Every fire has put out,
Her burying bell tolled ending to more than her.
She is our dulled days, in the wanhope fray
Of the land's decay
From harvest to harvest stumbling, in the falling awry
Of the old order, the slighting of the old skill,
Was triumphant still.
Her right hand's cunning rejoiced her, to graft bud,
Chop wood, skin rabbit, re-furbish an old rag,
Was renewing brag,
Deft-daily aimed, the bucket cutting well-water
Splashed the day's sun with glory, her door nightly locked
Warded unshocked
The stars in their courses, pledged planets, with day and night
She was clothed, with sun and moon alternately crowned,
From her garden ground
Loving and extortionate, she fetched the tribute of earth.
She could catch a bird in her hand, when she was seventy-three
She climbed a tree
To lop its berried boughs for her christmas garlands.
With mother-wit pungent, resonant with old lore,
She had why and wherefore
For every doing, with thrift or theft alike
Gift or gain delighted and justified.
She could no more turn aside,
Flinch from her centre, dash doings with doubt, than tree
From its infallible pattern of growth abjure;
She was stock-sure
Of herself, she could look the whole world in the face.
There was no one she could not cajole, counsel, set right,

There was no plight
She could not mend, no doubt that she could not reason ...
And yet she was old and poor, was buffoon and byword ...
And yet she was adored,
Being the secret zest, being the last dangerous,
Comforting odorous brand from the sacred fires
That through pagan shires
Burned at the cornered year, signalled All's well,
The sun succoured, the earth's foison assured,
To their obscured
Forefathers ...
And now she lies dark and quenched and cold.

Weep, every swain, weep, village wife and maid,
The old Blouzelind dead!
Weep for the warm heart and the ribald tongue,
The laboured hand, the light step down the lane,
The never-again
Unbodied greeting tossed startling over hedge,
The sudden nosegays framed with artful care,
Given here and there,
Random and lavish as though earth had given them.
Weep for the bawdy jokes and the jay's laughter
Ringing on rafter,
The stored songs, the ballads jolting all
To the same Villikins and his Dinah stave,
And *Mother's Grave*,
And the child's curtsey bobbed at the end of the song.
Weep for the old carcase that could look so young;
Time's flout flung
Aside as she told of her passionate courting-days.
There she would stand shining, there she would re-enact
All that her packed
Memory held mint-new, gesture and word.
The dead bones rose up, were re-knit and furbished
With the new-burnished
Flesh of their youth and hers, the red-coats marched
By with the drums booming and the fifes quaking,
And one from the ranks breaking
Seized her with threatening kiss, with raging Adieu

Felled her. Ah! gone the disguise, the bowed
Beldame time-ploughed.
There in the furious astonishment of love
Like a twanged bow vibrating the maiden stood,
Her hardihood
Of virginity darting its flint-flash to that smiting,
Her flesh with joy melted, with amazement darkened,
As in triumph she hearkened
To the awakened wrath of the virgin womb.

And now from herself scattered she lies, lies dead.
To a dulled bed
She has crept, and her soldier turns not, turns neither to greet
Her faithful return, her pledged side to his side,
Nor her unfaith to chide,
Her fancy to other dalliance straying, her dallying delay;
Nor does she, avid of response, imperative
To be owned alive,
Resent, poke answer out, extort cuff or kindness.
Careless and cold they lie, cold as their children's
Hearts, that the hindrance
Of a too-long-lively mother too long a-dying
With virtuous grudge endured; cold as the loins
(Weep, sorry swains,
Weep, village maid and wife the old Blouzelind dead!)
That, lost her bawdy enkindling, her hoarded fire
From the midsummer pyre,
Her lust still purely remembered enlightening
With vagrant sparkles the dreary matings, the pined
Kind after kind
Hireling instinct of ram and bull and boar,
Must drudge henceforth, clay on clay to beget
More clay and yet
More clay, from clay scarcely emerging to serve
The clay-clad earth, must in the land's winter plough,
Nor be heartened now
By her kindling applause, by her spring-fast hold on life.

And the very winter looms and the leaves down-shed,
On her, six-months dead.
Close look the enemies, the bright cold cloud,

The sharpened sky, the sunset untimely smiting.
Now the affrighting
Wind at sunset rises, and here I sit
In a strange house, unknit
To it, unhomed yet, hearing the beleaguering
Voice through our trees threatening with but the concern
Of a guest to learn
How in which chimney mumbled, at what door
Fumbling these first envoy assaults foretell
To those who must dwell
Here winter-through where mid-winter's worst will befall.
But sharper a summons rouses me, a lost
Unbodied greeting tossed
Startling over half England, over half a year,
Winter be a-coming, crying, Winter's in the air,
Prepare, beware,
Look well to your defences, fetch in the wood,
Saw logs, chop kindling, dig over your garden ground,
Wrap shelter round
What green must face the grim, prune the outworn,
Heap the year's refuse to rot down and feed
The next year's seed,
Bestir to store, guard, gather, make trim,
Cram day with doing, in winter's teeth outwit
The winter's threat,
Haste to make fast, ward, tether, carry in!
Saying, moreover, summer to winter tends,
All things have their ends
Appointed, the spring and the fall, the sunny and the dow.
I know that the flower must bloom, ripen and spread
Its increase, and shed
Petal, dying back to the earth whence it came.
We must all die, dear ladies, and that's as true
As I sit talking with you.
We must all die, and what becomes of us then,
Whether we go upward or downward there's no telling.
But while we are dwelling
Here on this earth our dear lives are our own.
We can love, can't we, us can do what we can
For our fellowman.
Us can enjoy life, us can make the most of our time

While it's ours without fretting over what's to come after?
And then with laughter
Suddenly spilled on the air like the wren's timbrel
She said, 'Twould be an awful pity to waste
Life while its taste
Is sweet on our lips. You be like old Grannie and be merry
While you can, and leave the dead to bury the dead,
With command she said.

So be it, my dear. My words lament you no further.

*Frankfort Manor, 1933*

The lament has a breathless quality, as if written at great speed. It is an impressionistic portrait of a remarkable, if wilful, woman, warts and all; a woman who was 'buffoon and byword … / And yet she was adored'. At one point there is a fanciful diversion into pastoral ('Blouzelind' was a fair young shepherdess mourned in the 1714 John Gay poem 'The Shepherd's Week'). But Blouzelind bears little resemblance to Grannie, who steals coal from her neighbours, surprises villagers with posies, enlivens the inn. Life has been much duller in Chaldon since her passing, but still time must go on. Winter is coming, and the ground prepared for spring. In her roundabout way, Warner is reconciling herself to Anne Moxon's death.

The poem was a farewell. Sylvia seems never to have written about Anne Moxon again. While Shepherd Dove is the central character of her story 'A Village Death', Grannie does not appear in any of her fiction, nor in that of Theodore Powys (who did use a 'Shepherd Poose' as one of his characters.)

Warner and Ackland never returned to Miss Green's, which was let instead to the farm labourer Jim Pitman and his wife May. However, Frankfort Manor proved expensive, and in 1935 they came back to the village – a place they always loved – renting 'The Hut', 24 West Chaldon, a rat-infested cottage, streaming with damp (but cheaper).

By 1935, like so many writers, both Warner and Ackland had become active members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, disturbed by the growth of fascism, both in Britain and, most particularly, in Germany. The Reichstag fire of 1933, an arson attack on the parliament buildings in Berlin, led immediately to a suspension of civil liberties and was a pivotal event in the unstoppable rise of Hitler. The Hut was to become the local party's unlikely hub.

However, the couple were equally concerned about matters closer to home. Neither woman had shown any particular interest in politics before their arrival in the village, and both came from comfortable backgrounds, worlds away from rural Dorset, one of the lowest paid counties for agricultural labourers in England – as they were soon to discover.

In *Country Conditions*, published in 1936 by Lawrence & Wishart, a communist press, Valentine Ackland argues that conditions in the country were no better than they had been one hundred years before. It is a scrupulous and well-documented work, furnished with reports from various villages, though predominantly from Chaldon. She describes the tied and overcrowded cottages, the insanitary conditions, the unsettling custom of annually moving from one job to another and the inadequate treatment of the old, the sick and the dying.

When she first went to Chaldon in 1922 to visit Theodore Powys, Sylvia Townsend Warner was enchanted by the place, but her feelings were gradually to become more mixed, as she describes – in horticultural terms – in her essay 'The Way by Which I Have Come' (1939).

> At first it was the flowers I enjoyed; the wisdom, the good friendships, the traditions, the racy speech, the idiomatic quality of the English country worker – or the other flowers, the *fleurs du mal*, the twists and patiently-wrought vices that develop under thatch, the violent dramas that explode among green pastures. Then my interest turned to the pursuit of more serious cabbages … I still grow flowers and I still grow vegetables. I still appreciate the goings-on of my neighbours, and I still amass a solid fury at the conditions they have to endure.[17]

Whatever would be done to ease the poverty, with the death of Anne Moxon the 'old order' had gone for ever – and Chaldon was the poorer for it.

## Note on contributor

Judith Stinton is a founder member of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society and was the editor of the Society Newsletter for 14 years. She is the author of 11 books, including *Chaldon Herring: Writers in a Dorset Landscape* (1988 and 2004). Her most recent book, *Chesil Beach: A Peopled Solitude*, was published in 2021.

## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the reviewers during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

## Notes

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