

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

The Gardener's Story

Sara Hudston^{1,*}

How to cite: Hudston, S. 'The Gardener's Story.' *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2017, 17(2), pp. 39–48.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2017.10>

Published: 11 December 2017

Copyright:

© 2017, Sara Hudston. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2017.10>

Open Access:

The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

*Correspondence: sarajhudston@gmail.com

¹Independent writer

The Gardener's Story

Sara Hudston

Foreword

This piece was originally published in July 1995 in The Wessex Journal, a bi-monthly magazine now sadly defunct. It arose from interviews with Colin House, who grew up in Maiden Newton and knew Sylvia Townsend Warner well.

Visit East Chaldon churchyard and under the beeches with their cawing rooks is a flat stone, engraved with the names of two lovers who were once betrothed beneath a thorn tree on the edge of the village.

The dates record that one of them, the poet Valentine Ackland, was buried nine years before her more famous other half, the writer and poet Sylvia Townsend Warner.

The spot seems tranquil – a quiet corner on the western edge of the plunging Purbeck Hills, only a few miles inland along a winding green valley from Durdle Door.

Like so many old Dorset villages, Chaldon has its ugly new bungalows – one flaunting the ridiculously out-of-place name 'Mae Hame' – and its share of weekenders, no doubt drawn to the cutesy pub. There's a tatty-looking farm and the Dorset Queen coach company parks its buses in a yard by the green.

Some of the poky, thatched cottages are pretty enough but nothing special beside the picturesque extravagance of Worth Matravers or Corfe Castle.

Few casual visitors would imagine that in the 1920s and 30s the village was bursting with artistic endeavour. It was home to John Cowper Powys's brothers Theodore, the reclusive Dorset sage, and Llewelyn, the mystical philosopher who liked to lie naked on the moonlit cliffs.

But then rural Dorset, that most secretive of counties, is adept at hiding its inner life. Its spectacular scenery distracts tourists and charms them away from discovering its deeper confidences. Inside those dark cottages, so inconvenient before the advent of electricity and mains drainage, memories are hoarded and old superstitions linger on.

Warner and Ackland knew all about the realities of rural life. They lived in Chaldon on and off from 1930 to 1936 and wrote articles exposing the miserable conditions labourers there endured. Although they moved to the outskirts of Maiden Newton in 1937, it was Chaldon where they fell in love and chose to be buried. But before Warner could rest in peace beside Ackland, Old Dorset had much to say in the last rites of even this most rational of writers.

Warner had many friends and the last years of her life saw the revival of a most unusual relationship.

'She died May Day, seven-twenty in the morning, with my arms around her.'

In 1978 Sylvia Townsend Warner breathed her last, cradled by her former garden boy Colin House. Their enjoyment of each other's company, which Colin describes as 'a meeting of kindred spirits', thrived despite a 43-year age gap and lasted for more than a quarter of a century.

To explain how this largely self-educated builder became the final confidant of one of the twentieth century's greatest women writers,



Figure 5.1 Colin House with his spearfishing team, The Weymouth Congas, in 1960. Colin is on the far right.

(Copyright: Colin House)

we have to go back to Maiden Newton in the late forties. The second eldest of five brothers, Colin lived with his parents in the old council houses at the Dorchester end of the village. His father was a builder and gravedigger – both trades that Colin was to take up. But while he was a schoolboy, there were all the amusements of a country childhood to keep him happy: ferreting, fishing on the Frome and exploring freely along the water meadows, seeking out the first primroses, cob nuts or holly for Christmas.

In those days Maiden Newton was self-sufficient with its own baker's, ironmonger's and mill. It even boasted two bespoke tailors who fitted out all the young men for miles around. Milk was delivered in different measures by Arthur Squires on his bicycle and householders would leave their cans out on the doorstep to be filled. Some of the older residents could recall the village guide, written entirely in rhyme, that was handed out at the train station to the many visitors come to do their business.

When Colin turned 12, he discovered an astonishing new world tucked away by the river in the hamlet of Frome Vauchurch.

Colin met Warner and Ackland while doing gardening jobs for the elderly woman who lived opposite them. Mrs Holly Edwards was 'a rather grand old lady who loved her whisky and gin' and he cut her lawn in exchange for the choice of a double-yolked egg or a packet of crisps. He always chose the crisps and he also got to catch a trout from the river. Warner occasionally called on Mrs Edwards and it wasn't long before she asked Colin to come and help in her garden.

For a time he worked on both sides of the lane until some particularly bad winter floods burst the banks of the Frome and the river swirled into Mrs Edwards' house. She refused to leave and perched on the kitchen table while the water swept through below. No doubt she was suitably fortified against the cold and it was possibly her fondness for a tippie that led to her falling off the table and drowning in her own house.

From then on Colin laboured for Sylvia alone. The company and conversation of Warner and Ackland astounded him. For a boy who was to leave school at 15, they opened up unimagined intellectual and cultural perspectives and their house, with its pervasive smell of black coffee, fascinated him. The power of the relationship still overwhelms Colin.

'It was the most influential period of my whole life. I knew I could ask Sylvia about anything and get an honest answer, even such things as you couldn't talk to your mother or father about,' he says. 'For me

then, going into a house where two ladies lived with lovely things was another thing altogether.’

By then it was about ten years since the ‘ladies’ had moved to Vauchurch from Chaldon. They had been living together since 1930 and their Communist views, lesbian relationship and retirement to rural Dorset had cemented a rather dubious literary reputation. Their efforts during the Spanish Civil War had led Stephen Spender to use Sylvia as the model for his acid portrayal of a ‘Communist lady writer’ in *World Within World* (nowadays we might think that the joke was on Spender. After all, Warner was the better writer.)

Local people apparently viewed them rather differently. Colin tells of numerous small and practical kindnesses that Sylvia carried out for others, such as paying off the grocery bills of the poorest at Christmas. This was at a time when the pair’s income fluctuated and (until Sylvia’s mother died) was largely dependent on the short stories Warner wrote for the *New Yorker* magazine.

Colin recalls her as being a kind, down-to-earth person. ‘She believed in life. I think she was very close to nature, she was very earthy. She had a wonderful feeling for the natural world around her. Especially the river. It always brought her something new; dab chicks in the autumn or the kingfisher who often sat on the railing outside her window.’

One summer it brought two lads in a canoe who were trying to navigate the length of the Frome. They hit a roll of submerged wire at Vauchurch and sank at the bottom of Sylvia’s garden.

‘She came down the garden waving her arms when she saw us and said something literary about us arising from the waves,’ remembers George Dewhurst, the son of a GP from Long Bredy, who was in the canoe with a schoolfriend. ‘Lots of other people on the way had shouted at us, but she was very nice and helped us mend it.’

Sylvia displayed the same willingness to chat to whoever dropped by her door. One regular summer visitor was a tramp or wayfarer, known for miles around as Bitabread after his habit of knocking on doors and asking: ‘Got a bit a bread to eat?’ He was sometimes to be seen sitting on the veranda drinking tea with Sylvia and discussing country lore – perhaps the best way to catch rabbits or the properties of certain wild plants.

‘He came originally from a very rich family and was a very educated man,’ says Colin. ‘He had a great white beard and he used to walk the villages in the summer and stay in the workhouse at Cerne Abbas in the winter.’

There were other callers at the house whose real significance was not apparent to the eyes of a child. In 1949, Valentine renewed an old love affair with an American called Elizabeth Wade White, who came to stay at the house in Vauchurch. This visit was appallingly painful for Sylvia and she moved out to a hotel in Yeovil, leaving Valentine and Elizabeth together. At the time Colin saw nothing peculiar in this and even thought the three were great friends. It was a long time until he knew the truth.

‘In retrospect Valentine wasn’t very kind to Sylvia. Without any doubt at all Sylvia had the deeper of the two loves,’ he believes.

Eventually, the lovers were reconciled. Valentine had many affairs, both with men and women. Many years later when he was clearing out the house after Sylvia’s death, Colin found a locked diary hidden away. He broke the lock and discovered it was Valentine’s and contained explicit descriptions of her sexual encounters with a variety of people.

‘I took it and laid it on the doorstep of the first person who was mentioned in it,’ says Colin.

Back in the 1950s such secrets were unimaginable. He left school, learned to dig graves, taking great delight in getting the sides perfectly straight, and carried on gardening. Then, when he was 17, a series of disasters brought the first stage of his friendship with Warner to an end.

Colin was working for his father on a house in the village when there was a horrible accident. One of his friends died before his eyes after falling off a ladder and impaling himself on the spike railings below. The shock made Colin decide to leave home and he joined the RAF. His first experience of the Air Force was to discover one of the other new recruits slashing his wrists in the toilet block.

Coming so soon after the tragedy at home, the effect was devastating and he was dispatched to Aylesbury for assessment. There he was found unsuitable for life in the forces and sent home. Half-way back on the train he was sexually assaulted by a man and the trauma of this attack landed him in Herrison Hospital at Dorchester. Here he underwent ECT and was given repeated doses of insulin to put him into a series of comas as part of a treatment which was later to be banned.

Colin was in hospital for nearly two years and it wasn’t until he did some gardening in the grounds that he remembered his work for Sylvia.

‘It seemed so far away, all those lovely things I’d done in the village, I felt momentarily whole again.’

His recovery was slow. In 1964 he married Sukey, a young woman from Maiden Newton, and moved away to Fleet near Weymouth, where he started up in business as a stonemason and builder.

‘Looking back I feel I owe my sanity to Sylvia Townsend Warner.’

Warner meanwhile suffered her own unhappiness. In 1969 Valentine died of breast cancer, leaving Sylvia alone at the age of 75. It was not until after Valentine’s death that her friendship with Colin entered its second and deeper stage.

Colin had business troubles and lost almost all his money. He started doing odd jobs for Sylvia and when she heard of his difficulties, she paid his mortgage for a year and sent him to see Sir Owen Morshed, near Sherborne, who restored churches and might have use for a stonemason. Sir Owen was very helpful to Colin and he was able to rebuild his firm. Little did he know that the Morshed name was to play a significant part in Sylvia’s last days.

By the end of 1977 when she was 84, it was clear that Sylvia was growing increasingly frail. Her close friend Antonia Trauttmansdorff visited frequently to keep her company and make her meals. Then a few weeks before she died, Warner called upon something she had used before to stave off illness. It was called the Black Box and it was brought by Lady Owen Morshed, wife of Colin’s benefactor.

‘I was there when she came carrying it and saw her go in,’ says Colin. ‘I think it was a faith thing. I don’t think it was witchcraft – quite.’

The Box is still used by some in Dorset. Sufferers send a token of themselves, often a letter or a lock of hair, to be put in the box and prayed over. Sylvia had used it for Valentine’s illness.

Colin knew Sylvia was dying and was prepared for what he had to do. They had discussed it many times. His first task was to take out a hefty brown paper package with the initials VA on the front from a secret drawer in her bureau.

‘She said it was just personal things she wanted destroyed with her,’ says Colin. ‘I went down to the undertaker’s in Bridport and unscrewed her coffin and put it in.’

The package was burnt with the body and Colin turned to his second promise. Three years before, Sylvia had written to him requesting that when she died, he should be the one to dig the hole for her casket next to Valentine’s.

‘You have always been my dear gardener – and I should like you to plant me. Please say Yes,’ she wrote.

So Colin went to Chaldon and dug a pit to the right of Valentine’s casket. ‘Just out of my own mind I lined the complete hole with wild flowers ... she was so fond of flowers, particularly green flowers like hellebores.’

On the day of the burial, Colin went early into Bridport to pick up Sylvia's ashes and as he came across Eggardon Hill, a hoopoe flew low in front of his van. The sight of such a rare bird was memorable enough, but later when he drove down the back lane into East Chaldon, there, dusting itself in the middle of the road, was another hoopoe. A coincidence, maybe, but Colin saw it differently. 'It was as if it was a goodbye. After all, our friendship all started with birds and flowers.'

But that was not quite the end of things. After the funeral service, Colin set the small memorial stone at a slight angle to let the rain run off. When he revisited the grave a few months later he found it flat on the ground.

'I lifted the stone to put it back and there underneath were two crossed hinges. It was an old Dorset curse to keep the spirit earthbound, so my father told me. I removed them and threw them over the wall. They weren't put back and to the best of my knowledge they haven't been since.'

Colin believes that someone held a spiteful intention against Sylvia. Did they remember the libel action that played a part in her leaving Chaldon years before when she spoke out over the ill-treatment of some handicapped serving girls? Or did somebody who was envious of her talent think that her love for Valentine was unnatural?

Yet there is another explanation. Cecil Hugh Williamson, an authority on witchcraft customs who set-up the Witchcraft Museum in Boscastle, believed that the hinges may have been intended for a positive use. He said they could be symbols of transition from this world to the next, hinges to open a doorway into the unknown. In this sense, he suggested they were marks of love and respect. Old Dorset lives on and keeps its secrets still. As the inscription on Sylvia and Valentine's grave says: '*Non omnis moriar*'; death is not the end, or, as Sylvia translated it for Colin: 'Not all of me is gone.'

Afterword

When I first heard Colin's story more than 20 years ago I was astonished. It had all the elements of one of Warner's own short stories – love, disaster and a magical edge that trembles between the everyday and the fantastic, leaving the reader uncertain what to believe. I checked the verifiable facts – in particular the letter from Warner when she asked him to 'plant' her, and her other letters to him, which tell of a long and friendly relationship. Some of the letters



Figure 5.2 Colin House at home in Weymouth in 2016.
(Copyright: Sara Hudston)

address him as ‘darling Colin’ or ‘dearest Colin’. There is no doubt that they knew each other well.

I didn’t see Colin for years until I interviewed him again in the autumn of 2016. He is 80 and has been unwell for some time. Although his short-term memory is failing, his recollection of events long past is sharp. He told me how he found Valentine Ackland’s private diary in a wooden box in the garden shed when he was clearing Warner’s house for sale after her death (he previously said he found it in the gun-room). He revealed something he wouldn’t tell me before – the identity of the first person mentioned in the diary. It was Janet Machen, Warner’s cousin.

Colin read the diary, but said of this: ‘I felt I was intruding and reading something highly personal ... the innermost thoughts of someone. It was an extraordinary account of a woman’s love life ... It was detailed, intimate and very personal.’

He left the diary on Machen’s doorstep. ‘I do regret doing that but it was the right thing at the time. It was probably burned.’

Colin allowed me to photograph some of the letters that Warner sent him. They tell of mundane bits and pieces of maintenance work Colin did in Warner’s house and garden, of social visits and Warner’s liking for Colin’s wife Sukey and their children. In one letter, dated Valentine’s Day 1977, Warner responds to the news that Colin has been

swindled by his business partner. After thanking him for ‘that splendid post which I found firmly in place when I came home yesterday’ she writes: ‘I was sorry not to see you. I am shocked by the way you have been let down. I hope something may be salvaged. If not, you will still be able to say like the French King after a defeat: “All is lost, except honour.”’

The letters tell how she helped Colin financially by giving him the field next to Riverside, her house in Frome Vauchurch. The field was called ‘Cornom’ and had been used for hundreds of years to graze animals overnight before they were sent to market. It was 4.7 acres of pasture, a substantial size, and brought in an annual rent. Colin later sold it to the buyers of Riverside after Warner’s death.

In one letter Warner says ‘You may be the next nearest thing to a fish’, referring to Colin’s spearfishing hobby. He was British champion and in 1967 captained the British team in the world spearfishing championships at Cayo Avalos in Cuba. He started fourth in the world rankings: ‘I had rough luck; I was doing bloody well and I got a big parrot fish and it bit right across my hand which kept me out the contest for a few days.’ He finished fourteenth.

At home in Dorset, Colin often swam with the tide from Chesil Beach down the west side of Portland to Pulpit Rock at the end of the isle, a distance of about three and a half miles. At Pulpit Rock he had to cut back quick to the deadwater behind the rock so he could clamber out before being swept on into the ferocious tides of the Race. Sukey remembers how she used to have a freezer full of fish caught by Colin, which formed a large part of their diet. A couple of the letters refer to a lunch visit Warner and Peg Manisty made to Colin and Sukey’s then home at Strawberry Cottage in Fleet, near Weymouth, when they ate grey mullet. (Fleet is the setting for *Moonfleet*, J. Meade Falkner’s stirring Victorian tale of smuggling on the Dorset coast.)

Colin says that Warner asked him to be with her when she died and he stayed at her house for three nights before her death on 1 May 1978. He says that Janet Machen told him to leave, but Warner insisted on his staying. Of the events that he describes subsequently, readers will have to make up their own minds, but I have no reason to disbelieve Colin. While hoopoes are rare in Dorset, they do occasionally turn up, generally in early May when they migrate northwards from the Mediterranean to their breeding grounds in France and Spain. According to the RSPB, they sometimes overshoot and spend a short time on the South Coast before heading back across the Channel. One of the most recent officially recorded hoopoe sightings in Dorset was

on 2 May 2014. A bird (presumed to be the same one) was spotted twice on the same day – once near Eggardon Hill and once near Swanage, about ten miles from East Chaldon (see www.dorsetbirds.blogspot.co.uk).

Shortly before her death, Warner wrote a preface to *Mr. Fortune's Maggot*. In it, she describes how writing the novel was 'made the more alarming by the way in which things kept on going right – like the business of Mr Fortune's watch, for instance'. There is something of the same beguiling quality to Colin's story. It has a Warneresque literary pattern, especially the ambiguous ending, which flexes both ways like an optical illusion. Was the hinge under her gravestone a blessing or a curse? '*Non omnis moriar*' indeed.

Note on contributor

Sara Hudston is a writer who lives in West Dorset. She is a contributor to the *Guardian's* Country Diary and a freelance editor for Little Toller Books. Her website is www.sarahudston.co.uk.