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Tinch Minter^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: tinchmint@gmail.com

¹ Independent scholar

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Sylvia's Gifts: Meetings with Sylvia Townsend Warner in the 1970s

Tinch Minter

It all began with pure chance – my taking lodgings with Janet Machen (later Pollock) in Bristol in 1969 – a Janet who, though my landlady, quickly became so much more, a dear friend for life. She was at that time a troubled and unsettled Janet; I would frequently watch her setting off in her tiny Fiat which surely had only a sewing machine engine under the bonnet. But Janet always departed with such aplomb in the serene expectation that she would arrive in Dorset to visit her cousin Sylvia. These visits were for giving comfort, for Valentine had very recently died. I knew of Sylvia as an old lady so it collided with my understanding of cousinhood, for Janet looked so young, sounded so youthful, with ideas always fresh and vibrant but often rebellious. And wasn't she like myself a student at the time? How could she have an ancient cousin and be so devoted?

The following year Janet hit upon a brilliant scheme for assistance in comforting Sylvia. She gathered a gang of her young friends to go to Chaldon – actually well beyond Chaldon, up and down the flinty path that led to Sylvia's sanctum, one of the clump of buildings by Rat's Barn. It was here, just inland from the chalk cliffs, that we were to sing to Sylvia, not just sing anything but specifically Tudor madrigals and motets. So gathered at her remote rented cottage, Chydyok, we released to the Dorset air some of the music which Sylvia under her musicologist's hat had unearthed in cathedral libraries so many years previously. And how we did sing! Not only sing, we even rehearsed – a little. But something about her presence pushed our ribs wide as we filled her little garden with those close and often alarming harmonies. The wonder she expressed as we sang was rapturous, never tearful or sentimental, but overflowing with infectious joy. Outside that flint



Figure 7.1 Janet Machen, with young choristers

cottage we followed her precepts, opening our lungs and our hearts to celebrate her. I'm only sorry none of these photographs have captured her. In the picture of Janet, who had magically founded the pop-up 'Chaldon Chorale', I see her smile, her inner loving pixie. We were Robert, my predecessor as Janet's lodger; Piers, who sang with him in the choir at Chichester Cathedral; Robert's sister Jane; Janet's son Matthew; and myself. It's clear from Robert's posing that none of us were abashed by Sylvia's venerable age or illustrious career. It was impossible not to feel charmed by her. What charmed was that Sylvia loved us, she became one of us, and she drew so much delight from our youth and fresh approach to the music she revered and yet had had no association with for so long. Never was there a hint that we were murdering those precious sounds, that these madrigals were somehow hers and that we should give them due respect. She gave us freedom to enjoy giving them back to her with all the enthusiasm we could muster.



Figure 7.2 The 'Chaldon Chorale'. Left to right: unidentified young man smoking, Tinch Minter (in dark glasses), Matthew Davis, Jane Shrubsall, Robert Shrubsall, Piers Allen

Back in Bristol, Janet said that Valentine had not been interested in music and so Sylvia had put it away from her, and that therefore some of those part songs she had never heard except in her head. Only callow youth could have made us so brazen as to sing them to her, knowing just how significant her contribution had been to musicology. In this brief slice of eternity we sang and sang and sang again to Sylvia as much as to the air and the landscape she loved. For me 'The Silver Swan' by Gibbons will always evoke that day, with Sylvia's silver hair shimmering in the sunshine as she smiled through her grief. It was as if we had rounded out her musicologist past and connected it with the long days of Valentine's dying. All of us gathered there shared a day that would stretch into a powerful sinew lending dynamism to our lives.

By November 1970 Janet's pixie self had conjured up another plan for comforting Sylvia and to draw me closer into that charmed

circle. By this time I was living in London. From Bournemouth the train seemed more and more reluctant, stopping with greater frequency and at the tiniest of stations perched in the middle of nowhere. Finally the train reached a station with the unlikely name of Wool where, smooth as silk, I was picked up by taxi and driven to Frome Vauchurch. In my family such luxurious arrangements were unheard of. If I had imagined a journey into the past across Hardy's Egdon Heath, catching a glimpse of an ancient reddleman, I was to be disillusioned, for the disproportionately large, blundering blocks of Winfrith nuclear power station soon overwhelmed all else. No wonder Sylvia had exclaimed and campaigned so vociferously against it. No wonder the hurt of that lost ecosystem still rankled with her twenty years later.

Then followed the drive into the unknown, and finally down the little lane from Maiden Newton where, just before the hump bridge over the Frome, the driveway wound into the garden, only later opening out to reveal the house and the view beyond. One thing became very clear now: the belying of the years was a family trait, for Sylvia had sprung to the front of the house even before the taxi stopped and I was smothered in her energetic welcome. This was no stooping, frail old dear but a spry woman. She hugged me all the way into the house, sweeping me up with solicitous hospitality, keen to share the world she had built around her that fitted like a comfortable glove. Of course one glove was missing from the pair. But my first glance at the veranda which fronted the house introduced me to a sense of Valentine: there was a collection of disparate objects that encompassed everything from garden tools to apples and pears and a large male bust, lent extra dignity by a jauntily angled, if battered, hat. Strings of onions and walking sticks of many a shape and handle design stood alongside shoes and boots and pots of this and that and rolls of string, fishing tackle, plus a gun. A year after her death Valentine was a palpable presence, for she had not been tidied away along with all her possessions. Though I had not met her, she was to become more and more real to me.

Sylvia told me in all simplicity that the fists of garlic hanging from the veranda, drying along with bunches of sage and thyme and marjoram, were there because she was a witch. They were to ward off evil. In even greater simplicity she wanted to know if I was a witch too. It soon became apparent anyone could become a witch with Sylvia because she made magic happen. Her sorcery changed the simplest events into excitements; being generous to a fault she always made out that serendipity or fortuity occurred through my agency. It was the first I knew about having magical properties! So, if she harvested the very

fattest raspberries it was because I had arrived and had said I liked them and therefore they responded. If the post brought her good news, I had turned the heart of the sender. If the river murmured comfortably beside the house I had tamed the waters on that day. If the swallows lined up to fly to southern climes from the adjacent field I had somehow ordained the correct meteorological conditions. In Sylvia's coven every assumption was to be turned on its head.

Later, Sylvia took me on a tour of her house that seemed to float on the stream. It was shaped more like a stranded barge moored against the land, a high-sided barque with decks and look-outs, idling in the garden instead of battling it out on the high seas. And almost all of it was made of wood. Surprised as I was to be greeted by garlic and the advertisement of witchcraft, I was soon to discover the rest of the house was equally surprising. Not to be outdone by the veranda, the first room contained another eclectic assortment, but this time of antiques. Everywhere were beautiful objects; Sylvia told me which one was cherished because it had been a gift to or from Valentine on a special date, or because it had been discovered on a particular journey to a particular house sale, when they had scoured the country in their hunt for antiques. Her descriptions dovetailed their life together. Time and again an *objet d'art* or a spill pot was a vestige of the time Valentine had had an antique shop in the house. Their shared past was everywhere in the house – how could it not be after so long a partnership?

As we went further into the interior, I was struck by the specially water-clarified light dancing across each room on the long south side of the house. In every respect the house which stretched itself so lazily along the sparkling river was entirely idiosyncratic, if ramshackle, and exhaled a suggestion of being temporary. It was the doors which alerted me, for not one of them matched – they comprised a veritable display case of English door design, panelling and manufacture. If you were afflicted by an obsession with order and replication, Sylvia's house might have terrified you. But how perfectly this infinite variety complemented Sylvia and the intense life lived within its walls. No room had the same cornices, or bookcases or floorboards or window frames or door-jamb. Clearly the house was built on a principle: why have a set when you can have variety? But this was not the thinking behind the richness of all this interior and exterior miscellany. Sylvia enjoyed relating its extraordinary history. According to her a man had arrived from Australia and pitched his tent on the riverside, on the north side, shielded from prying eyes by the trees. He found the river stippled with trout, the land fruitful, and presumably he was able to find sufficient

casual work in the neighbourhood to keep body, soul and commitment there. And so at first he squatted there, then started to think of his little camp as a permanent place to live. He set about collecting wood for building. His raw materials were apparently either scrounged or bought from tips as and when he could come by them.

As Sylvia explained it, her house was begun as the house that one Australian built – maybe he was Jack or at least a jack of all trades – plank by plank, brick by brick. But later she surmised he either became frustrated by the amount of labour necessary to build himself a permanent home, or (as I like to think) he whistled for the sake of companionship and his brother came over from Australia to help him in the endeavour. Her story unfolded: the two brothers continued collected building materials as and where they could find them. For an unspecified while they worked happily together, established their rights to the site and kept extending the building. In the fullness of their construction time it became the house that the two brothers built.

However, disaster struck when they argued, again at a time unspecified. However long it lasted, this was evidently some epic argument. Eventually each brother staked his claim to a part of the house. The final resolution entailed adaptations to the building: another wall went up. Where two outside doors had been sufficient before, no fewer than seven were now needed. When you bear in mind that this is a house with one long wall bordering the river that makes a lot of entrances and exits on the three remaining flanks. As Sylvia told the tale, the two brothers never spoke to or saw each other again. Was I to believe this or was it just a gloriously inventive story Sylvia cooked up to explain the idiosyncrasies of the building? Fact or fiction, like the ancient city of Thebes Sylvia's house had seven entrances, and in every respect it delighted in its variety. Truly it was a perfectly fitting case for those two individuals who took such intense part in the existence of things around them.

Variety also informed the interior, which was furnished on the principle: why should household objects agree? So each piece of furniture in the two separate sitting rooms, one above the other, displayed its individuality. Here was a joyous freedom from the stricture of matching sets of chairs, or crockery, or glasses or anything else. No two cups and saucers had to be made in the same factory. But they were of course all china, beautifully delicate china, suitable vessels for lapsang souchong, which she would bring upstairs to me. As it is my favourite tea, its smoky aroma made me feel instantly at home, just as the strong coffee brewing in the mornings pulled me towards breakfast.

Sylvia's was a house of enticing aromas – ever my sensory weakness – with herbs invariably included in every savoury dish, roses, sweet peas and other flowers from the garden in any number of vases, and various riverine smells that invaded at different times of day, while from the north side the gradually dampening garden offered more lush notes. It was another family tendency and a marvellous life lesson that from both Janet and Sylvia a meal became a gift, created with love. Whatever the task, whether mundane or simple, whether gardening, cooking, sewing or writing, Sylvia completed it with love, and thereby made magic by turning it into an art form. How much this attitude was a demonstration of her individuality and of the moment!

In their garden of delights nature was not intimidated or blighted by regimentation. But one concession was made: the vegetables were grown in straight lines. By modern standards it was a huge garden and much of it was a mystery as it twisted and turned away, then opened out playfully after hiding from the visitor, revealing more of itself around the next shrub or stand of trees; it was a green world that had been formed and nurtured by Valentine and Sylvia over the years. Sylvia never went out without returning with some treasure to share – some scented shrub, some magnificently coloured leaf, and invariably a handful of herbs. There was no question of ready-made food. Sylvia cooked with originality, turning her own grown produce into delicious and surprising food: stews to comfort and entice the senses made with the last of her love and care for the vegetables she had grown. How could I forget a sorrel soup made decadent with splashes of thick cream and enriched with egg yolk! Other soups she thickened with chestnut flour, a smooth, rich reminder of her days in France. Although her kitchen was outmoded Sylvia was unfazed, even though on every pass she had to step deftly over a hole in one of the floorboards. The shop in Maiden Newton village was her Harrods; better still, the family were happy to deliver and were very accommodating in getting for her the unlikely ingredients she enjoyed.

Her Cockney 'char' at that time was also a free spirit, defiant of local customs and refusing to be intimidated by local yeomanry. I discovered this independence when I ventured into a conversation concerning an order for meat. This was transacted by the two Londoners with humour and orderliness, which I understood to indicate a regular occurrence. 'How many rabbits do you want tomorrow? And how about venison? Or a brace of pheasants? A hare?' Thoroughly countrified women, I thought, and rejoiced in these fruits of late autumn. In this transaction no prices were mentioned. It all sounded

delicious; it wasn't until later I realised most of the meat was destined for the cats, not for us. And this order was not going to the local butcher but to her husband who worked on the railway. Were Sylvia's beloved cats fed by train-kill? When I suggested that those wild creatures could not be neatly beheaded by a train without being reduced to meaty goo, Sylvia laughed. This railway line ran alongside a country estate. Naturally there was game and naturally it could find its way into traps and snares beside the line. Sylvia's rich, rolling voice, her crisp Rs, the roundedness of her vowels brimming with the collected culture of decades, would dispel any possible hint of poaching from the most well-heeled magistrate.

Before I went, Janet had impressed upon me the seriousness of my task. I was to catalogue Sylvia's and Valentine's books and tune into the situation of recent and abiding loss. I duly arrived in the upper sitting room fired with virtue and diligence. But in practice Sylvia rebelled against a guest who was to comfort her. Rather it was for her to entertain me; so, kittenish and teasing, she used endless wiles to interrupt me. Would I be able to complete my task when it was her treat to feed me with titbits of news and observations and to regale me with story ideas? For hours I became a pair of ears for her to lob stories, insights and observations into, anything to let her creative mind exercise. I will never know what was reality and what was fantasy. But all of it was engaging. Having recently endured ten years of rigorous schooling I was astounded when she said she had had no structured education, that it was, as she put it, a ragbag. Certainly it sounded haphazard, spending her childhood running around corridors at Harrow, pressing an ear first to one door, then another until she discovered a subject which interested her – and having to disappear rapidly if anyone came along. For all the paucity of learning on the hoof she turned it into a secret treasure and all her own. As a writer she could pick anything out of her ragbag education, snip it into a new design that expressed her interests and embroider it into a theme for a novel, and make a perfect garment from it: Sylvia performing magic again.

I never heard any more than the briefest reference to her mother, for really my task was to let her share whatever it was that brought a smile to her face. But I did hear how she loved her father not least for his sitting on his rocking-horse, preferring woodwork to teaching even his daughter.

In that upstairs sitting room where I worked were some strangely rugged, embroidered pictures. I knew chaste antique silk pictures, but Sylvia's collection of embroidered works were clearly not the creations

of Regency ladies. She told me about these blustery images of sea life, the frail boats perching on rolling waves and how Valentine had found John Craske and made it her business to encourage him, and more to the point had bought his pictures. I was to see some of them again in Peter Pears's house – for Sylvia left them to Aldeburgh. The warm friendship of the two was one between such similar souls, both exquisite artists, both devoted partners, both meticulous in the grace of their social beings. Like Sylvia, Pears was so solicitous a host, worrying that I should be comfortable even when he himself could no longer use his right side.

On my cataloguing visit I was reading *Daniel Deronda*, a paperback which had become dog-eared by being my companion on tube and train journeys. One afternoon Sylvia asked me to promise her something. I expected she would like me to send her lapsang souchong, Gauloises or chestnut flour from Soho, or perhaps a regular supply of specially rich coffee from the Algerian Coffee Stores in Old Compton Street, or to sniffle out some snippet from the BM library. But no, she wanted me to give her my shamefully tatty George Eliot. I couldn't resist of course, though her request did seem strange. The morning I left there was an immaculate brown paper parcel on the kitchen table. Her delight in performing simple tasks added radiance to everything she did, including wrapping this exquisitely neat parcel and fashioning for it a stout string handle. She handed it to me with the strictest injunction that it was not to be opened until I was inside my flat in London. Imagine my surprise when I unwrapped four red leather-bound volumes of the first edition.

And then her wondrously curlicued handwriting brought me news and invitations – not least the letter longing to see my eighteenth-century nose peeping round a door in her house again. Sylvia's delight in anything out of the way or individual had a way like nothing else of cherishing that individuality.

A woman of enormous dignity, by then in her late 70s, living alone, bereft, she never ever moped. What I dreaded – household chores – were to her another form of giving. So at the end of the long corridor upstairs my bed had such crisply ironed sheets they crunched on my first night. She always placed fresh water in a carafe and biscuits by my bedside. When I caught a cold, Sylvia ordered me straight to bed telling me she had THE proven remedy. In no time she arrived upstairs bearing a tumbler of sloe gin, two white doorsteps thickly spread with butter and stuccoed with chunks of garlic, and the simple statement of an indisputable truth that I would be better in the morning. Who would dare not to be? And I was, my head cleared and sniffles banished – the

best of remedies and still applied. Only that next morning did she talk briefly about nursing Valentine, not about her loss but about showing love by administering to the sick.

I only ever saw her upright, active both mentally and physically, never flagging. Like Janet, Sylvia took delight in looking after people. It lent her the sense of continued sharing, a continuance of a life of dedication to another that was so deeply veined in her. Even when she was sitting down enjoying a whisky there would be a cat demanding her attention. Her enthusiasms for things great and small energised her; her interest in the young, her wide range of experiences and refusal to regret the past made her appear ageless. Just as she was never fusty about history in her writing she lived for here and now. She was of no age and of all ages. Like Janet she looked young, sounded youthful, her ideas always fresh and vibrant were often rebellious. And she remained lifelong a student thinking for herself, untrammelled by convention.

In the 1980s Janet suggested that I should write a BBC radio feature about Sylvia because, as she informed me, Sylvia had been kept off both radio and television for two reasons: her membership of the Communist Party and her lesbianism. I was astounded to be warned off the twin topics that had lent such significant form to her life: her politics and her relationship with Valentine. Janet was therefore thrilled with my partial success in finally pushing her in front of the microphone when 'The True Heart' was broadcast in March 1986. It is scarcely believable now that either topic would seriously ruffle editorial feathers. Can it have been because the BBC was still smarting from the Guy Burgess débacle? As for feminism, that was just about acceptable if I touched upon it with the lightest of feathers. In the real world, feminism was well out of the closet but lesbianism was considered a step too far for family listening. What would the world come to if the BBC was heard to condone such acts? So it had to be a very thin account and even my interviews with her friends Bea Howe and Sir Peter Pears were heavily edited. Curtailed or not, it was my chance to pay tribute to two unforgettable friends who have inspired my work ever since.