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Article:

Piette, A. orcid.org/0000-0001-6774-626X (2022) Book review: Sylvia Townsend Warner, *English Climate: Wartime stories* (London: Persephone Books, 2020; ISBN: 978-1-91026-327-3), with a preface by Lydia Fellgett. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 21 (2). pp. 146-145. ISSN 1475-1674

<https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2021.14>

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The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society

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How to cite: Piette, A. 'Book Review: Sylvia Townsend Warner, *English Climate: Wartime stories* (London: Persephone Books, 2020; ISBN: 978-1-91026-327-3), with a preface by Lydia Fellgett'. *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 2021(2), pp. 146–145 • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.stw.2021.14>.

Published: 21 June 2022

Peer Review:

This article has been through editorial review.

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Open Access:

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

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Book Review: Sylvia Townsend Warner, *English Climate: Wartime stories* (London: Persephone Books, 2020; ISBN: 978-1-91026-327-3), with a preface by Lydia Fellgett

Adam Piette

This little collection of 22 stories written between 1940 and 1946 is presented by Persephone Press as no. 137 of its series of elegant A5 volumes with their silver dust-covers. It joins the Press's list of wartime female authors, notably Mollie Panter-Downes, Marghanita Laski, Monica Dickens and Jocelyn Playfair. The Warner Society newsletter has already pointed out some shortcomings of the publication, notably the implication in the Preface that it collects all of Warner's wartime stories – when in fact she published 13 others not included here – and the lack of awareness of *Dorset Stories* (Newsletter 41, n.p.). Only two tales in this collection do not appear in *A Garland of Straw*, *The Museum of Cheats* or *Dorset Stories*, and these were published in *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* in 2004 and 2007. However, the edition does give one the chance to take stock of the wartime short stories and to explore their connections to British home front culture and to Warner's novel about a nunnery enduring the Black Death, *The Corner That Held Them* – written while Warner gave lectures to the BBC, to troops and to women's community groups, and served with the Women's Voluntary Service WVS – she inspected Rest Centres designed to welcome evacuees.

There are enough stories to gauge the wartime topics to which she felt drawn. Nearly half of the stories dwell on the mobile subject, whether soldiers returning to homes, evacuee experiences or varieties of refugee consciousness. The returnee tales include 'The Water and the

Wine', a 1940 satire tracking Miss Gauntlett as she 'implacably' inspects her former childhood home (p. 2); we judge her through the eyes of the present occupiers, a mother and daughter – she is a 'chitty old hag' to the young Pamela, a 'poor revisiting ghost' to the mother (p. 3). The returnee is just as implacably judged by them and by the story itself as blindly caught up in her past and her father's power over the house. The 1941 story 'Rainbow Villa' presents a harsher view of houses destroyed by billeted soldiers and evacuees, as the poor owner is consoled by kindly women. The 1943 'English Climate' follows a gunner returning home as his village collects old books for salvage. He finds his volumes in the long line of print-salvage running through Dumbridge, an '*auto-da-fé* of disgraced books' (p. 135), and accuses his mother of burning them like the Nazis. 'The Way Back' tracks a POW return of the native to his army base in Dorset, but changed utterly by the war, possessed by a solitary anarchic restlessness signifying a new homelessness – the ex-prisoner of war identifies with the Monmouth rebels and their guerrilla tactics against the state. The displaced-person mentality is captured as he is portrayed suddenly feeling alive when he hears a rabbit-hunter shoot his gun, throwing himself to the ground, 'refuging his human-coloured face and hands behind a tussock of grass' (p. 203), thus registering the animal wildness and temporary refuging of the refugee, unable to base themselves in any home.

The returnee tales are accompanied by several refugee stories, including a story about a shirt gifted to a refugee ending up in Mexico ('My Shirt is in Mexico'). The sudden homelessness created by bomb threats is played out in 'From Above', which inhabits the mind of a woman finally released from the tyrannical control of her husband over her house and mind by a time bomb. That gender liberation offered by the evacuee experience is associated with political solidarities when compared to migrant swallows as they fly from Africa in the 1942 'The Mothers': a teacher tries to educate her rural school class about international politics until a boy tries to stone the nesting swallows, a veiled racism and misogyny tolerated by the children's mothers as they eye this strange intellectual teacher askance.

More traditional comic evacuee stories join this thematic cluster, with 'Noah's Ark' representing the censorship of London child-evacuees' experience of death by their host Mrs Purefoy, keen to erase the children's fantasies about London zoo and its predatory animals. Written in 1943, 'It's What We're Here For' stages a WVS story about local women's sympathy and tact as they seek to help a rather loose and 'dramatically

fragile' mother of evacuees trying to get her children back. The tales about wartime mobility of mind and body stretch, in other words, from acerbic and sharp-witted social comedy to more existentialist explorations of the displaced homelessness arising from the years of violence.

The other grand topic of the stories relates more closely to her wartime novel: it concerns the communitarian solidarity among older females during the war while the young are away in the services. *The Corner That Held Them* had been entitled *People Growing Old* and Warner began writing the novel in February 1942; the next month, she noted in her diary, 'Wrote a short story about scorching English earth. Why do I write about old people when I write about war? Because they have more independence, a freer play of reactions? – or because it seems, down here, so much an old persons' war?' (*Diaries*, p. 119: 12 March 1942). That attention to the older generation is familiar from *Dad's Army* satires, but as important were the efficient networks of Women's Institute forms of support, communal aid and gendered solidarity.

Six short stories in the Persephone collection work around this theme. The Home Guard training that women received during the war is lightly lampooned in 'England, Home and Beauty' as we watch the WVS women reveal their possessive attachment to their guns and the 'unchaperoned alligator' of the machine-gun: the story's point is that women's ingenuity and detailed dedication to their work also has its technico-passionate side, as with all soldiers and their weapons. 'Sweethearts and Wives' is the most affectionate of the stories about female solidarity; it features three women and four children who have formed a 'composite household' (p. 151) in Badger Cottage, observed through the eyes of one of the husbands, William. The story gently compares the little community to the 'joint households of early Soviet days' (p. 154) and it inspires William to reflect on women as 'braver, more adaptable, probably harder, certainly less self-indulgent' than men (p. 157). The bustle and canny strategies of survival, an intricate weave of projects by the women, compares favourably to the 'childless, melancholy world' of the naval ship that William has grown used to in the war (p. 156). The energy, agency, good humour, black-market savviness, survival rituals and vitality of the older women startles William as it is designed to charm the readership: and such a charm has designs on us, political, gendered and communitarian, with links to the nunnery in *The Corner That Held Them*.

Other patterns emerge as we read the collection: how the wartime stories often turn on salvage as a trope for damage, destruction and recycling; how they often feature encounters between soldiers and women

in their houses, as when two young men in uniform inspect a house designed by a female architect and, though admiring the house, disdain her attachment to modern art ('Mutton's Only House'). The division of the world between a mainly male army and female-dominated home front is being set up as the materialisation of the other war Warner wrote to tell Nancy Cunard of in 1944: 'the great civil war, Nancy, that will come ... fought out on this terrain of man and woman' that needs to be addressed 'before we talk of social justice' (*Letters*, p. 84; 28 April 1944). That encounter between the military and the female is neatly reversed, however, in another of the stories, 'Poor Mary', which brings together wife and husband estranged by the war's logistics, the wife in her Auxiliary Territorial Service uniform, the husband a commanding officer in his country cottage. The story points up the elemental differences between town and country, army and peace-makers, while still allowing Warner to probe the differences between the genders, the woman's 'slanting ironies', her 'chivalrous, quarrelsome disposition', her radicalism, contrasting favourably with the observer-male's assumptions about her (he wrongly believes her to be pregnant), his Robinson Crusoe isolationism, his patronising attitudes.

The stories trace out Warner's exploration of the radical social changes wrought by the war in the body politic. These are especially striking in the new sense of democracy, the increased equality and breakdown of formalities being generated by the female community in Badger Cottage in 1943, which would unfurl after the war into women's liberation and the welfare state. Also being tracked is the end of the servant class ('A Cold' is a story about a servant resigning), the launch of a new civil war between the sexes and the scoping out of the consequences of the extraordinary mobility and displacement of the war on the imagination of the populace.

What the stories most passionately and wryly observe are the resources, wit and range of communal experience of the home front women as their WVS-style organisations took over the rural economy and culture: an experience that was no mild comedy of genteel manners, but an exercise in a revolutionary form of loving and being together, whether under fire or no, staged with superbly unsentimental, sharp-witted, inventive *élan*. The short story form suited Warner's exploration of this terrain, offered in much the same generous spirit as the picaresque chapters of *The Corner That Held Them*. The brevity, precariousness and quick communal bonds – so poignantly accessed by the short story form, only to be rapidly snatched away – suited the quick and sudden changes

and mobile transformations of that precarious wartime she saw as inaugural of a new age.

Note on Contributor

Adam Piette is a Professor of Modern Literature at the University of Sheffield. He is the author of *Remembering and the Sound of Words: Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, Beckett* (1996) and *Imagination at War: British fiction and poetry, 1939–1945* (1995) and *The Literary Cold War, 1945 to Vietnam* (2009).