

Sylvia Townsend Warner

by Ingrid Hotz-Davies and Kate Macdonald

Sylvia Townsend Warner was born in 1893 into a family both privileged and intellectually stimulating. Her father, George Townsend Warner, was an exceptionally gifted teacher of history at Harrow School. Warner herself was first educated by her mother Eleanor Mary Townsend Warner, née Hudleston, who seems to have had little interest in her daughter once she began to grow up because, as Warner thought, she was not a son. Warner seems to have been very close to her father. Claire Harman's biography includes a haunting photograph of a teenage Sylvia skating with her father, a beautiful image of mutual grace and consideration, poised together in a spin, holding onto each other but also pursuing their own trajectories.

As Sylvia grew older, the task of educating her moved from her mother to her father. As a result, she had access to her father's considerable library as well as his expertise as a historian and as a teacher, and as a meticulous stylist in both writing and speech. This meant that she received an excellent education: 'By the age of seventeen or so, Sylvia's erudition was both phenomenal and perfectly natural. In the opinion of some, she was "the cleverest fellow we had", to others she was known – somewhat disparagingly – as the best boy at Harrow'. It also meant that Warner completely escaped *formal* educational disciplines, schools, curricula, and the influence of the state in determining what young people should learn and read.

Her first intellectual love, however, was directed more towards music than writing. In 1917 she was appointed to the editorial committee of the Tudor Church Music Project, on which she worked for twelve years. As late as 1975, at the end of a long writing career, she would describe herself as 'that odd thing, a musicologist'. She moved to London and, alongside the Tudor church music, began a life of writing in earnest. In 1925 she published her first collection of poems, *The Espalier*, and her first novel in 1926, *Lolly Willowes*, which became a Book of the Month in the US. She continued to publish poetry alongside novels and short stories. Later in life, she also translated from the French, and in 1967 she published a commissioned biography of the acclaimed and troubled English writer T H White. While her status as a literary figure may have been on the margins rather than at the centre, she maintained a distinguished career, and her long collaboration with *The New Yorker* ensured some financial stability. Her short stories in *The Cat's Cradle Book* were published first in the US during the war, and only in the UK in 1960.

In 1930, at the age of 37, Warner moved in with and became the lover of the poet Valentine Ackland, the woman who would become the love of her life. At this point, Warner's only long-term relationship had been with the musician Percy Carter Buck, with whom she had begun a secret affair when she was nineteen. He was married, twenty-two years older than her, with five children, and he had been her music-teacher since she was sixteen.

Sylvia and Valentine, like many anti-fascists of the period, joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1935. During the Spanish Civil War they joined a Red Cross unit and were active in the 1937 International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture. Warner's political commitment found its expression for a while in an active involvement in Communist activities and in general anti-fascist work. Her relationship with Valentine was troubled by Valentine's tumultuous affair with the American scholar Elizabeth Wade White, as well as Valentine's addiction to alcohol (this is recounted in Peter Haring Judd's *The*

Akeing Heart, also published by Handheld Press). But their relationship was Warner's life's project: exploring how freedom could be reconciled with love. While she felt that many of their letters could not be published as long as people mentioned in them were still alive, after Valentine's death in 1969 Warner spent much time sorting and arranging their lives' correspondence, constructing an autobiographical framework for their story and preserving the history of their love. She died in 1978, a year after the publication of a collection of her Elfin stories, *Kingdoms of Elfin*.

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