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The Bequest of Books: A Hidden Biography

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The Bequest of Books: A Hidden Biography

Frances Bingham

Abstract

This article presents and introduces a sequence of six poems that Sylvia Townsend Warner dedicated to Valentine Ackland. Five are previously unpublished, as is the sequence as a whole. Five of the six are love poems to Valentine Ackland arising from their trips to Spain during the Spanish Civil War; in them the romantic and sexual theme is interwoven with their experience of social revolution in Barcelona. The poems are particularly important because of their unusual combination of radical politics and queer desire.

Keywords Sylvia Townsend Warner; Valentine Ackland; Spanish Civil War; lesbian love poetry; queer politics; communism; the 1930s.

After Valentine Ackland's death on 9 November 1969, it was profoundly important to Sylvia Townsend Warner that they should be 'remembered together'.¹ Commissioning the memorial stone in Chaldon churchyard, which carries both their names, or preparing their letters for publication,² she had a task to occupy her grief. (The Warner/Ackland Archive itself is another product of her concern that the records of their life together should be preserved.)

Ackland left many bequests, both in her will and less formally; one of the most moving documents in the Archive is a tape-recording she made detailing the small gifts she wanted Warner to distribute after her death with messages to go with them. Whether it was sending her camera to the kindly assistant on the photography counter in Boots, or her car to friends who needed it, Ackland's bequests were carefully planned.

Warner carried them out with characteristic precision and imagination – even embellishment. (Not all her efforts were equally successful in the long term. Their collection of Spanish Civil War memorabilia, full of personal relics, was originally presented to St Anthony’s College, Oxford, with a memorial dedication in perpetuity, but it inexplicably migrated to the Bodleian, losing the dedication en route. When researching Ackland’s life, I managed to locate the box-files, with the help of Dr Julianne Lambert, but I never discovered why they’d moved because – as the don who had been Warner’s contact there cheerfully explained – he and the college librarian hadn’t been on speaking terms for many years so couldn’t discuss the matter, rather like a situation in one of Warner’s short stories.)

Ackland’s bequest of twentieth-century poetry books to the Arts Council Poetry Library (as it was then) is a well-documented example of Warner’s imaginative engagement with the task. The bequest was a significant contribution to the library, and remains an important core collection of the National Poetry Library (NPL) in London’s Southbank Centre (its later manifestation). Unfortunately, in the NPL’s online catalogue the bequest has been transmogrified into the Sylvia Townsend Warner Bequest (despite the fact that the donation took place some years before Warner’s demise), a mistake of grave-spinning proportions. Alive to such eventualities, Warner commissioned a bookplate from their friend Reynolds Stone, which records the joint nature of the bequest in every copy: *The Gift of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner*.

To the NPL’s credit, however, the correspondence between Warner and Eric White of the Arts Council, with the original list of books she sent him, has been preserved in the library archive. This book-list probably represents the selection which Warner ‘began to consider’ in 1972,³ as it’s not a complete catalogue of the eventual bequest. The list itself is typed, probably by Susanna Pinney, and corrected in Warner’s elegant hand.

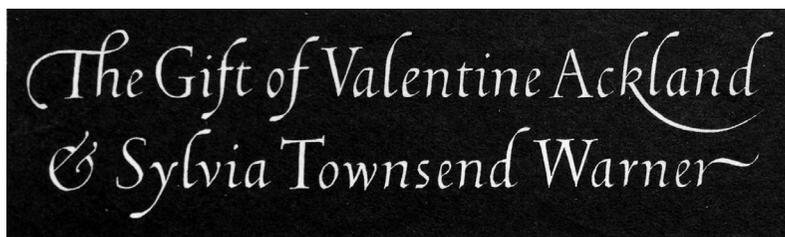


Figure 1 Bookplate in the Ackland Bequest copy of poems by Cavafy. Photograph © 2020 Liz Mathews.

The idea of ‘selection’ is an important clue to reading the Ackland Bequest; it is by no means all of the poetry books from Ackland’s study at Frome Vauchurch. (As the NPL holds only twentieth-century titles, some of Ackland’s favourite poets – John Clare, the Metaphysicals, those in *The Greek Anthology* – are excluded. Nor does the bequest include all the twentieth-century poetry books that Ackland possessed; I have her copy of C. Day Lewis’s *From Feathers to Iron*, and there are many others extant, which Warner presumably did not select.) So the list is, unfortunately, also incomplete as a record of Ackland’s personal collection. It can be read, however, as a hidden biography, or even a message to the future from Sylvia Townsend Warner.

These books describe a lifetime’s reading and record the developing interests and preferences of the poet Valentine Ackland. A period fondness for the Georgians is represented by the earliest books in the collection, reminding us that Ackland was a child of 1906. Here we find favourite lyrical poets such as James Elroy Flecker and Gerard Manley Hopkins (first published in 1918), who influenced Ackland’s adolescence so profoundly. Her early youth is also represented by the Great War poets who remained Ackland’s heroes and rivals – Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and Isaac Rosenberg and others.

From the 1920s we find Charlotte Mew’s works published by The Poetry Bookshop, and *The Earth for Sale* by the bookshop’s proprietor



Figure 2 Books from the Ackland Bequest on display in the NPL during Liz Mathews’ artist’s residency at the Southbank Centre in 2008. Photograph © 2020 Liz Mathews.

W.S. Graham	The Seven Journeys	E. Dickinson
G.M. Hopkins	Poems 1918	"
Ezra Pound	Cantos	"
F. Prokosh	The Assassins	"
V. Ackland - S.T. Warner.	Whether a Dove or Seagull.	Whittier
	V.S.A.	Poe
		Melville
A. Mac Leish	Conquistador	J.G. Villa
" "	Before March	
" "	Frescoes for Mr Rockefeller's City	

Handwritten notes in ink:
 - Above 'The Seven Journeys': 'The Seven Journeys - a Details of Elizabeth's'
 - Above 'Whether a Dove or Seagull': '← STW's hands - The Nature of the Movement VA'
 - Above 'V.S.A.': 'V.S.A.'

Figure 3 Detail of the book-list, with Warner's ms. addition in ink. Photograph © 2020 Liz Mathews.

Harold Munro – both titles reminders of Ackland's life in London as an aspiring poet and bohemian in that decade. An interest in Modernism and experimental poetry develops as the poet enters adulthood; T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce all take their places, as do the Sitwells.

Continuing to read chronologically, the appearance of Sylvia Townsend Warner in Ackland's life is represented by their joint poetic work, which Warner wrote by hand onto the typed list as an extra title: *V. Ackland – S.T. Warner, Whether a Dove or Seagull*. 'S.T. Warner' is present on the list in only one other book, *Opus 7*, perhaps another memorial to their Chaldon days.

Next comes the Communism of the 1930s. At one time, the Ackland Bequest might have been perceived as a plot to infiltrate left-wing propaganda into the heart of the establishment. In 1952, when MI5 requested an update from the Dorset Constabulary on 'these two women who in the past have been of particular interest to us', the (entirely uneventful) report concluded: 'It is known, however, that both persons are great readers and that *they do possess some literature appertaining to Socialism*' (my italics).⁴ These grounds for suspicion repeat the implication that literature is potentially subversive, and reading – no less than writing – a suspect activity. (And might not books owned by such people advance suspect anti-establishment agendas from Communists, environmentalists, gays, women, foreigners – possibly all at once?)

'Literature appertaining to Socialism' is certainly well represented in the bequest. W. H. Auden and C. Day Lewis – the usual suspects – have five and six volumes respectively, while fellow travellers Louis MacNeice, Edgell Rickword and Stephen Spender also make their appearance. (Rickword was a friend, Spender not; his memoir *World within World* contains a misogynist satirical portrait of Warner and Ackland as a 'Communist lady novelist' and 'poetess' addressing each other as 'comrade, darling'.⁵) Nancy Cunard's *Poems* and anthologies

are also present, a reminder that this political ally was also a cherished friend.

All of these writers were involved in the Spanish Civil War to some degree, but an inquisitive MI5 agent might have been puzzled by the inclusion of three books by Roy Campbell, who supported the Fascists in Spain. His *Flowering Rifle* memorably describes Lorca's murder as merely the shooting of 'known perverts and sexual cranks. A normal re-action.'⁶ This is a terrifying illustration of the fact that Ackland's prescient 'consideration of my own fate, and others like me'⁷ under a Fascist state (first made in November 1933) meant considering the likelihood of a similar death.

Later, when in America, Ackland and Warner bought and were given poetry books, so American poets (a separate category on the typescript) are well represented; they include Emily Dickinson, Laura Riding, Marianne Moore, Robert Frost (unappreciative dedicatee of *Whether a Dove or Seagull*), Muriel Rukeyser, Archibald MacLeish, Jean Starr Untermeyer and others. Among them is one E. White, whose volume *Country Verses* sits demurely between Elinor Wylie and Karl Shapiro.⁸ (Obviously enough, the selection list isn't alphabetical.) Did Warner include her rival Elizabeth Wade White's book as a necessary element of Ackland's library, or life? Was this her sense of fair play or of mischief?

This biographical reading of the bequest could possibly be taken to extremes – interpreting Ruthven Todd's inclusion as a coded allusion to Ackland's alcoholism, or William Empson's as a reference to a disastrous visit to Chaldon. And the three volumes of T. H. White's poetry could be included to remind us of Sylvia Townsend Warner's biography of the writer. While avoiding such extremes, to read Ackland's books in this way allows a portrait to emerge – partial and unreliable as it inevitably is – which adds another dimension to the poet's life as we know it.

The bequest illuminates the way in which Ackland's maturity was accompanied by the poems of her peers: a previous generation of women writers, including Ruth Pitter, Frances Cornford, Edith Sitwell, Vita Sackville-West; near-contemporaries such as Kathleen Raine, and younger poets such as Muriel Rukeyser and Elizabeth Jennings. Themes other than 'Socialism' are apparent here: nature poetry and poetry of place, spiritual poetry and poetry connecting the personal with the political.

Love poetry is also important in this collection. The melancholy lyricism of Robert Graves and Walter de la Mare echoes in Ackland's

own work, and the presence of Cavafy (corralled with Rilke and others in a list sub-section headed 'Various') reminds us that Ackland, too, wrote as a sexual outsider. The bookshelf spy could also have spotted Vita Sackville-West's *King's Daughter* (1929), containing poems of which the author warned her husband 'people will think them Lesbian',⁹ or the beautiful edition of Emily Dickinson's *Love Poems and Others*, containing her most erotic poem, 'Wild Nights'.

Indeed, many of the books from the Ackland Bequest are beautiful volumes, rare first editions with engravings or hand-printed limited editions, though some are also water-damaged, foxed, bent, cigarette-stained, wine- or ink-spattered. Books themselves were talismanic objects to both Warner and Ackland, and they possessed many; Warner fantasised that their overflow library could possibly be shelved on the ceiling by some anti-Newtonian invention involving wire cupboard doors.¹⁰ Ackland believed that inanimate objects (such as the 'small antiques' she bought and sold) could absorb something of their owners' personalities, like relics, and that 'all poems are in the language of heaven'¹¹ – making books themselves doubly sacred to her.

Within some of these Ackland Bequest books, there are pencil notes and even draft poems. (There were also other unexpected bonuses for the library: letters from Walter de la Mare and Claude Colleer Abbott were found folded inside their writers' books.) Written on the endpaper

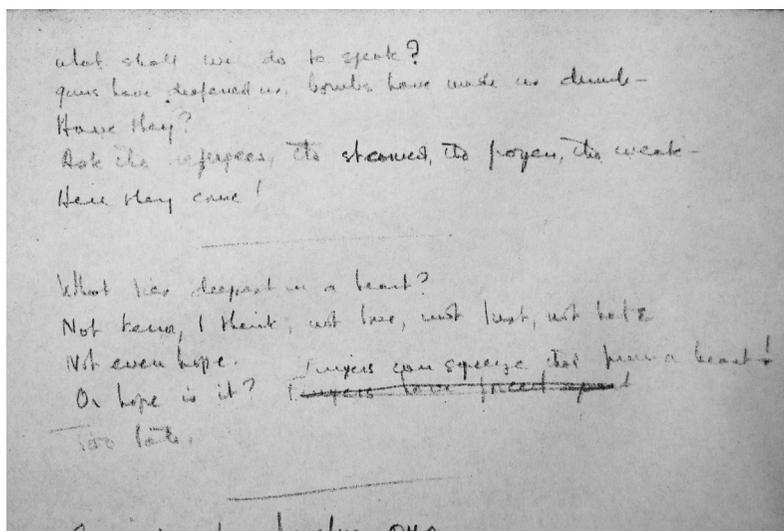


Figure 4 The endpaper of Muriel Rukeyser's *A Turning Wind*, with notes in Ackland's hand for a poem about refugees. Photograph © 2020 Liz Mathews.

of Muriel Rukeyser's *A Turning Wind* are notes for a poem by Ackland on the theme of refugees. This is an indication of the way in which reading a political, humanitarian poet (one who also wrote love poems to women) can inspire a political, humanitarian poem.

What shall we do to speak?
Guns have deafened us, bombs have made us dumb –
Have they?
Ask the refugees, the starved, the frozen, the weak –
Here they come!

Curiously these homeless ones,
Ourselves indeed they are who have no place.

And in another verse (in which the 'harried and driven' are identified as Jews), there's the memorable device that the guns themselves are 'unhappy that another voice should be / Heard here unbearably'.¹² These scribbled lines evoke Ackland's strong empathy with the dispossessed and her determination to speak for the silenced, throughout her writing life.

Ackland had believed, during her miserable childhood, that she 'had the poets to protect me' and that they remained her 'friends and protectors'.¹³ (A poetry library might represent to her the ultimate company of poets, ever-ready to defend one of their number.) These poets' books were perhaps so potent to her because their authors proved



Figure 5 *Dedication*, artist's book by Liz Mathews (detail). Photograph © 2020 Liz Mathews.

true the Latin quotation from Horace which Ackland had chosen for her gravestone: *Non omnis moriar* ('I shall not altogether die').

Sylvia Townsend Warner's book-list for the Ackland Bequest enjoys a further presence in the National Poetry Library, as the basis of *Dedication*, an artist's book by Liz Mathews which was recently acquired by the library. Titles from the bequest are lettered in charcoal on a waterfall of pages on handmade cotton rag paper, with text from the poem by Lilian Bowes Lyon (lettered in ink with a



Figure 6 *Dedication* on display in the NPL. Photograph © 2020 Liz Mathews.

wooden peg) which the artist describes as ‘an invocation to enlightenment’.¹⁴ It’s a work which transforms a practical book-list into a statement of creativity, and celebrates both Ackland’s gift of books and Warner’s creation of an afterlife in which she and her lover would be remembered together.

Note on contributor

Frances Bingham is a freelance writer, and editor of *Journey from Winter: Selected Poems of Valentine Ackland* (Carcenet, 2008), the biographical edition of Ackland’s poems. Her play *Comrade Ackland and I* was broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2019. She contributed to *Critical Essays on Sylvia Townsend Warner* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2006) and to the BBC Radio 4 series ‘From the Ban to the Booker’. Other publications include a novel, *The Principle of Camouflage* (Two Ravens Press, 2011), and a play, *The Blue Hour of Natalie Barney*, which was staged at the Arcola Theatre in London in 2017. Her biography of Valentine Ackland is forthcoming from Handheld Press in 2021.

Notes

- 1 Sylvia Townsend Warner, Diary, 25 February 1970. STW/VA Archive, quoted in *Journey from Winter: Selected Poems of Valentine Ackland*, ed. Frances Bingham (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008), p. 199.
- 2 See the narratives by Warner in *I’ll Stand By You: The Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland*, ed. Susanna Pinney (London: Pimlico, 1998).
- 3 *The Diaries of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 361; entry for 19 January 1972.
- 4 National Archives Catalogue Reference KV/2/2338.
- 5 Stephen Spender, *World within World* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), pp. 211–12.
- 6 Roy Campbell, *Flowering Rifle* (London: Longmans, 1939), footnotes to Part One.
- 7 Warner, *I’ll Stand By You*, Narrative 6, p. 122; letter to Llewelyn Powys, November 1933.
- 8 *Country Verses* in the typescript; White’s full title is *Country Verses from a type-case*.
- 9 Cited in Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), p. 219.
- 10 Janet Machen in conversation with the author, perhaps visualising some contraption like an old-fashioned meat-safe, as there was a connection with her story that on Catholic fast days (when Ackland could only eat fish) Warner liked to make a particularly delicious hare soup.
- 11 Valentine Ackland, Diary, ‘Vigil of the Assumption, 1957’. STW/VA Archive.
- 12 Handwritten by Valentine Ackland on back endpaper of Muriel Rukeyser, *A Turning Wind* (New York: Viking, 1939). Ackland Bequest, National Poetry Library.
- 13 Valentine Ackland, Diary, 30–31 October 1957. STW/VA Archive.
- 14 Liz Mathews, ‘Working with Words’, Southbank Centre gallery talk, 19 May 2008.

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