

Some Notes on George Moir and Flora Warner

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Sylvia Townsend Warner's paternal grandmother, Flora Warner, nee Flora Jane Moir, was a woman of high intelligence and forceful character, who played an important part in the shaping of the writer's sense of self and origin. 'I loved her next to my father, and she loved me next to him', Sylvia told William Maxwell in 1973, 'and her father loved her beyond all others. [...] there is a bull's-eye gravity about the way these people love.'¹ Sylvia was identifying a heritage of powerful affections running down from parent to child across four generations, and suggesting other emotional and intellectual affinities too. What follows are a few more biographical details about the older members of this imagined family-within-a-family, Sylvia's grandmother Flora Warner and great-grandfather George Moir.

George Moir, a short, spare man, 'the ugliest of my forebears [...] and the most engaging',² was born in Aberdeen in 1800, second son of a vintner. He moved to Edinburgh in his teens and worked in a lawyer's office, then trained as an advocate and was called to the bar in 1825. Moir practised law all his working life (and ended his career as Sheriff of Stirling and Professor of Scots Law at Edinburgh University) but literature was his true passion and vocation. When he arrived in Edinburgh he already read Spanish, Italian and French, and acquired German soon after: he was publishing articles and translations in the *New Monthly Magazine* as early as 1822, and later became a regular contributor to the *Edinburgh Review*, the *New Foreign Quarterly* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, where his series of 'Fragments from the History of John Bull' chimed perfectly with the magazine's High Tory satirical stance. Here he is, in the year of the momentous Reform Bill, making a comic dig at 'Madam Reform's more unruly and disreputable followers', harrying John Bull from his House:

When Gray was kicked out, and with him their own hopes of getting in came to an end, they tried every engine they could to annoy or terrify John; they ran to his saving bank and drew out their money, (which, to be sure, was not much) thinking they would leave him no cash in hand to pay his watchmen or his servants; they held meetings, at which they swore they would pay no rents; every servant who had steadily opposed the old woman's entrance they pommelled, pelted and plastered with mud; as for John himself, whom they had so lauded before, he was now a base, tyrannical, hen-pecked old grampus.³

Moir was first known in Edinburgh's intellectual circles as a translator from Spanish and German, and a skilled versifier. Sylvia Townsend Warner told George Plank⁴ that his translation of *Wallenstein* had been at the printers when Moir heard that Coleridge was preparing one too, so withdrew; but this can't be true, as Coleridge's *Wallenstein* was published in 1800, only a year after Schiller's trilogy of plays was first printed in Germany – and George Moir was hardly in a position to act as rival then, having only just been born. Moir was twenty-seven when his translation of the two main parts of *Wallenstein* appeared, 'the first full translations into English from the German of Schiller' according to the DNB, although this isn't entirely accurate either, as Moir's version did not include the prologue, 'Wallensteins Lager', which he had to admit had defeated him ('unfortunately [it] defies translation', he wrote in his 1827 preface – Coleridge had not translated the prologue either). The failure rankled, and Moir returned to the recalcitrant text over the next couple of years, publishing 'considerable extracts' from it in the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in 1829. The first publication in book form, however, came the next year with Lord Francis Leveson-Gower's translation, widely accepted as the first, and perhaps it is this instance of being apparently pipped to a post that lies behind Sylvia's story of her great-grandfather making a gentlemanly withdrawal of his scholarship. Indeed, Moir seems to show more punctilio than deference in the care he took to note – when his complete translation was finally printed in 1834 – that most of his 'Wallensteins Lager' had been published 'some months prior to the appearance of Lord Leveson Gower's'.⁵

Moir had met and become friends with Thomas Carlyle by 1828; 'he even stayed with them at Auldmuckle or whatever that farm was called, and did a drawing of it which was afterwards sent to Goethe', Sylvia told George Plank in 1960.⁶ The farm in question was Craigenputtock, and Moir's neat watercolour of it appeared in engraved

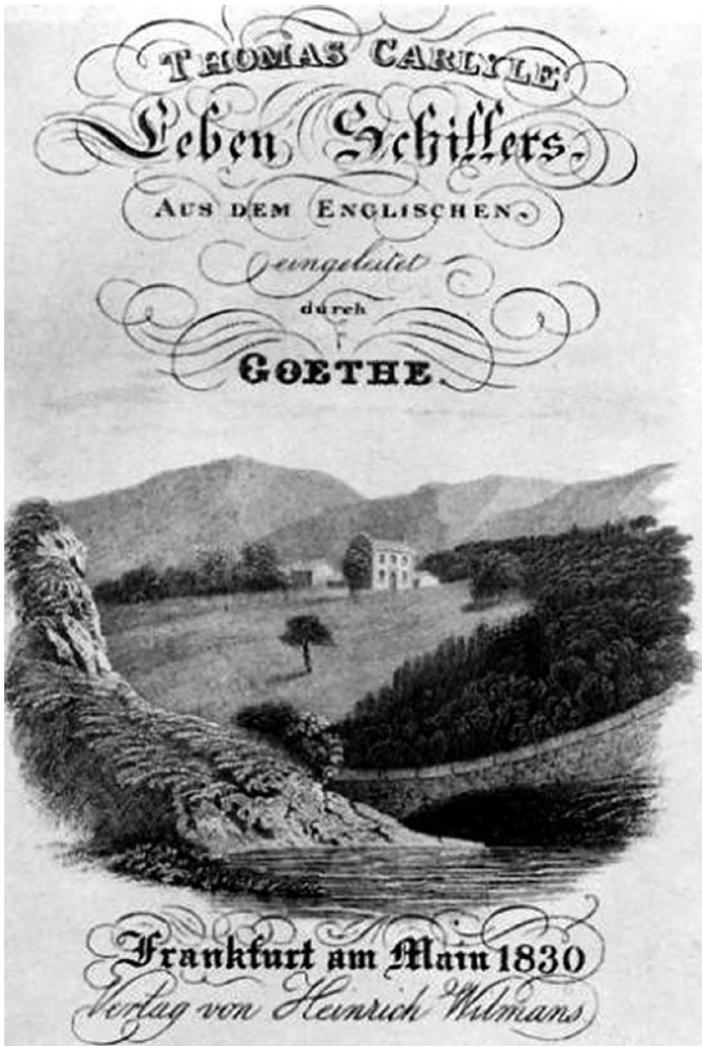


Figure 1.1 Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*, frontispiece to the German translation based on the watercolour by George Moir.

and elaborated form as frontispiece to the 1830 edition of Carlyle's *Life of Schiller*.

In that year, Moir had married Flora Tower, daughter of George Tower of Aberdeen, and moved to a comfortable terraced house in Edinburgh's New Town at 63 Northumberland Street. Their first child, Euphemia Georgiana, was born the following year and their second, George Alexander, in 1832. Domestic life seems to have chilled the



Figure 1.2 Craigenputtock, a property in the family of Jane Carlyle; 1829 watercolour by George Moir

growing intimacy between Moir and Carlyle, as the latter noted in a letter of February 1833:

George Moir has got a house in Northumberland Street, a wife, too, and infants; is become a conservative, settled everywhere into *dilettante*, not very happy, I think; dry, civil, and seems to feel *unheimlich* in my company.⁷

Moir's third child, Flora Jane, was born in 1837 or thereabouts (accounts differ: she appears on the 1841 census as a four-year-old, on the 1851 census as a thirteen-year-old and on her death certificate in 1913 as seventy-two), but this was a terrible time for the family, with the deaths in quick succession of six-year-old George and seven-year-old Euphemia, presumably from infectious disease of some kind. Their grave in the churchyard of St John and St Cuthbert in Edinburgh, where both parents were also later buried, names them as 'Beloved Children of George Moir, Esq., Advocate'. Flora was now the eldest of the family, and at least three more children were born to the Moirs over the next seven years: another two daughters – Mary (who never married and lived until 1918) and Anne (later married to Ponsonby William Moore, 9th Earl of Drogheda) – and a son called Robert William.

At some time in the 1840s, the family moved to one of the best addresses in Edinburgh, 41 Charlotte Square, the heart of an enclave of high-ranking advocates, judges, sheriffs, politicians and aristocrats.

Moir had been appointed Professor of Rhetoric at the University in 1835 and contributed major articles for the 1842 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on poetry and the modern novel, which were later published as a book. The house on Charlotte Square was often full of writers and dons (one of Moir's early mentors, and a lifelong friend, was the philosopher Sir William Stirling Hamilton) and it was after an evening party attended by Matthew Arnold that the poet remarked to the teenaged Flora Moir, 'I see that good taste means a great deal to you, and morality very little'.⁸ This was a compliment which must have pleased George Moir as much as it did his clever daughter. Flora's wide reading, quick wit and powers of argument were all of his fashioning: no wonder he 'loved her beyond all others'. Sylvia Townsend Warner inherited some books from her great-grandfather via her grandmother, and through them a link to his life and mind: 'My grandmother loved him so devotedly and so appreciatingly that it often seems to me that I knew him myself', she wrote in 1960, 'and when I read *Tom Jones* or *Clarissa Harlowe* or *The Beaux' Stratagem* or *The Way of the World*, I like to think I am reading and handling the pages he did. He kept these shocking works in his study, where his pious sad wife couldn't get at them'.⁹

Flora went away to school in England in the 1850s, but was back at home in 1861, acting as housekeeper after her mother's death in 1858. Where she met Reverend George Townsend Warner, recent graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, and a master at Highstead School near Torquay, is not recorded (perhaps the school she attended had been in or near Torquay?): they were married in 1864 and moved to Devon, where the following year their first child, George, was born. Flora and George had three more children, Flora ('Sissy'), Robert and Euphemia ('Effie'), and led a happy and busy family life at Highstead School and later at Newton College in Newton Abbot, George working hard and successfully as a teacher and headmaster, Flora an exceptionally efficient, spirited and affectionate mater familias.

Flora returned home to Scotland regularly (the Warners always spent their summers in the Borders) and inspired a love of her native country in her son George and, through him, his daughter Sylvia, who called the landscape of the Ettrick valley 'the authentic country of my mind'.¹⁰ Flora's quintessentially Scots sensibility also influenced the writer profoundly: 'It all stemmed from her, all the high-minded good sense and latent wild emotion, of the family', Sylvia said later in tribute, 'all the force and direction and sense of romance mixed with realism and contempt of balderdash – the impetuosity with which she would

stamp on nonsense or pettiness, and the melancholy that underlies love'.¹¹

After Reverend George Townsend Warner retired from teaching in 1895 and moved from Newton Abbot to a quiet country living at Alfold on the Surrey–Sussex border, Flora saw a great deal more of her eldest son (who was by this date teaching history at Harrow School), his wife Nora and their two-year-old child, Sylvia, Flora's first grandchild. Sylvia loved her visits to Alfold; the rectory's comfortable air, the bank of white violets in the paddock and the company of her unconventional grandmother, who one day, and quite out of the blue, threw Sylvia to the floor in a bout of rough-and-tumble, with 'reckless, burning abandon'.¹² Flora composed herself perfectly before Sylvia's mother re-entered the room, but the unexpectedness of the display, and the shared secrecy of it, indicate Flora's reserves of high spirits and mischievousness.

Flora made a very untypical Home Counties Church of England wife; she was a rationalist and humanist before anything else, 'a theologically inclined unbeliever', as her granddaughter described her, with that 'contempt of balderdash' thrown in for good measure. These traits must have added interest to the many sermons Flora wrote on her husband's behalf, as Sylvia jokingly suggested: 'people used to say it was difficult to reconcile the Mr. Warner they met in society with the Mr. Warner they heard in the pulpit'.¹³

When Reverend George Townsend Warner died in 1902, Flora moved to a flat in central London, at 26 Cliveden Place, the stretch of road between Sloane Square and Eaton Square in Belgravia. Country retirement was obviously not for her: in her seventh decade she chose the stimulating bustle of the metropolis. George and his family were not far away in Harrow, and her younger son Robert, a barrister who worked for the Board of Education, lived in a mansion flat on Victoria Street. And though Sylvia hardly ever mentions them in either her letters or diaries, Flora did have at least two other grandchildren, Sissy's daughter Cecily Flora Monckton (born in 1896) and son Edward Philip Monckton, born in 1899. These first cousins were much nearer in age to Sylvia than the two on her mother's side, Hilary and Janet Machen (born in 1912 and 1917 respectively, and to whom she remained close all her life), which makes Sylvia's silence about them all the more curious. They must have seen each other fairly frequently, for in the 1911 census Cecily and Edward are both listed as living with their grandmother at 26 Cliveden Place, and both 'at school'. Edward died at the age of thirty-seven in 1936, having had one son, Charles; Cecily's

only child, Rachel How, who corresponded with Sylvia in the 1950s, lived on until 2012.

Another interesting fact from the 1911 census is that, contrary to what one might suppose, Flora Warner was not the owner of 26 Cliveden Place, nor even the tenant, but a lodger. The house – a large one, with twelve rooms – belonged to a Madame Emilie Drury, a fifty-two-year-old widow, who also lived on the premises.

And it was nearby, in Sloane Square, that Flora died on 22 September 1913, hit by a taxi. When the telegram arrived at the Warners' home in Harrow, Sylvia remembered hearing a strange howling sound, which turned out to be her mother reacting to the news. Her father was silent. 'These people' seldom showed their most powerful feelings.

The inquest took place four days later, and was reported in *The Times* on 27 September as follows. It makes a strange end to the life-story of this much-loved woman, stepping off the kerb one Monday morning into the path of a faulty cab. And only three years later, almost to the day, George Townsend Warner's death came as an even greater shock, leaving Sylvia stripped of the two people she had cared for most in the world.

'Motor Accident and Defective Steering Gear'

An inquest was held at Westminster yesterday on the body of Mrs Flora Townsend Warner, 72, widow of the Rev. G.T. Warner, late of Cliveden-place, Eaton-square, who was knocked down and fatally injured by a motor-car.

Mr. R.T. Warner, barrister, stated that his mother had good sight and fair hearing.

A chemist's porter said he saw Mrs Warner leave the kerb when a motor-car was coming from the direction of Eaton-square quite close to its near side. The driver shouted, and Mrs Warner seemed to make a movement backwards towards the pavement. The sharp application of the brakes caused the car to swerve and mount the kerb, the lady having been struck by the lamp.

A police-constable said that the driver made the following statement: – 'I saw the lady, but could not steer the car, the steering gear was wrong. The boss knew the steering gear was wrong this morning.' Upon examining the car, the witness found an iron rod hanging down at a joint.

Richard Halstead, of Dorking, departmental manager to Messrs. Vickers (Limited), the owners of the car, said the driver

was one of the finest they had, but the Coroner pointed out that he had been twice convicted for exceeding the speed limit.

Ralph Bradley, chief of the Public Carriage Department, Scotland Yard, said the steering gear of the car was defective.

After Henry Brewer, the driver, had given evidence, the Coroner admonished him for telling what he described as an inconsistent story, and told him to 'pull himself together'.

A doctor described Mrs Warner's injuries and said death was due to a rupture of the heart.

The jury returned a verdict of 'Accidental Death'.

Notes

- 1 *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 263; to William Maxwell, 10 January 1973.
- 2 *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 180; to George Plank, 5 January 1960.
- 3 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 32 (1832), p. 327.
- 4 *Letters*, ed. William Maxwell (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 180; to George Plank, 5 January 1960.
- 5 See Herbert Smith, "Two English Translations of Schiller's "Wallenstein"", *Modern Language Review* 9 (1914), pp. 243–5.
- 6 *Letters*, pp. 179–80; to George Plank, 5 January 1960.
- 7 James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795–1835* (2 vols., London: Longmans, 1881), ii. 332.
- 8 Warner to George Plank, 5 January 1960; see Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 10.
- 9 *Letters*, p. 180; to George Plank, 5 January 1960.
- 10 To Bea Howe, 3 June 1924; see *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 19.
- 11 *Journal*, 24 May 1950; see *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, pp. 25–6.
- 12 *Journal*, 20 January 1954; see *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 11.
- 13 Warner to George Plank, 24 May 1960; see *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography*, p. 10.

*Note on contributor

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