

The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Sylvia Townsend Warner
Papers, 1937-1977

Compiled by Laura K. O'Keefe
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SUMMARY

Title: Sylvia Townsend Warner Papers, 1937-1977

Size: .3 linear foot (one archival box).

Source: Purchased from Bart Auerbach, Ltd., New York, 1993.

Biographical Note: Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978), the British writer, was the author of seven novels, thirteen short story collections, five volumes of poetry, a biography of T. H. White, and other writings.

Description: Outgoing letters from Warner to the American composer Paul Nordoff (1909-1977).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sylvia Nora Townsend Warner was born on December 6, 1893, in Devonshire, England, the only child of George Townsend Warner, a schoolmaster, and Nora Huddleston Warren. Educated at home, she moved to London in 1917 to pursue a career in musicology, serving as one of the editors of the ten-volume study Tudor Church Music.

At the same time, she maintained an interest in writing poetry and fiction; her first novel, Lolly Willowes, was published in 1926. It was followed by Mr. Fortune's Maggot in 1927.

It was also in 1927 that Warner met Valentine Ackland (1906-1969), an aspiring writer. In 1930, they became life partners, eventually settling permanently in the village of Frome Vauchurch, Dorset, in 1937. Throughout the 1930s, they continued to work on their writing: Warner's short stories began to appear in The New Yorker (which would eventually publish more than 140 of them), while Ackland contributed to such periodicals as The Daily Worker and New Masses, both women having joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1935.

After attending the American Writers' Conference in New York in 1939, Warner and Ackland returned home in October, following Britain's declaration of war on Germany. Warner joined the Women's Volunteer Service, establishing rest centers for evacuees from the cities. Her published writing between 1939 and 1945 included an anthology of short stories, The Cat's Cradle Book (1940) and A Garland of Stars (1943).

The years immediately following the war were difficult ones for Warner, marked by her mother's increasing senility and eventual death in 1949, and by Valentine's ongoing affair with an American woman. Ackland eventually returned to Warner in 1949, and the next fifteen years were relatively tranquil for them both. During that time, Warner produced more than half a dozen books, including a translation of Proust and a biography of the novelist T. H. White.

In 1967, Ackland learned that she had breast cancer; after a long struggle with the disease, she died in 1969. Warner, then in her mid-70s, continued to mourn her for the remainder of her life, though she found some solace in her garden and her much-loved cats. In her last years, she also enjoyed a resurgence of interest in her work, especially among feminist scholars.

Increasingly troubled by arthritis and deafness, Warner became bedridden early in 1978. She died on May 1 of that year.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

During her 1939 visit to the United States, Warner met the American composer Paul Nordoff (1909-1977), who had written an opera based on Mr. Fortune's Maggot two years earlier. Though the two were to see each other fewer than a dozen times throughout their lives, a deep friendship developed between them, carried out largely through their correspondence over the next four decades.

The 237 letters in this collection are from Warner to Nordoff.* Their content ranges from humorous and original descriptions of commonplace events and activities to more painful accounts of the occasional strains in Warner's relationship with Valentine, and her warm, commiserative responses to the conflicting feelings evidently expressed by Nordoff in his letters concerning his bisexuality and his marriage. There are also occasional discussions of their artistic work, and scattered references to prominent acquaintances such as Ralph Vaughan Williams.

About forty-five of these letters, or excerpts from them, appeared in a published anthology of Warner's correspondence, edited by William Maxwell (see below). Interfiled with a number of the letters are annotated photocopies of them, possibly used in compiling the anthology.

Works consulted:

Ackland, Valentine. For Sylvia: An Honest Account. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985.

Harman, Claire. Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989.

Maxwell, William, ed. Letters: Sylvia Townsend Warner. London: Chatto & Windus, 1982.

New York Times. Obituary, May 10, 1978.

*At this writing, we do not know the location of Nordoff's letters to Warner, if they have survived.

CONTENTS LIST

The letters are contained within one box and are arranged chronologically. A folder list follows.

FOLDER

1	1937	(five letters)
2	1939	(seven letters)
3	1940	(eleven letters)
4	1941	(six letters)
5	1942	(two letters)
6	1944	(one letter)
7	1945-1947	(seven letters)
8	1948	(six letters)
9	1949-1950	(fourteen letters)
10	1951-1952	(thirteen letters)
11	1953-1954	(twenty-two letters)
12	1955-1956	(twelve letters)
13	1957-1958	(sixteen letters)
14	1959-1960	(fourteen letters)
15	1961-1966	(fifteen letters)
16	1969-1970	(fifteen letters)
17	1971	(ten letters)
18	1972	(twenty-five letters)
19	1973	(ten letters)
20	1974	(nine letters)
21	1975	(seven letters)
22	1976-1977	(five letters)
23	undated	(eight letters)