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Vivien Whelpton: *Richard Aldington. Novelist, Biographer and Exile, 1930-1962* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press 2019); pp. 395; paperback £20.98

I first became aware of Richard Aldington when I heard a reading of his poem 'Trench Idyll'. I was moved by this poem and so sought out his other war poems. Reading them I realised that unlike say, Sassoon, Owen, Brooke, Rosenberg I didn't really know anything about Richard Aldington.

Vivien Whelpton's first volume *Richard Aldington: Poet, Soldier and Lover, 1911-1929* was a revelation. The book deals with Aldington's life and career up until the publication of his bestselling war novel *Death of a Hero*. In the preface Aldington is described as 'poet, critic and translator'. The pre-war London literary scene is described in detail, notably the Imagist Movement. Literary greats people the pages Ezra Pound, TS Eliot, D H Lawrence to name just three and Aldington's complicated personal life is examined as is his complex personality.

This second volume covers the years from 1930 when Aldington was thirty-eight until his death aged 70. It is worth noting that it is set in a larger, clearer font. As with the first volume it is a dense work which has been thoroughly and meticulously researched.

Part One "The Wanderer 1930-1936" opens with Aldington in North Africa with Brigit Patmore. His marriage to H.D. the poet Hilda Doolittle (to him Dooley) had failed. He had had various relationships including a passionate affair with Dorothy "Arabella" Yorke. Patmore was eleven years his senior and was married with two sons. They spent time in Paris but travelled extensively. Aldington had a low opinion of the state of things in England saying after a visit 'The Labour people I saw were good-hearted boobies. The Tories are simply fat-heads and crooks'. He worked continuously publishing amongst many varied works the poem *A Dream in the Luxembourg* and the novels *The Colonel's Daughter*, *All Men Are Enemies* and *Very Heaven*. Vivien Whelpton skilfully weaves together the travels, the life style, and the many personalities encountered with an insightful commentary. There is mention of further affairs including one with the writer Irene Rathbone who wrote a poignant poem about their first meeting *Was There a Summer?* Rathbone did not marry and Vivien Whelpton notes that her love for Aldington never diminished. This section of the book concludes with two dramatic events. In October 1936 Aldington had a major dispute with his publisher Chatto and, notwithstanding the fact that *Very Heaven* was nearing publication, terminated his contract and transferred to Heinemann. More dramatic and quite startling was the breakdown of the ten year relationship with Patmore. In their time together Aldington and Patmore had covered three continents and ten countries but never had a permanent home. Aldington had begun an affair with Netta Patmore. She was the wife of Brigit's son Michael. Netta and Michael had only been married for a matter of months.

Part Two “The Exile 1937-1950” begins with divorces. Aldington’s divorce from H.D. was finalised on 22nd June 1938. He married Netta three days later and their only child Catherine (Catha) was born on 6th July two days before his 46th birthday. Aldington had longed for a child and was desperate that it should be legitimate. Catha was born in England but the family soon moved to France and then to America. Aldington was demoralised and pessimistic at the thought of another war. They settled in New England thanks to the help of kind and generous friends. However, friends and contacts were unable to find Aldington the academic employment he had hoped for and more travelling ensued. This included a 2,000 mile journey which ended in New Mexico where they had arranged with Frieda Lawrence to rent the Lawrence’s ranch-house at Taos. This was not a success partly because the altitude did not suit them. They returned first to Florida and then to Hollywood renting an apartment at 8349 Sunset Boulevard. Studio work was not forthcoming. Aldington suffered another period of ill health and was severely worried about his finances. He had, however, achieved success with his biography of the Duke of Wellington. In March it was decided that they should go to Jamaica where Netta’s mother was living. They arrived in May 1946 after a truly arduous journey. Aldington wrote at this time ‘I shall be very glad to get out of this country after 7 years of it & hope to goodness I never see it again’. At the end of Part Two Vivien Whelpton says ‘Creatively the years in America were disappointing. Just as he had earlier come to accept the end of his career as a poet, Aldington had discovered that he could no longer write novels’.

Part Three “The Recluse 1951-1962” begins before 1951. In 1946 the family had moved to Paris as Jamaica had proved unsatisfactory. Aldington found post war Paris a disappointment writing in his diary ‘still a city of the dead’. However things began well with the first print-run of the Wellington biography selling out and his Wilde anthology requiring a reprint. Many old friends came to visit and new acquaintances were made. About this time correspondence with H.D. was renewed and this continued until her death. H.D.’s partner and closest friend for over 40 years was the British writer (and wealthy heiress) Annie Winifred Ellerman known as Bryher. At the end of July 1947 the Aldingtons moved from Paris to the Riviera. By this time the young Australian poet Alister Kershaw had appeared on the scene. He was to remain an important person in Aldington’s life and it was he who proposed that Aldington write a biography of T.E. Lawrence. Before this in 1950 Aldington had published *D.H. Lawrence: Portrait of a Genius, But...* Vivien Whelpton comments that Alexander Frere, Aldington’s publisher and friend, ‘had understood perfectly that Aldington was the right person to write the definitive study: a close friend and unswerving admirer but with a clear-eyed awareness of the complexities and drawbacks of Lawrence’s remarkable personality...’ Aldington was full of anxiety that the book would not be well received but on the whole reviews were favourable. Unfortunately this was not the case with the T. E. Lawrence biography. It was first published in Paris in 1954 as *L’imposteur: T. E. Lawrence, the Legend and the Man* and then in England as *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Inquiry* (1950). Vivien Whelpton notes that when Billy Collins, his publisher, first saw the manuscript ‘He was horrified: the illegitimacy issue, the extent to which it was claimed that Lawrence had fabricated exploits and the attack on all his previous biographers were a publisher’s nightmare’. Cuts and emendations to the text were demanded, the Daily Mail pulled out of an agreement to

serialise it, The Daily Telegraph turned it down. As the Londoner's Diary of the Evening Standard announced 'The reputation and integrity of Lawrence of Arabia are about to come under the most devastating attack ever launched upon them'. The attack on a national hero was not appreciated and the reviews were mostly hostile. Aldington had become a pariah, publishers were reluctant to be associated with him. His reputation never fully recovered. It should be noted, however, that in later years when confidential government files were released a good deal of what Aldington had written was found to be correct.

By this time Netta Aldington had left her husband and daughter and gone to live in London. Aldington had serious money problems and he and Catha moved to a pension in Montpellier. Kershaw later wrote 'This was Richard's first experience of real poverty, but his stoicism was admirable'. Another friend, Geoffrey Dutton, mentions the 'poky pension'. Although often ill Aldington continued to work and published a biography of Robert Louis Stevenson. By 1957 the financial situation had worsened. Aldington even wrote to ask H.D. if she could lend him some money saying 'You will think me very imprudent to have gotten myself and Catha into a state of virtual destitution'. H.D. sent him some money and so did Bryher who continued to help them financially. H.D. is described as his chief correspondent. He was writing to her at least once a week. Later Vivien Whelpton says 'These were years that found H.D. at the top of her creative powers, while Aldington had little inspiration left'. How ironic. In July 1957 Aldington left the warmth of the Midi to live in the north at Sury-en-Vaux near Sancerre. This was necessitated purely for financial reasons. He would be living alone. It was hoped that Catha could find work in Paris which was only a hundred miles away. Aldington wrote to Bryher that he was not in the least lonely in Sury. He describes his daily routine in a letter to H.D. Vivien Whelpton comments that what is missing from this schedule, for almost the first time in his life, is work. She adds that his health was a source of anxiety to himself and others. A doctor's examination found him to be run down from overwork and worry. His young friend Eric Warman procured for him some writing commissions and even more importantly had his tax situation looked at. This eventually resulted in a substantial rebate. Meanwhile Bryher had decided to fund Catha's continuing education. She later gave Aldington himself an annuity. Surprisingly Catha travelled to Switzerland to meet H.D. and Bryher. The visit was a great success on both sides. Bryher and Catha took to each other at once; their friendship – and her support for Catha – would last until Bryher's death in 1983. H.D. said the visit had made her very happy. Bryher then turned her attention to Aldington, H.D. having expressed her concerns about his health. Bryher suggested he come to Switzerland for a medical diagnosis. H.D. was apprehensive about meeting her former husband after a gap of twenty-one years. Aldington was nervous too. Whelpton notes the trip proved a pleasure to them all and the medical results were reassuring. Aldington wrote of H.D. to Lawrence Durrell 'She is 73, crawling about still on crutches...but still a noble-looking woman and bright as sunlight'. When she died in September 1961 he felt the loss sorely.

Aldington's ill health continued and he had more or less ceased writing. In 1962 he received an invitation from the Soviet Union of Writers to visit Moscow for his 70th birthday. He was an acclaimed writer in the USSR. *Death of a Hero* had been translated in 1932 followed by other works. On 22nd June he and Catha embarked on a three week visit

to Moscow and Leningrad. The schedule was packed and exhausting. Aldington was fêted throughout. Vivien Whelpton notes it had been 'a hospitable and gratifying tour'. In his valedictory speech Aldington said 'Here in the Soviet Union, for the first time in my life I have met with extraordinary warmth and attention. This is the happiest day of my life'. He later told Bryher that he had learned that the three most popular English novelists in the Soviet Union were Dickens, H.G. Wells and himself [in that order]. Although described by Kershaw as 'looking younger and happier than I had ever seen him' when they returned, the trip had taken its toll and Aldington died of a heart attack just a few days later on 27th July.

Thus ends an in depth examination of the life and work of Richard Aldington written with great skill and insight. At the front of the book there is a List of Illustrations. The quality of the photographs is only fair but it is wonderful to be able to see the likenesses of so many of those mentioned. [Famous names litter the text like confetti]. Following the main body of the book there are no less than 59 pages of notes and an exhaustive bibliography. The research is painstaking and thorough. For instance there is even a quotation from a letter the eleven year old Catha sent to her absent mother. The letter is in the Morris Library archives at the University of Southern Illinois. It is generally considered that Aldington's dysfunctional childhood and his experiences on active service in the First World War contributed to his somewhat curmudgeonly nature but it should be noted that he could also be kind and generous and was usually very loyal to his friends. It was rewarding to learn so much about this fascinating and complex character. He really does deserve to be better appreciated and perhaps by now forgiven for the T.E. Lawrence biography.

Margo Thompson