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He could have done anything

The failed poetic and critical career of Richard Aldington

By Anna Girling

When, in 1958, Ezra Pound was released from St Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC after his thirteen years' "incarceration" for treason, two of the friends with whom he was quick to re-establish regular contact were H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) and Richard Aldington. Together, almost fifty years earlier, the three of them had emerged as the first Imagist poets, whose sparse *vers libre*, heavily influenced by Sappho and other Greek poets, would do so much to shape twentieth-century literature. Pound had come to London from Philadelphia in 1908, and was followed in 1911 by H.D., his one-time fiancée; he had since fallen in love with Dorothy Shakespear, and H.D. with her friend Frances Gregg, but the two Americans nevertheless quickly resumed a close friendship, which soon also included the literary hostess Brigit Patmore and her then lover, the aspiring writer Richard Aldington.

Aldington was just nineteen when he first met Patmore, Pound and H.D., all then in their twenties, and the youthful passions, ambitions and jealousies of the group would continue to play out in various ways for the rest of their lives. Writing in 1959, Pound would declare his "lasting affection" for Aldington, explaining that "not since … the four of us has there been any harmony around me" and that he had been "thinking of early friendships" – a gesture which Aldington, who had distanced himself from Pound since the latter's championing of Fascism during the Second World War, found "infinitely touching". The following year, reading Charles Norman's biography of Pound, Aldington was particularly struck by the comment, "This man could have done anything", which seemed to "put the whole tragedy in six words". The same could also be said of Aldington himself.

By this point young Richard had just started his first year at University College London, from where, as Vivien Whelpton tells us at the start of her two-volume biography, he was "forced" to withdraw after just two terms because of his "father's failed financial speculations". Aldington would "always resent" his parents for this premature halt to his studies, which "confirmed him in his contempt for his father's ineptitude" – and, as Whelpton points out, he would return to this grievance with varying degrees of savagery in a number of his later works. By beginning her extensive telling of Aldington's story here, Whelpton not only emphasizes the perceived hardships and humiliations of his family life, but also the extent to which such tribulations shaped Aldington's self-image. She also makes clear how closely she aligns herself with his self-mythologizing.

While for Whelpton (as for Aldington), the twin "tragedies" of Aldington's life were his "need to earn a living" and the ways in which he was hampered by those closest to him, the real tragic flaw which emerges from these two volumes is his persistent paranoid belief that he was uniquely hard done by and that his former intimates were, if not plotting his downfall, at least blocking his routes to success. The ways in which he reacted, and overreacted, to this conviction led him to alienate almost everyone he knew, as well as a great many he didn't.

When in 1955 Robert Graves called him “a bitter, bed-ridden, leering, asthmatic, elderly hangman of letters”, there were many who would have agreed.

Within a few years of his forced departure from UCL, Aldington had married H.D. and become a well-known essayist, critic and poet at the heart of avant-garde literary London, and he would go on to be a popular and prolific writer during the interwar period. How he ended up despised, and largely forgotten, in the English-speaking world is the driving question of Whelpton’s biography – which is clearly intended to rehabilitate Aldington as much as to document his life. Whelpton seemingly subscribes to the view that to know all is to forgive all, and she thus provides a wealth of detail about almost every aspect of Aldington’s life from 1911 until his death in France in 1962. In this she builds on the efforts of the small but determined band of Aldington’s defenders who have, over the past seven decades, sought to rescue him from what they see as a “disgraceful neglect and ostracism”; like them, Whelpton suggests that previous studies of his life have left admirers searching in vain for “the ‘real’ Aldington”.

For Whelpton, as for those who have previously written about him and his circle, the root of this real Aldington lies in the decade after his arrival in London in 1910. The story of the romance between H.D. and Aldington, their shared Hellenic enthusiasms (she “Astraea”, he her “faun”), their early success as poets, published in little magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, and the pressures put on their relationship by both the First World War and a complex web of friends, lovers and fellow writers (often one and the same), is part of modernist mythology. When in August 1914 it was declared that Britain had entered the war, H.D. and Aldington were, with John Cournos, part of the crowd massed in front of Buckingham Palace to hear the announcement; H.D. would later remember that, while “the mob shouted, ‘We want war’”, they had “shouted back, ‘We don’t’”. Earlier that year the anthology *Des Imagistes* had been published, in which both Aldington and H.D. featured prominently. Indeed, Aldington was the most generously represented poet, with ten poems – a point of contention for some of the other contributors, who included James Joyce, William Carlos Williams and Ford Madox Hueffer (as he then was) – and the collection opened with Aldington’s “Choricos”:

The ancient songs
Pass deathward mournfully.
Cold lips that sing no more, and withered wreaths,
Regretful eyes, and drooping breasts and wings –
Symbols of ancient songs …

Harriet Monroe would write later of the importance that this Euripidean “invocation to death” assumed for soldiers at the front, describing letters she had received from men for whom the poem had “shuddered … along night roads”. When the war broke out, however, although Aldington quickly tried to enlist – and was rejected, owing to a previous hernia operation – his chief preoccupations, in addition to poetry, were his work for *The Egoist* and, soon, H.D.’s pregnancy.

H.D. discovered that she was pregnant just a month after the war began and when, eight months later, her daughter was stillborn, she associated this death with the carnage of the Western Front – "because something had died, something would die". The trauma of this loss would be revisited by H.D. in her fiction for the rest of her life; the most immediate effect on the couple, however, was the breakdown in their physical relationship. H.D. was warned of the risks of becoming pregnant again, and Aldington, it seems, took this as licence to seek sexual relations elsewhere – initially with Florence Fallas, the wife of a friend, who had also recently lost a child, and then later, and more seriously, with Dorothy Yorke. Whelpton does not tell us about H.D.'s reaction to Aldington's first infidelity, but we do hear at length about the "extent to which H.D.'s sexual reserve [since the stillbirth] had affected" Aldington, as well as "the strain of the war" and his own "fears" about military service. He did not successfully enlist until June 1916, however, and so Whelpton suggests that, despite the sexually explicit poetry he wrote about Fallas in March of that year, they did not consummate their relationship until late May – after the extension of conscription to married men.

Whelpton's biography chiefly differs from earlier studies in its extensive use of archival material, and in its harnessing of this material to mount an emphatic defence of Aldington. And, as Whelpton explains in her introduction, one of the chief ways in which she differs from Charles Doyle (the author of a respected biography published in 1989) is in her extensive discussion of their subject's experiences in the First World War. Where Doyle follows Barbara Guest, H.D.'s biographer, in suggesting that "it is only necessary to compare [Aldington's war novel] *Death of a Hero* with Graves's *Goodbye to All That* 'to realise that Aldington's experiences are not so desperate or tragic as he would have us believe'", Whelpton describes this as "a complete distortion of the facts". And, where Doyle allots only one chapter to Aldington's experiences at the front, Whelpton devotes a whole section (eight chapters, complete with military maps) to Aldington's time as a soldier. Melding military histories with contemporary accounts, and Aldington's own letters and poetry from the period with later accounts from *Death of a Hero* (1929), she shows Aldington's shifting attitudes to his fellow soldiers – from "contempt for [their] minds" to "the beginnings of respect and solidarity", as in, apparently, an epitaph for a fallen "comrade" in May 1917:

You too are dead
The coarse and ignorant,
Carping against all that was too high
For your poor spirit to grasp,
Cruel and evil-tongued –
Yet you died without a moan or a whimper.

For Whelpton, the psychological and physical effects on Aldington of his war years (which included the damage done by gas to his lungs), along with a "troubled" and "problematic lower-middle-class childhood" and the "humiliation" he felt about his family, serve not only to explain his behaviour, but also often to excuse it on the grounds of his "inner chaos".

Some readers will find such an approach wearing, and the effect of Whelpton's exculpatory meta-commentary is often to distance us from Aldington and the events described, rather than bringing us to a greater understanding or empathy. Aldington's current reputation largely derives, not from his writing, but from his personal history and the manner in which he treated various female partners, and on the public backlash against his biographies of Norman Douglas and T. E. Lawrence in the 1950s. Whelpton deals with this by minimizing and providing psychological explanations for the former, and insisting on the unfairness of the latter. Her suggestion that Aldington was "a feminist who loved and respected women", though, not only raises questions about her interpretive framework but also draws attention to the many instances when Aldington's treatment of women was not necessarily that of a feminist.

Aldington's affair with Yorke, conducted chiefly in H.D.'s bed, and H.D.'s own subsequent affair, which resulted in another pregnancy, are ascribed to Aldington's "almost clinical state of depression" and H.D.'s "spiralling into hysteria" (a contrast in diagnoses which raises its own questions). Ten years later, the end of his relationship with Yorke – in the course of which he had near-simultaneous affairs with at least four other women – is explained by his "low self-esteem", despite the fact that this was also the period in which he successfully established himself as a prolific translator and reviewer of French literature (for the *TLS*, among many other journals) and produced his long war poem *A Fool i' the Forest* (1925), seen by some as a response to *The Waste Land* (1922). Aldington's next long-term relationship was with Patmore, again, with whom he lived, travelled and worked apparently happily for eight years, writing some of his most substantial works, including *Death of a Hero*. It was also during this period that Aldington published his collection of "savage" satires, *Soft Answers* (1932), which included attacks on Nancy Cunard, T. S. Eliot and Pound, all friends of Aldington – although only Pound would remain so.

In 1936 Aldington left Patmore, this time for her daughter-in-law, with whom he had been having an affair for "over a year" – explained for Whelpton by his "desire for a child" (he and Netta Patmore married when she was eight months pregnant), and, again, by "low self-esteem". This second marriage lasted for twelve years, until Netta left *him*, but, other than a few brief asides, she is largely absent from Whelpton's books – perhaps out of deference to their daughter, Catha, who died in 2010. After spending the Second World War in America, the couple had moved to France in 1946, from where Aldington produced a fairly steady stream of anthologies, translations and biographies.

Increasingly "impecunious", and finding it hard to write creatively, Aldington was ever more reliant on such work for an income. He thus embarked on his biography of T. E. Lawrence with high hopes of a significant financial return. Even before the work was published in 1954, however, reports that he was planning to expose Lawrence's homosexuality and illegitimacy, as well as to question existing accounts of Lawrence's time in the Middle East, provoked a storm of objections. Aldington was forced into lengthy rewrites, which delayed publication, and when *Lawrence l'imposteur* finally appeared, it was immediately met with a barrage of negative (but strangely similar) reviews – largely orchestrated by Basil Liddell

Hart (the author of an earlier biography). This hostility was compounded by the outrage that had been caused just a few months earlier, among those who might otherwise have been sympathetic to Aldington's case, by the publication of *Pinorman* – Aldington's book of reminiscences about Douglas, his partner "Pino" Orioli, and the publisher Charles Prentice. Originally intended as a "panegyric", this somehow became an indictment of Douglas's work, character and "vice"; it focused explicitly and at length on Douglas's paedophilia, stating that his past was "strewn with broken boys".

While the gravity of such revelations was recognized even then (though not to the extent that it would be today), most contemporary outrage was directed at what was seen as Aldington's hypocrisy, and what Whelpton acknowledges was his "prejudice against homosexuality". Certainly, Aldington had had plenty of earlier opportunities to censure Douglas's behaviour; he and Patmore had spent months at a time with Douglas and Orioli in Florence in the early 1930s, and their friendship was such that, on hearing in 1937 that Douglas had been charged with "raping a young girl", Aldington had written to ask "if there is anything I can do". Writing in the *TLS*, Constantine FitzGibbon denounced *Pinorman* as a "betrayal", while Graham Greene called it "mean" and "dishonest", and attributed Aldington's "petty denigration of a friend" to "jealousy".

Whether or not these controversies had an effect on the sales of Aldington's books, by the late 1950s he emphatically felt that he was the victim of a "boycott" caused by "vindictive dislike and spite". It probably did not help that by this point he and his daughter were living in rented boarding house rooms in Montpellier, and that he was worried about his inability to support her financially. In May 1957, in "virtual destitution", he wrote to H.D. – with whom he had been in regular correspondence, but had not seen, since the 1930s – asking if she could lend him "any (even five!) dollars". H.D. had been in an open relationship with Winifred Ellerman, the writer and shipping heiress better known as Bryher, since 1918, and apart from a period during the Second World War, they had lived in Switzerland since the early 1920s. Whelpton seems determined to represent Bryher as the villain of the piece, without whom H.D. and Aldington's marriage might have survived; she is described as "unrelenting", a "puppeteer par excellence", and "intensely" and "openly" "hostile" to Aldington (for mentioning his "infidelity" to H.D.). In the end, however, Bryher would rescue Aldington, as she had H.D. In response to his appeal, she immediately cleared his debts, arranged for him to be given a monthly allowance, and settled a million francs a year on his daughter for her education.

Both Aldington and Catha would soon also visit the pair in Switzerland, where Catha and Bryher struck up a close if unlikely friendship, which lasted until Bryher's death in 1983. H.D. would die in 1961, and Aldington the following year, soon after an official seventieth-birthday trip to Soviet Russia, where it had transpired "that the three most popular English novelists there are Dickens, H. G. Wells and Aldington (in that order)". The chapters documenting this period are rich in letters between Aldington, H.D. and Bryher – with occasional interjections from the American artist George Plank, who emerges as a camp Greek chorus via his correspondence with the two women ("A man responsible for so much suffering in others perhaps deserves his own … I am so shocked by the shock to *you* at Richard turning up and telephoning out of the blue! Thank all the gods and goddesses that Bryher was at hand to be a prop”). The picture created by Vivien Whelpton of these increasingly frail figures, still paying the price, and reaping the rewards, of their youth is strangely moving, and offers – at the last – the sympathetic, redeeming image of Aldington which she has been so keen to provide.

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