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

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His name appears at the top of the memorial to the War Poets in Westminster Abbey, but even those who know the work of most of the other war poets often do not know the work of Richard Aldington.

This second and final volume of Vivien Whelpton's biography begins in 1930. In that year Richard Aldington – much like Robert Graves – having already terminated his marriage some years before, and several relationships subsequently; having written his testimony of the Great War *(Death of a Hero)* and quarrelled with a number of his friends; set off, with a new-old lover, Brigit Patmore, for wider shores. Years of travelling followed: 'In eight years they had covered three continents and ten countries, but never had a permanent home'.

When Aldington left England, he also left behind most of his old contacts and friends – in particular the Bloomsbury and *Criterion* set, whom he now viewed as precious and 'inktellectual' [*sic* – Aldington was not the world's greatest speller, but this is a deliberate, and brilliant, coinage]. His own ideal, by contrast, was the 'finer fuller life ... the life of the here and now ... the life of the senses, the life of the deep instinctive forces – free of religious or political creed'. Aldington had developed a particular animosity towards T. S. Eliot: born partly of jealousy of Eliot's celebrity, but intensified by Eliot's not having fought in the Great War and by his treatment of his wife (not that Aldington himself could stand on very high moral ground in that respect). He valued loyalty, even when he did not always practise it – and he certainly remained loyal to the memory of D.H. Lawrence, and to some extent to Ezra Pound: another writer who had avoided the Great War, but who had been a lively friend and mentor in those early years before it.

In Aldington's personal relations, it seems that a real capacity for warmth and affection went side by side with a capacity for extreme rancorousness, together with a habit of 'sneering' and abuse which was widely noticed and criticised by reviewers. There was a considerable ruthlessness about the feelings of others, and a tendency to react furiously to all criticism of his work: Vivien Whelpton identifies his characteristic 'note of personal bitterness and ... lack of creative distance'. In the 'thirties and afterwards – though enormously prolific and very conscious of a mission to speak to the 'ordinary' reader – he managed to alienate the circulating libraries and some of the reading public; and tended to attribute all this to personal spite and jealousy rather than to any genuine response to the work itself.

The chief problem for any commentator on Aldington nowadays is the fact that so little of his work, apart from *Death of a Hero,* some poems, and his biography of T.E. Lawrence (of which more anon) remains in print: Vivien Whelpton's thoughtful analysis of his work is result of deep and wide private research and analysis. One of her conclusions about the novels which Aldington wrote during that inter-war period is that his central characters tend to sound rather too much like himself, and are often, like him, didactic and hectoring. Alec Waugh commented that there were both a satirical and a romantic side of Aldington, but that they were kept separate, not allowed to meet. Another, later friend commented: '… he lacked the nurturing of nature, the fertile simplicity of water and manure on a garden. For him the manure remained shit, the compost did not meld with the soil'.

He was also (sometimes rabidly) homophobic, and not seldom misogynistic. He does not come over as an immediately or wholly likeable or admirable character; and yet Aldington could evidently be a kindly and generous friend – at any rate whilst those friendships lasted: they often

enough ended in recrimination and character assassination. He was open-handed with money, when he had any, and with hospitality, and was hard-working and generous in his encouragement of others. His lasting friends, once he had left England, were publishers, editors and other expatriate writers: later in life he consorted with those, such as Roy Campbell and Henry Williamson, whose politics had put them out of fashion with the London *literati* – though Vivien Whelpton stresses that Aldington himself was never sympathetic to Fascism. He was also scornful of 'drawing room Communism': Aldington's political sympathies tended towards old-fashioned Toryism (little or nothing to do with the Conservative Party then or now) which he identified with the greatest degree of personal and intellectual liberty and independence. Ironically, his writings were very popular in the Soviet Union, whereas in Britain and America he was constantly faced with demands for self-censorship.

The first volume of this biography, published in 2014, [1]recounted Aldington's unstable origins: a 'problematic lower-middle-class background', a loveless, dysfunctional childhood and a truncated education. This was followed by war trauma and post-war restlessness – and Aldington for most of his middle life seems to have been generally a creature of flux, always moving on to something new, whether a writing project, a relationship, or a country of residence. At the beginning of this volume Aldington is still a poet, and sometimes a hauntingly impressive one:

> Tonight it will be very lonely
> In the woods of Roncesvalles,
> There will be a sighing in the damp branches,
> A cold smell from the leafy ground
> In the blackness of pilgrim shadows ...

Then, partly from a change of inspiration and partly from economic necessity, he moves on to prose: novels and short stories. Vivien Whelpton noted that ‘The strongest of the stories are those in which … anger … is replaced by pity for the dead’ and we can see this in the two poems of his which we are most likely to know: ‘In Memory of Wilfred Owen’[2] and ‘Eleven Years After the Fall of Troy’[3]

In the late 'thirties – more or less without warning, and with little or no remorse – he 'ditched' Brigit Patmore and began a new life with Patmore's new daughter-in-law, Netta, with whom he had his only living child, Catherine ('Catha'). The end of one relationship seems to have led him to return to an earlier one: there was a rapprochement, which deepened over time, with his first wife, the poet H.D. In the same years – seeing what was happening in Italy and Spain – he began to feel that another European war was inevitable. It was not enough to have left England: the Continent too must be left behind, in favour of the United States. This move put Aldington into something close to the category of men whom he had despised in the Great War – men such as Pound and Eliot who could have fought but had managed to stay out of it – and also to the 'parlour pinks' such as Auden, who were avoiding the new war by taking themselves off to America. He justified himself by saying: 'I think it is a mistake ... to take upon ourselves ... vicarious responsibility for the war and its conduct. Where there is no power there can be no responsibility ...'.

The wartime years in America followed the recurring Aldington pattern of initial rapture and subsequent disillusion. A spell in Hollywood seems to have made him some money but produced little or no actual achievement. It was during this period, however, that Aldington embarked seriously upon his third and final writing career: as a biographer. An unexpected product of this was a very well-received biography of the Duke of Wellington – an unlikely hero, it might seem, for a disenchanted infantryman, but Aldington could identify with Wellington as an inspired officer' with Wellington's emotional, instinctive conservatism; and with a man who had distinguished himself in war but been unable to move with the spirit of the times after it.

At the end of hostilities, we see Aldington and his family settling again in France– - his antipathy to Britain intensified by his scorn for the Attlee government. Another figure who attracted Aldington's

loyalty, D.H. Lawrence, was the subject of the next biography, also in general well reviewed. And then came the beginning of a series of disasters. A friend of Aldington's at this time commented that

> Richard's worst wounds came not from the jagged world but from himself. The bearings of the love-hate seesaw screeched in his soul ...

The financial, personal and literary catastrophes which befell him at the beginning of the nineteen-fifties were certainly not all self-created. Aldington was immensely hard-working and prolific, a thorough scholar and researcher, and an extremely adaptable writer of literary and critical prose. On the page, he had often been generous and perceptive, but in the outside world his capacity for vindictiveness and self-righteousness in the end did more damage to him than to anyone else. His second wife left him abruptly, though their daughter remained with him. (It would be interesting to know whose decision this was, and how it came about.) Against this background, he undertook the biography of the other Lawrence – T.E., he 'of Arabia' – which was to be his nemesis.

Although he had had mixed feelings about T.E. Lawrence from the start, Aldington had at one stage admired him – as he had admired Wellington – for his abilities as a soldier and a leader of men. But the researches for the book led Aldington increasingly to realise that the myth of Lawrence was largely originated by Lawrence himself, and had very shaky grounds in fact. But if you are going to expose a hero's feet of clay, you have to remember and consider the pain and resistance of those whose hero he was; and Aldington was not the man for that. Having decided that Lawrence was a fantasist and a charlatan, Aldington fell prey to his old penchant for satire and belittlement, and his long-standing homophobia: the biography became a 'hatchet job' – to be countered by a lethal counter-attack from Lawrence's friends and supporters, led by the prestigious military historian Liddell Hart. Robert Graves denounced Aldington as a 'hangman of letters'. Although the book of course enjoyed a *succès de scandale*, and undoubtedly changed and undermined Lawrence's standing in history, for Aldington himself it meant financial and professional ruin.

Curiously, for this reviewer at least, that marks the point at which it becomes possible to feel real admiration for him: bearing poverty, isolation and disappointment with considerable dignity, living in a run-down *pension,* and constant in his unselfish love for `Catha', cooking healthy meals for her and worrying about her examination results. Another surprisingly uplifting and redemptive theme of these last years is the renewed warm and loving friendship with H.D., and the kindness and generosity of H.D.'s partner Bryher. Bryher had no great reason to love Aldington, but she set about supporting Catha's education in various practical and financial ways, and eventually made Aldington himself an allowance which enabled him to live his last years in modest security without ever having to write for a living again. The rest of his life was short, but not long before the end he had a brilliantly successful tour of the USSR, in which he received all the honour which he had felt to be his due, and had never quite received in the West. It was an ironic career to the end: Aldington admired the Russian reverence for art and culture, but had no sympathy even with democratic socialism, let alone Soviet communism.

A strange and sometimes unedifying saga – but Vivien Whelpton's achievement is very considerable in bringing to life a writer who for a long time has been represented more by his name than his work. It has made this reviewer turn to more of Aldington's verse, and incidentally back to the works of H.D. as well. My one tentative criticism is that –- particularly in the middle section of the book – the life and the work tend to be dealt with in alternating sections, which means back-tracking in time, and losing some of the context in which the work was produced. But since there were, evidently, at least two Richard Aldingtons, perhaps that also is not inappropriate.

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[1] *Richard Aldington: Poet, Soldier and Lover 1911 – 1929* (2014)

[2] https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/ww1lit/SgB7MLCkYyU/gsyg4j3KB1QJ See also *WOAJ* September 2015

[3] http://vivienwhelpton.co.uk/aldington-the-poet