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VIVIEN WHELPTON, RICHARD ALDINGTON: POET, SOLDIER AND LOVER 1911-1929

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Reviewed by David Worthington

Vivien Whelpton definitely knows her Aldington. No doubt about that. Richard Aldington is, however, an enigma and his life presents innumerable puzzles, a problem for anyone trying to understand and write about him. Does Vivien Whelpton get him across to us in writing this close and detailed documentation of the life of Richard Aldington between the years 1911-1929: Poet, Soldier and Lover?

The story of these years 1911-1929 is well told and illustrated with lots of interesting photographs of the famous people who played their parts in Aldington's life and also the lesser-knowns in his story. All the photographs of Aldington himself however show a different-looking young man looking back at you. He is a chameleon. And in none of the photographs is Aldington smiling or laughing. Perhaps there wasn't a lot to smile or laugh about.

Edward Godfree Aldington was born in Portsmouth 1892. The result of a 'shot-gun' wedding between Albert Edward Aldington, a lawyer, and 'an educated man and avid reader' trapped into marriage by Jessie May Godfree 'determined to move out of working class poverty'. Both his parents wrote dreadful novels and Aldington didn't like either of them very much. We learn that while still a young boy he chose for himself the name Richard in preference to his given name Edward. This interesting decision by the young Edward is in parentheses. Why did he choose the name Richard?

The family moved a lot and we learn that Aldington always thought that he had had a difficult childhood. Some school, which he hated apart from the rugby, some private education and some unknown periods which are not charted. And butterfly collecting and playing chess and sea shore pleasures and trips to the continent with his father. It doesn't seem too bad. He developed early a habit of leaving things and moving on, schools and University in particular, which seems to have stuck with him through life, including his personal relationships.

In her book Vivien Whelpton covers Aldington's years from 1911, 'when he embarked on his literary career and a life of his own choosing', to 1929 and the publication of the novel *Death of a Hero* 'really a threnody, a memorial in its ineffective way to a generation which hoped much, strove honestly and suffered deeply', as Aldington put it. The last chapter of Whelpton's book, called 'Death of a Hero' reviews Aldington's first and best known novel in

detail and tells us how it is Aldington's 'pre-war life and his war experience ... in almost every detail'.

Vivien Whelpton necessarily gives us also what we need to know about Aldington before 1911 to make any sense of Aldington in the years she covers in her book. 'Class and male sexuality are the keys to understanding Aldington'. And we get also in good detail the changing literary scene in London from 1911 with the arrival of Imagism and Pound, Flint, Hulme, and all the others among whom there was so much conflict. So much literary argument in fact that one is often surprised that anything at all creative and exciting came out of this time – as it did, for before the war Aldington was writing poems and being published. Some of the poems are very good and Vivien Whelpton's book does Aldington and us a service in reminding us of Aldington's poetry. He should be better known for his poems. He was once. He is commemorated with fifteen others on the World War I Poets Memorial in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

And we learn also about Aldington's enduring relationship and failed marriage with the poet HD, her child by the composer Cecil Gray, Bryher and HD, and Aldington's own infidelities.

It is a very confusing time and not only for personal relationships. Vivien Whelpton is good also on all the other 'isms', in addition to Imagism, trying to establish themselves: Hellenism (Aldington and HD's search for health beauty and youth), Vorticism, Cubism, Futurism, Dynamism (Amyism, Nageism, Etcism).

Aldington's war is covered in detail and illustrates what a contrary and changing character he was. When war broke out he went off straight away with TE Hulme to join up. The HAC rejected him maybe because of his medical history and an earlier hernia operation. Aldington then spent the next two years thinking of ways to avoid conscription. The ideas included becoming a conscientious objector, going to the United States and using his father (whom he disliked so much) to use his influence to obtain exemption from service for his son. In 1916 when conscription was introduced Aldington decided to join up ahead of being conscripted because then he might have some say in his choice of regiment and also because 'it would be better not to go in under the slur of having been compelled to do so'.

On joining up Aldington felt some contempt for his fellow soldiers but he settled in and of course the war changed him considerably as it did all who took part in it. He then developed an aversion for those men who had not seen combat and it put the squabbles of literary London in perspective. His war gave him the material for *Death of a Hero* which made him famous.

In 1929 Aldington is writing well and beginning to find some happiness and the book concludes. Vivien Whelpton has made us interested in Aldington. We want

to know more. There is an 'Afterword' from Vivien Whelpton telling us that Aldington wrote lots more novels and some biographies. And there were more lovers and ups and downs and whether the damage to Aldington in the years to 1929 'was irreparable remains to be seen'. It sounds as if we can look forward to reading in due course about the years after 1929.