

Book Reviews

Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters. Edited by Norman T. Gates. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press. 1992. ix + 402 pp. \$49.50.

Richard Aldington & H.D.: The Early Years in Letters. Edited by Caroline Zilboorg. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 1992. xiii + 237 pp. \$35.00

Last year's publication of two new editions of Richard Aldington's letters coincided nicely with the recent centenary conference celebration in Montpellier of his birth. Both of these books go a long way to reanimate a writer who, due largely to his scathing biographies, both written in the fifties, of English sacred cows Norman Douglas (*Pinorman*) and T.E. Lawrence lost favour with the testy English literary establishment. The result was the virtual neglect of his fiction and poetry in the United Kingdom for nearly twenty years. Not surprisingly then, it has been largely through the influence of the American scholar Norman Gates and the activity of The New Canterbury Literary Society in the United States that Aldington's work has been kept alive in literary and academic circles; therefore, it should come as little surprise that Dr. Gates, now Professor Emeritus of English at Rider College in New Jersey and author of *The Poetry of Richard Aldington* and *A Checklist of the Letters of Richard Aldington*, should continue his work with a fine new edition of Aldington's letters.

The book contains 154 letters covering fifty years of Aldington's life, each section containing letters from correspondents as disparate as T.S. Eliot, the Russian scholar Mikhail Urnov, and the self-styled King of Poland, Count Geoffrey Potocki. Each section also contains a brief biological sketch which makes the letters more relevant to the general reader. Further, the letters are carefully and helpfully footnoted. In a postscript to F. S. Flint on 14 September 1915 concerning Flint's proposed book on modern French poetry, Gates' footnote informs the reader not only that the book in question never appeared, but also that two articles were published instead; Gates' footnote goes on to name both articles and to tell the reader exactly where they can be found.

Such meticulous work is the keynote of Gates' book. The Annotated Index at the end of the book gives readers quick access to the names of particular persons or titles of literary works that they may wish to look up, and in that way it acts as invaluable reference tool for anyone wishing to know more about Aldington's views or about his connections with the then literary scene. More than any other aspect of this very useful book is its bringing together under one cover the protean vision of Richard Aldington.

Through numerous letters to various correspondents, we are given glimpses of Aldington the lover ("Sweetie girl, I long for you day & night, & live for the hour when I shall hold your lovely body naked in my arms again and be joined to you in lovely ecstasy" [110]); Aldington the loyal believer ("Lawrence is not Dead. They have been announcing that since 1915 and he goes on, and will and will and will. They can't kill him. You no more stop him than an army can stop the spring. You can no more quench him than you can quench a star" [139]); and Aldington the truth teller; ([writing of his biography of Norman Douglas] Norman made no effort to conceal his habits and tastes, and I'm damned if I see why the public should be imposed on. Why should we go on having Victorian waxed dummies foisted on us as biographies Not being bourgeois I admire a great artist more than a great bugger, who claimed to be a gentleman" [269]).

By the time one has reached the end of Gates' book, one has achieved a comprehensive vision of the forces that acted on the formation of the enigmatic character that was Richard Aldington. In contrast to the comprehensive view of Aldington's rich and varied life offered by Gates, but no less a useful tool to literary studies, Caroline Zilboorg's palimpsestic investigation of Aldington and his first wife Hilda Doolittle focuses specifically on the breakdown of their marriage as both writers struggle to find peace and security in the discontinuity of the post-War world.

Dr. Zilboorg's book examines in particular 91 of Aldington's letters to H.D. - all written between April 1918 and December 1920, a period which Zilboorg describes as follows:

This was a pivotal and important time in both writers' lives, a dramatic and intense period personally, socially, and historically. These years would test their love for each other and challenge their ideas of art and the future, calling into question all of their earlier decisions and commitments (2).

Sadly, the perspective we have is somewhat one-sided; we discover that Aldington probably destroyed all of H.D.'s letters from this period some time after she had moved down to Cornwall with Cecil Gray, so our perspective of the relationship is seen exclusively through the eyes of Aldington. However, what we can observe of Aldington in his letters lays to rest a number of objectionable portraits of him which have appeared in sympathetic biographies of H.D. Clearly, as Zilboorg points out and as can be seen from the letters written by Aldington from the front during 1918, he makes brave efforts to hide the horrors of the war and his own frustrations from his wife.

His tone is surprisingly gentle and concerned while she is in Cornwall co-habiting with Gray. He even sends H.D. love letters and poems while she refuses to reply out of insensitive pique.

Caroline Zilboorg's book offers a little of everything: in her painstakingly thorough introduction to the letters, for example, she unravels the rather complicated psycho-sexual relationships that began in Devon and continued later in Mecklenburgh Square. This background assists the reader, for example, to understand Aldington's tonal equanimity when writing his wife at the home of her lover: "I hope you don't mind my writing to you so often. You must tell me if it causes any difficulty in the new ménage" (62). Or his saying calmly in the same letter that "I can't quite give up the idea that we shall be together soon" (63).

Like Gates' work, Zilboorg's footnotes and biographical appendix are both fastidiously accurate and comprehensive. In short, both of the new edition of Aldington's letters are a positive addition to Aldington's scholarship and would serve well as models for would-be editors of literary correspondence. In both works, one feels the editors have allowed the letters to speak for themselves whilst standing discreetly aside to clarify any esoteric points the reader wishes to air.

Patrick Quinn
Nene College
Northampton, England

Roads to Glory by Richard Aldington. London: Imperial War Museum 1992. 312 pp. 16.00 British Pounds

Blasting and Bombardiering: Autobiography 1914-1926 by Wyndham Lewis. London: Imperial War Museum 1992. 312 pp. 22.50 British Pounds

Wyndham Lewis: Art and War By Paul Edwards. London: Lund Humphries 1992. 144 pp. illustrated. 18.50 British Pounds.

On the 13th of September, 1930, an advance copy of Richard Aldington's *Roads to Glory* arrived at Le Lavandou in the South of France where Aldington was spending the last few weeks of the summer. He immediately wrote to Charles Prentice, his editor at Chatto & Windus, that he was 'delightful with the appearance' of the book—as well he should have been. As soon as you pick up the IWM's superbly executed facsimile (including a new critical introduction by David Wilkinson) with its splendid typography and striking black, gray and beige cover design by Paul Nash, you'll understand why.

Within a week *Roads* had sold over 2,000 copies. And although *Death of a Hero* had been published by Chatto one year earlier (nearly to the day), only months after its publication Aldington was back at work on the stories that would comprise *Roads to Glory*. Yet, after reading these thirteen stories, one is undecided about how successful Aldington really was in capturing the feelings of those who 'passed so close to annihilation.'

There are times here when Aldington captures the horror and disillusionment in rich evocative prose. His descriptions of the battlefield, of the sacrifice and waste, and perhaps above all, the ludicrousness, can be magical, as in this passage from 'Sacrifice Post':

About three-thirty, Davidson crawled into his wire bedstead to get an hour's sleep before stand-to. Within ten minutes he had been awakened by his servant.

'Wha's matter? Are they coming over? Anybody hit?'

'No sir. Runner from Batt. H.Q., sir.'

Davidson had torn open the message with feverish haste. It was marked urgent, and required him instantly to furnish statistics of the number of socks in his detachment....

Other times Aldington can't seem to get the right balance between lunacy and a sarcasm which is so prevalent that it distinctly mars the writing. Aldington was obviously a bit punch drunk from being censored when, in the middle of a bombing raid in 'Sacrifice Post' his protagonist cries out 'oh, unprintable profanities.' The balance is also off when in 'At All Costs' he characterises Bert (labourer turned 'revolutionary orator') as someone 'innocent of metaphysics and aesthetics; epistemology did not interest him, and he had no formal logic. Perhaps we might say he was a dogmatic pragmatist.' One gets the feeling that anyone without a public school education might well stop thinking altogether.

After Aldington reread the stories in *Roads*, he wrote to Prentice that he 'found them rather better than I had feared. The later stories are certainly an improvement. I give minus awards to Deserter, Booby-Trap, Victory and Killed in Action; neutrals to Meditation and the Lads, plus to the others.' I would agree with much of his assessment. The later stories superbly capture the disillusionment and feelings of redundancy that were so common amongst returning soldiers. Aldington also does well at conveying the feelings of dispensability that afflicted many infantrymen. When he sticks to descriptive passages of trench warfare (without churning all and sundry through a life philosophy which too often rings hollow, or worse yet, simplistic), he is able to impart, as no regimental diary can, the horror of the Great War.

Whatever the polemics of Lewis's later fascism, antisemitism and general descent to the right, Lewis has much to offer as a documenter of the Great War in more than one medium. Lewis enlisted in March 1916 as a gunner in the Royal Garrison Artillery, and by May 1917 was serving as a Subaltern with the 330 Siege Battery, RBA. By September he was fighting in the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele). In November, while Lewis was on leave in England, he met Captain Guy Baker, who suggested that he apply to Beaverbrook's Canadian war artist scheme—which he did. Thus by early January 1918, until the end of the war, Lewis worked as an artist.

Anyone who has not read Wyndham Lewis's very selective autobiography of the years 1914-1926, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, is in for a real treat. Nowhere have I read anyone who has the sheer audacity, ego-centricism and perfectionism of blowing one's own horn as Lewis does. And I haven't commented about the book itself yet: only its introduction.

Once past the introduction, however, and well into the 'Blasting,' and 'Bombardiering' part, Lewis is another writer—almost. When I read Lewis I can hear the sounds of war, and not simply the clichéd 'boom boom' of the guns:

The gas-shells were small, came down with a soft sickly whistle, and struck the ground with a gentle *plock*. Their very sound was sug-gestive of gas.

And I can actually see the front:

Upon the crest of the ridge ahead was our observation-post. We had no difficulty whatever in locating it. No one, in fact, could miss it. For it had a cluster of shell-burst around it, rather as a mountain-peak is crowned or ringed with cloud.

Although the dry humour and patent certainty of one who *knows* he's going to survive the war is painfully evident throughout the memoir, Lewis creates a compelling world for us—that of the Gunner Officer. What Lewis could certainly have used was a good editor like Prentice at Chatto & Windus. His grammar can be quite extraordinarily awful, and his punctuation worse. Chatts had, in fact, been Lewis's publisher up to 1930, and lost money on all his works. It is a pity because Eyre & Spottiswoode were not as visually creative a publisher as Chatts, and the cover design of the book is quite dull and lifeless—which is a great pity, particularly when one thinks of Lewis's own vibrant cover designs. Yet, once again, it is only possible to comment on these things thanks to having a carefully produced facsimile (which incorporates a critical introduction by Catherine Wallace) by the IWM.

Wyndham Lewis: Art and War is the catalogue produced by Lund Humphries in association with the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust to coincide with the

IWM's exhibition of the same title (which ran from 25 June-11 October 1992). It is a superbly designed catalogue, complete with a substantial chronology of Lewis's life (including photographs, literary publications and exhibitions), and a thirty-three page critical essay by Paul Edwards which locates Lewis within the various European art movements of his time.

Just as Lewis was a polemic writer, he was a polemic artist. His angular vorticist figures and his stylised views of battle fields was not what the public wanted or expected from its war artists. His two commissioned paintings, *A Canadian Gun Pitt* and *A Battery Shelled*, are included in the exhibition, as are some twenty-five plus drawings or paintings done throughout the war (although not all of them are about war, they are without doubt informed by it).

Lewis's war art doesn't have the warmth or sense of desolation that, say, Paul Nash's work does. On the contrary, it has a tendency of leaving the viewer cold, but by doing so tends to imply that the tragedy of mankind is no less than the tragedy of the landscape. It is perhaps something akin to that feeling of dispensability that one gets when reading Aldington at his best.

When one looks at Lewis's Great-War Art, as opposed to that of the Second World War, one gets a sense of Lewis's grappling to portray something experienced: something between the manic pitch of the battle and the wearisome waiting in between; something that does not romanticise war, but shows it as a modern mechanically driven tragedy more implied than insisted upon.

Susan Schreibman
Dublin, Ireland