

Vivien Whelpton, *Richard Aldington: Poet, Soldier and Lover, 1911–1929*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2014. 414pp. ISBN 978 0 7188 9318 7. PB £30.00; EPUB £23.86; PDF £31.80.

Twenty-five years after Charles Doyle's previous biography, Vivien Whelpton's compendious new life of Richard Aldington covers the most important phase of his career, from aspiring poet to successful novelist via his military service. Whelpton's impressive research for *Richard Aldington: Poet, Soldier and Lover, 1911–1929* draws on and makes available in print for the first time a vast array of archival material, as well as making use of the myriad *romans à clé* by the Imagist circle and their many acquaintances. The volume adds to Doyle's less detailed but more comprehensive volume, expanded and embellished by valuable editions of correspondence that were not available to Doyle including Norman T. Gates's *Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), Michael Copp's *Imagist Dialogues: Letters between Aldington, Flint and Others* (Lutterworth Press, 2009), and Caroline Zilboorg's two selections of the Aldington–H. D. Letters, combined as *Richard Aldington and H. D.: Their Lives in Letters, 1918–61* (Manchester University Press, 2003). These all work, implicitly or explicitly, to correct unfair and inaccurate portraits of Aldington that derive from selective (mis)readings of him and his work in a number of biographies of H. D., notably Janice S. Robinson's *H. D.: the Life and Work of and American Poet* (Houghton Mifflin, 1982) and Barbara Guest's *Herself Defined* (Doubleday, 1984).

Whelpton continues this tradition of treating Aldington more sympathetically. Even where many previous accounts of these situations have seen him as culpable or antagonistic, here he gets a fair hearing. Whelpton notes that in the case of H. D.'s pregnancy by Cecil Gray, Aldington 'was agonisingly aware that it was his behaviour that had caused this mess' (189). While he is not excused, as the memorable description of John Cournos as 'the emotional refuse bin for both Aldingtons' demonstrates (127), it is refreshing to read an empathetic account, one which realises that decisions about relationships and sexual conduct are not taken lightly, however easy they are to judge as such in retrospect. This is particularly pertinent given Aldington's sensitive and thoughtful approach to life and love, even if that approach came at times from unusual positions and arrived at unorthodox conclusions.

The volume begins by moving briskly from Aldington's south coast childhood through his brief time at the University of London, getting promptly to his burgeoning literary career and mature relationships. This material will be familiar to readers of previous biographical works such as Helen Carr's magisterial *The Verse Revolutionaries* (Jonathan Cape, 2009), although Whelpton gives interesting additional detail in showing his journey to finding a literary identity. Situating him in terms of the older and more settled Pound and Flint is revealing. The volume reminds us that Aldington was still growing up and finding his feet as a man as well as a literary figure: it's all too easy to forget that he was only twenty years old in 1912 when his first poems were published in Harriet Monroe's recently-founded *Poetry* magazine.

Whelpton posits that Aldington's military experiences and their subsequent impact have been neglected by previous biographers (19), and works to address this. The focus on the effect

upon him of the First World War is of course timely, as centenary commemorations show little sign of abating. A maelstrom of contradictions and conflicting emotions characterises the period after Aldington's enlistment, as Whelpton notes: he was 'robust and healthy' (130), but repulsed by the grime of army fatigues; chaotically busy in service but able to find serenity at weekends and on leave with H. D.; the sensitive, sensual, romantic, thoughtful poet, repelled by the coarseness of intoxication and misogynist sexuality central to military relaxation, but also showing 'a genuine delight in his fellow men' (129) at their kindnesses and willingness to make the best of the situation. Aldington also served for an unusually long time in the lines and was in France, barring training periods, for almost two years, during which he endured gas bombardment. He was physically and mentally affected by the war during it, immediately after it, and also long after the explosions of the subsequent global conflict faded. Whelpton addresses this well, and it will surely be a key aspect of her projected volume on the latter part of Aldington's life.

*Poet, Soldier and Lover* makes it clear that, in addition to his well-known expertise as poet, translator, editor, later novelist and biographer, Aldington was an acute critic of industrial modernity. From the 1912–13 'Letters in Italy' in *The New Age* journal, their tone not unfairly described by Whelpton as 'that of a 20-year-old aspiring to be cosmopolitan, witty and knowing' (61), Aldington is alert to the problems of mass culture, his brash critique suffused with a youthful verve that has its own charm. Even at such an early age, he was a perceptive commentator. But it is his assessments of the war and its aftermath—his journalism written in the shadow of the conflict as he was struggling to write creatively—that really show him as engaged fully with the world. The quotations from his 1920–22 articles in *Poetry* show the extent of his post-war struggle. He complains in a 1920 'Letter from London' that 'the whole of Europe is in an ungodly mess as a result of the war [...] almost the whole life of the nation has become commercialised; [...] art and artists are in a lamentable state of disorder and neglect' (242). Pleasingly, Whelpton devotes a reasonable amount of analysis to the works of the post-war decade such as *A Fool in the Forest* (1924), and returns to the quotation on the original dustcover to situate the poem (presumably with Aldington's input?) as 'the contest between the ideals of the old Art civilisation and the new Trade civilisation' (265). Aldington sees the creative act as inextricable from wider circumstances. As a professional writer without financial patronage, who consequently really needed the money from his commissions, he was more than many other modernist writers subject to the caprice of the market. The post-war situation in the UK was even more precarious for many without Aldington's literary skill and contacts.

Indeed, the sections dealing with the war and the 1920s are the volume's strongest. Whelpton's biography really shines when Aldington is necessarily the focus. When Aldington is part of a group he often manages both to be pivotal and operate on its fringes. At least, he often saw himself as marginal in groups where to others he seemed central. His youth put him in the awkward position of feeling a need to show deference to elders in a modernist group prizing youthful iconoclasm. He also felt out of step due to his unstable upbringing and lack of a university education. Negotiating these issues while his character was being formed led to a personality that was collegial but determinedly individualistic. During the war Aldington continued to write and edit but his situation, both geographical and

emotional, meant that he became increasingly detached from his pre-war networks. Whelpton draws out well the ways in which his experiences set him apart from figures such as H. D., F. S. Flint and Ezra Pound. They did not or could not fight and, while all were largely sympathetic to the others' literary aims, Aldington was singular in his approach. That increasing separation allows him to shine for himself and not be compared to others, rather than paling in comparison to the spare beauty of H. D.'s Imagist verse or Pound's brio as Imagism's P. T. Barnum. The end of the 1920s is evoked well, particularly the personal maelstrom that Aldington suffered as he had the burst of productivity and explored the painful memories that saw the manuscript of *Death of a Hero* finished.

I find the book most problematic in its literary judgments. Notions of what is 'good' or 'bad' poetry do not seem to have a clear rationale, and Aldington is sometimes found wanting where I would prefer a more empathetic reading of the text, an attempt to understand his writing rather than holding him to account and subject to evaluative aesthetics. For example, Aldington's city poems such as 'Cinema Exit' and 'In the Tube' are deemed Aldington's 'least satisfying' by Whelpton (96). However, to me this is just the point of the poem. It is not meant to satisfy; it is meant to jolt the reader into a realisation of the potential problems of industrial modernity. Whelpton concludes that he does not reconcile the worlds of what John Gould Fletcher describes as 'a sense of the sordidness of existence, of the wayward and casual beauty with which nature decks that sordidness' (96). This I read as a sophistication of Aldington's poetry, and part of the modernist belief that poetry should be didactic and engaging, rather than determinative: he invites readers to consider their own position and find their own solutions. Aldington's project is a different one to those of poets such as Eliot, Graves and Sassoon, to whom he is implicitly or explicitly compared and found wanting (e.g. 208). He seeks to avoid reinforcing the discourse of the English elite. While he is most often analysed in terms of the tenets of Imagism (here and generally), he was quickly dissatisfied with that mode and its focus on precision and distance, values which fed into the critical model for the analysis of literature that was being formalised in essays such as Eliot's germinal 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). Aldington is a more emotional poet who is prepared to defend that position, as Whelpton notes, although we see him wrestling with this position in correspondence with Herbert Read in 1925 (259). He is also prepared to recognise the value of this in other works, such as when he describes *Journey's End* as 'Bad art, perhaps, but the stuff of life & deep emotion' (324).

Whelpton's volume would also benefit from drawing further attention to the previously-unpublished manuscripts that are included and quoted from. Material is present all the way through the volume that has previously been unavailable outside of research libraries not always easily accessible. One wonders if the location of the Aldington archive at Southern Illinois University has contributed to its neglect, although the Morris Library have been excellent keepers of these valuable works. I draw attention here particularly to instances such as the poem beginning 'It is bitter, watching the bright leaves fall' (239) that meditates on love and separation but is presented suggestively at the end of the chapter detailing his split from H. D. An attempt at dating and some analysis of the poem would enhance the availability of this delicate, elegaic and previously-unknown work.

Whelpton's account is formidably thorough, and a valuable addition to the biographical resources previously available to the Aldington scholar; it will also be useful to students of the First World War, modernist literature, and the early twentieth century. NCLS members will welcome this new account, and those with institutional affiliations should certainly order the volume for their libraries. *Poet, Soldier and Lover* is a well-finished, attractive book even if the main print is a little small. This is almost certainly due to the pressures of producing a manageably-sized physical object from the wealth of information it contains. The photographs give a real sense of the people and places that feature. However, in the digital world, I find it hard to understand how a pdf file can be more expensive than a paperback book, particularly when most presses now produce pdfs in the proofing process. I hope that when the initial pressing sells out and the volume has broken even, a lower pricing point might appeal to a greater readership while the First World War and its literature are highly visible. Vivien Whelpton has made an important contribution to Aldington scholarship, and I await the proposed volumes detailing Aldington's early and late years with interest.

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