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*Changing partners, changing hands, dancing round, in a Bacchic orgy of war-time  
love and death ....*

H.D.: *Bid Me to Live* (1960)

There is a near-coincidence between the subtitle of this book and that of Jean Moorcroft Wilson's one-volume version of her Siegfried Sassoon biography, reviewed in the last issue of this Journal. But there was little coincidence between the literary worlds of Richard Aldington and Siegfried Sassoon. They were parallel worlds in time, and in geography – sometimes less than a mile's-worth of London streets apart, the distance between Mayfair and Bloomsbury – and that literary uncle, Harold Monro, had some connections with both. But the two coteries saw their literary roles in very different lights, and their tone and temperament were very different. The Georgians were essentially traditionalists, even when they set out to shock; the "Imagists" (of which more anon) saw themselves as rebels, even though most of what they wrote seems extremely tame and un-shocking.

By comparison with the frenetic emotional and sexual lives of the Aldington set, the Robbie Ross set which gave Sassoon and Wilfred Owen their entrée into the literary world appears – in spite of its secretiveness and the undercurrent of fear which came from its predominantly homosexual ethos positively staid and respectable. Most of its members, of course, were much older, and presumably used to discretion and camouflage. The Aldington circle – though Aldington was never its leader: its two puppet-masters were Ezra Pound and, later, D H Lawrence – was young, assertively heterosexual (at least where the men were concerned), cosmopolitan (with a rich admixture of Americans) and determinedly "modern" both in craft and in what we might now call "lifestyle choices".

Aldington's strange, unstable family background prepared him thoroughly, in certain ways, for such a milieu. Like Wilfred Owen's family, the Aldingtons had aspirations which were out of step with their income and background; unlike the Owens, they were emotionally and morally as well as socially unsettled. St. Margaret's Bay (near Dover), where the family lived for most of Aldington's childhood and youth, seems to have been in the early 1900s an astonishingly unlikely hotbed of partner-swapping: Ursula Bloom, a family friend of Richard's age, remarked: "I was surprised and interested in the flagrant love-making that went on .... Never had I been in such a place for what the servants call 'goings-on' ". Aldington's mother was, it seems, a prime mover in this world.

The Aldington household also, though ostensibly higher up the middle class than that of the Owens (Richard's father Albert was a solicitor), was financially precarious. Albert was "ruined" on two occasions in quick succession. Not only

did Richard, still in his teens, have to be "the man of the family", dealing with the immediate consequences of his father's failure: but that failure also cost him his place at London University after only two terms. Unlike Wilfred Owen, however, Richard Aldington, in spite of a patchy education, was aggressively clever - a classical and modern linguist - and with astonishing speed found his feet in the *avant-garde* literary world of 1911. Very quickly - before he was even twenty-one - he became the lover of the literary hostess Brigit Patmore (granddaughter-in-law of Coventry "Angel in the House" Patmore) and then the lover, and eventually the husband, of the American poet Hilda Doolittle ("H.D.") who had to start with been the fiancée of Ezra Pound. In the early years, these passings-on and exchanges of partner seem to have taken place with little rancour - it was only later, under the stress of war, that the break-ups and betrayals in the group were accompanied by the bitterness which might be expected.

The group were very conscious of their modernity and of their commitment to innovation in poetry. Yet there was nothing very modern about their subject-matter. Both Aldington and H.D. were "ardent Hellenists", translating the Greek poets and turning to Greek themes and images. (Aldington himself at one point summed up this neo-Hellenic world-view as "health and beauty and youth in the midst of friends".) As a group he and those friends were beginning to be known as Imagists or "Imagistes". The term seems to have been invented by Pound before he knew quite what he meant by it, but it was inspired by recent French poetry, and once the ideas had crystallised, its manifesto was:

Go in fear of abstractions. Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something [...] Don't make each line stop dead at the end [...] A rhyme must have in it some element of surprise [...]

and

As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Fair enough - sensible precepts for any poet, though they bring us closer to what Imagism is not than to what it is. But although Aldington satirised Pound's bombastic enthusiasm by referring mockingly to Imagism as "the *mouvemong*", in those early years he was firmly a part of it. "Precision" was a word which turned up again and again in their self-definitions, and (to this reader at least) the poems are inclined to bloodlessness in a way which that word suggests, and which is again at odds with their hectic and vivid emotional lives. There is often something rather "ready-made" about the descriptive language, and the underlying metre can break down, particularly towards the end of a poem. This continues, in my view, to be a weakness with Aldington: although he seems to have thought prose inferior to poetry, his prose, and his prose-poems, have an energy and an intrinsic rhythm which seem to suggest (as Ms Whelpton herself

suggests) that he was moving towards eventual self-realisation as a novelist rather than as a poet.

The early success of the "Mouvemong" – backed up by a number of committed and wealthy patrons, notably Amy Lowell – like the lives of many of its members, was disrupted by the outbreak of war. Only a minority of the group were ever to bear arms, but all the same everything changed: the literary markets grew more uncertain; a strain was put on the American connection; people came and went from London, to save money or to escape from air raids; in the heightened atmosphere of war, liaisons became both more intense and more destructive; and on the level of personal tragedy, Aldington and H.D. suffered the loss of a stillborn baby. Nothing after that seems to have gone right for them: for people whose business was words they were extraordinarily bad at communicating honestly with one another; and in Aldington's case a commitment to individual freedom, and a perfectly genuine capacity for tenderness and affection, seem to have existed alongside a tendency to self-dramatisation and a considerable insensitivity (when his own gratification was at stake) to the feelings of others. What looked like extreme arrogance was, Ms Whelpton suggests, the behaviour of "a man with low self-esteem, a man who could not afford to recognise the wrong he was doing to others".

In the aftermath of the stillbirth H.D. became timid about sexual relations – or at any rate, about sexual relations with Aldington – and Aldington embarked on affairs: initially fairly insignificant, then a much grander passion for Dorothy Yorke, the fiancée of their friend John Cournos. Cournos, a Ukrainian Jew by origin, was away on diplomatic war service in Russia, which of course made the mutual betrayal all the worse. Aldington – who had harboured contradictory feelings about his possible role in the War from the day of its outbreak – finally enlisted in the ranks "under Lord Derby's scheme", and entered upon the squalor and drudgery of training, followed by the darkness and danger of being a "pioneer" (trench-digger, miner, bridge-builder, etc.) on the Western Front. Here, like Owen, he experienced a development in his feelings about the ordinary soldier, beginning with contempt and disgust but moving on to a warmer, more perceptive, but still rather detached respect; and developing that sense of "them and us" ("they" being non-combatants and "we" being fighting men, of all social classes) which we find to some degree in all the war poets, and which has attracted the label of "combat gnosticism".

From the degradation (as he could not help but see it) of life in the ranks, Aldington was rescued by a period of officer training, followed by a return to the line in the immediate aftermath of the *Kaiserschlacht*. Like Sassoon and Blunden, his survival was thanks to his having "just missed" a number of key engagements; but he was present at the battles for Lens and Cambrai in 1918, and on 4<sup>th</sup> November was only a few miles from Owen at the battle for the Sambre. On

November 11<sup>th</sup> he, unlike the other surviving war poets, was still on the battlefield. In *Death of a Hero* ten years later, he describes a momentary feeling of "almost painful exaltation" which was not experienced (or not admitted) by the others – but this is followed by a reaction which Sassoon and Graves would have recognised:

Then with a worse, almost unendurable pang, he thought of the millions of men of many nations who would never feel that ecstasy, who were gone for ever, rotting in desolate battlefields and graveyards all over the world.

Expecting to be detained for months or years in the Army of Occupation, Aldington actually found himself demobilised fairly early, in February 1919; and then slid into the familiar trough of lassitude, depression and guilt which accompanied survival. In the aftermath of Aldington's own infidelities, H.D. had entered into a short-lived relationship with Cecil Gray, which resulted in a child, Perdita, born shortly after Aldington's return to civilian life. Before the child was born, H.D. and Gray had parted, and H.D. had embarked upon the early stages of her relationship with the young writer Bryher (Winifred Ellerman). Although this was only briefly a full lesbian relationship, it was to be (in various eccentric forms) the emotional and domestic foundation of the rest of H.D.'s life.

Aldington – genuinely torn between his convictions about the rights of the individual to love where he or she chose, between his affection and concern for H.D., and his not-unnatural but not-honestly acknowledged resentment, vacillated about the degree of responsibility which he was prepared to take for the child. Although the bond between him and his wife (they did not divorce for many years) ultimately proved to be stronger than the crisis would acknowledge, the relationship broke down completely for a time. H.D., without Aldington's consent, registered the child as his, and then spent the next years in fear of how he might use his legal rights over the child to punish her (something which, to be fair, he seems never to have considered doing). Aldington, over the same period of years, tried one thing after another in order to regain what he felt the War had taken from him. In the early part of the book, it is easy to feel an indulgent liking for the young Aldington, who after all had scooped a life for himself out of unfortunate beginnings. It is possible to feel pity (perhaps rather than sympathy) for the older Aldington (but he was still only twenty-six when the war ended) without much liking him. Perhaps his life-view, like his poetry, seems in the end simply less attractive than that of the Georgians without the strength of any indisputable superiority of talent behind it. Graves, Sassoon and Blunden all in their way write compellingly about the loss of innocence, and evidently this has chimed with, or perhaps helped to form, many of our perceptions about our culture and the Great War. Aldington too experienced a profound sense of loss - but he could not so convincingly present himself as (had never, perhaps, really been) an innocent, though he tries rather unconvincingly to present his

protagonist, George Winterbourne," as such. His sense of loss - not unfairly, but less sympathetically – seems to be focused on the opportunities which he had missed because of the War, and on what he felt, rightly or wrongly, was the damage the War had done to his talent and creativity.

However strangely, it seems to me, Sassoon and Blunden were inspired by the War: it did terrible damage to them as men, but it fed their literary talent to the end of their days: like Ireland for Yeats, it "hurt them into poetry". Aldington's post-War experience more resembles that of Graves. In that decade between 1919 and 1929, he published several collections, and several individual long poems. He built up, by hard work and talent, a solid reputation and circulation as a literary critic and translator: but the literary scene had moved on: now there were the giants of Modernism to deal with. Aldington respected them, but could not seriously put himself on their wavelength. In his personal life, he tried, like many of the other survivors, to live in modest rural surroundings – partly from economic necessity, partly in order to heal himself and live free from metropolitan corruption. The relationship with Dorothy Yorke was obviously a loving one as far as it went, but eventually it disintegrated into a messy slew of affairs and attempted affairs on Aldington's part, before he eventually returned to his pre-War love, Brigit Patmore. Like Graves, in the late nineteen-twenties, he wrote an angry war-book (as with Sassoon, casting what was essentially memoir as fiction), brought a violent and deliberate end to most of his friendships in England (one form taken by this valediction was the sending of a blasphemous Christmas card to the newly-Anglican T S Eliot) and made a more-or-less dramatic exit from Britain. This is where the book ends, with the publication of *Death of a Hero*, and the beginning of a new, or new-old, life with Brigit Patmore. But, as Aldington himself observed, life is lived not according to long-term projections, but "only in spans of a few months". What came next, I hope that we shall find out – only to a limited extent does this volume predict it.

Vivien Whelpton is clear-eyed about the subject of her biography: she is more than aware of his limitations both as a human being and as a poet – this is no work of hagiography. It is an impressive contribution to knowledge and understanding: a feat of interpretation and compilation to which this short review can do little justice. Like Christopher Hassall's biography of Edward Marsh, it sheds light on a whole scene – literary, historical, political, social – as well as on an individual; and it returns us to an interesting, complex literary figure of that era who somehow did not become the centre-stage actor which he might have been, and evidently felt he ought to have been.

Meg Crane