

The dashing photograph on the cover of this new biography of Richard Aldington says it all. And the word “lover” in the title merely confirms an impression. This is a book about a poet-heartthrob. The Aldington portrayed on the cover reminds one of the type of man represented by the Cary Grants of the 1950s, the Leonardo DiCaprios of the 1990s, and the Zac Efrons of these days. It is a particular type of man who today thrives on social media but in a pre-Internet era had to create his own network of admirers. Once dead, however, the charm has gone and only the writings (or films) remain. For biographers and Aldington enthusiasts it has proven very hard to revive the memory and keep the flame alive. Caroline Zilboorg is one among several who have tried to keep the flame alive and give Aldington a place in the Modernist canon. Vivien Whelpton has risen to the challenge and certainly presented a good case for Aldington. In her view it is the fact of his being a man of letters with the predictable wider range of publications that led to the “neglect” of the writer. Her self-imposed restrictions on her biography are realized by limiting this book to the young adult Aldington. But it results nevertheless in a volume of over 400 tightly printed pages.

The structure of the book is more or less based on the chronology of Aldington’s life with Part One dealing with the pre-war years, Part Two the war years and Part Three the postwar period. In that first part then, from the section “Bohemia: London” onwards, we are introduced to some of the key players in Aldington’s life. Whelpton is very good at painting the pre-war cultural scene: its mix of generations, the confrontation of art and politics, the threat of war and its effect on new artistic initiatives. She presents the survivors of a previous era, the elderly Victorians whose presence was still felt and respected: Thomas Hardy, Henry James and Edward Gosse. But she is equally aware of the importance of the periodicals in this period such as the *English Review* and the *New Age* whose “editor, Alfred Orage, purchased it in 1907 to provide a cultural platform for Fabian socialism. This was Aldington’s biotope, the world in which he immersed himself quickly making friends with a small group of kindred souls. Whelpton identifies Ezra Pound, Brigit Patmore and Hilda Doolittle as the group of inseparable friends in which Aldington was to ripen and form. With them and with other, later friends he was to exchange poems and views on poetry. In this group the Imagist movement was born; by these poets the Imagist movement was defined and eventually monopolized. The web of contacts, meetings and influences only grows more complicated in the next few sections with sporadic anecdotes about authors who do not seem to matter to the life story, such as the tense relationship and resulting quarrel between Hardy and his first wife Emma while Yeats and Newbolt were there. Section Five of this first part presents us with Aldington the Imagist poet, to a large extent through his own poetry and one is intrigued and seduced. I, for one, will go back to the poetry of the man.

Part Two is all about the First World War but the methodology is the same: we follow the adventures of a number of key players of whom Aldington was one. We hear about the poet’s attitude to the war and his eventual decision to enlist. Important new contacts were added to his network: T.S. Eliot, Ford Madox Hueffer, D.H. and Frieda Lawrence and Bryher. Whelpton also adeptly informs the reader of Aldington’s movements and engagements in the war, meticulously described in his autobiographical writings such as *Roads to Glory*, and she illustrates these with maps of the places his brigade moved through or stayed at as well as the

unparalleled war paintings by Paul Nash. The poetry is presented from an interesting angle in the section called “The Poet of War and Desire”, where she points to a fusion of the two themes; the extracts from poems show another, older and more humane Aldington who can write this:

Though you desire me I will still fain sleep  
And check my eyes from opening to the day,  
For as I lie, thrilled by your gold-dark flesh,  
I think of how the dead, my dead, once lay.

And since this is the year in which the war is commemorated everywhere in Belgium it seems appropriate to quote the atmospheric “Meditation in a Belgian Village”:

Perhaps then this is my happiest moment,  
Here in this cold little Belgian house,  
Remembering harsh years past,  
Plotting gold years to come,  
Trusting so blithely in a woman’s faith,  
In the quiet night,  
In the silence.

Part Three shows at first a somewhat purified and chastened Aldington who picks up relationships he had previously stepped out of and shows more consideration and understanding than he did before the war. Thus the story reverts to what is essential in this biography: Aldington’s many loves and friendships. The writer herself may have preferred this way of dealing with his life if we may believe Whelpton. Indeed she relates how Aldington was disappointed with the criticism his novel *Death of a Hero* had elicited from Herbert Read since “Aldington had been seeking the reactions of a friend and former soldier, not those of a literary critic.” Again we are immersed in correspondences and Aldington’s feelings and the biography ends with a lengthy commentary on *Death of a Hero*, which Whelpton believes to be Aldington’s “Atonement”.

This is a skilfully written biography. The writer displays a huge knowledge of the life of her subject and a very good grasp of the contemporary literature and other artistic expressions of the age. Whelpton quotes generously from letters and other autobiographical material. The information is densely packed and could have done with some weeding out of facts and subjective interpretations of her subject’s emotions, always a hazardous enterprise at best. The book would also have gained in depth with more analysis of Aldington’s work and some theoretical insights. But obviously that was not the author’s aim. In what she aimed to do she was successful.

Marysa Demoor

Universiteit Ghent