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**Book Review**

*Richard Aldington, Novelist, Biographer and Exile 1930-1962*

by Vivien Whelpton, Lutterworth Press, 2019. Paperback, 416 pages

By Philip Neale

This is the second volume in a two-part biography of the writer Richard Aldington. The first, *Poet, Soldier and Lover, 1911-1929*, was published in 2014, and described Aldington's youth and as a soldier on the Western Front. The author, Vivien Whelpton, is a retired teacher with a life-long interest in the history and literature of the First World War, and she is an accredited Battlefield Tour Guide.

Even though Aldington's health and outlook on life were severely affected by the war and its aftermath, his early life was considered to be his most creative period with successful war-based novels, such as *Death of a Hero* (1929) – one of the most highly-regarded, and best selling, novels to come out of the Great War. He was a war poet, and Aldington and his first wife Hilda Doolittle wrote stark, minimalist poetry dubbed 'Imagist' by Ezra Pound. This was also the time he turned against the British establishment, and rejected many of the things he saw as wrong with the country and class privilege.

This second book focuses on his travels across Europe and the USA, and his friendships through letters with a large number of other writers and poets. He never lived for long in his hated England, and he led a nomadic existence moving across Europe, and particularly France where he eventually settled, and spent time living in the USA. His different marriages and affairs show he was considered attractive and desirable, but Whelpton also brings out his devotion to his daughter Catherine and her education and career. The book shows he had many difficult personal and literary relationships, and often went out of his way to offend people. It was easy for him to be cynical, ironic and mocking of people, and this transferred to his writing as criticism, sarcasm and anger, which would often upset his targets.

The period covered by this second volume is the most interesting for Lawrence scholars, as it describes Aldington's life when he turned from novels to biography. Lawrence as a biographical subject had first been suggested to Aldington by his close friend Alister Kershaw, and the resultant controversial book, *Lawrence of Arabia: A Biographical Enquiry*, was published in 1955. Aldington was described as a master of biographical writing, and used careful and detailed research to get to a full understanding of his subject. He certainly did this with Lawrence, but there were problems with the availability of resources. This was the time when Arnold Lawrence and other Lawrence correspondents, such as the Shaws, were

very protective of his reputation, and many letters and documents were simply not available to Aldington.

Aldington suffered from a dysfunctional childhood, and, together with his wartime experiences, it is clear that these affected his biographical writing. He saw Lawrence as a self-created hero against a backdrop of a less important part of the war in the Middle East. He believed he (Aldington) had suffered far more, and had also been present in the grand theatre of the Western Front, so why should Lawrence have had that hero status and not himself?

The two aspects of the biography which caused him the greatest problems were that he revealed Lawrence's illegitimacy (while Sarah Lawrence was still alive), and he presented evidence and suggestions that Lawrence was a liar, an exaggerator and had had far too much hand in the previous biographies. He was basically saying that Lawrence as a national hero had all been created by himself, based on lies and exaggerations, together with writing his own accounts of the war with people such as Lowell Thomas. It is well documented that the establishment, known as the 'Lawrence Bureau', directed mainly by Liddell Hart, and consisting of David Garnett, E. M Forster, Robert Graves, and many others, fought a 'dirty' campaign through many different channels and publications to discredit Aldington and prevent his book being published. Henry Williamson played an interesting role by being a close friend of both Lawrence and Aldington: he acted duplicitously for both sides.

Whelpton's book has three chapters on Aldington's research, the tribulations of publication against the campaigns to delay it and stop it, and the aftermath where books were eventually withdrawn from sale by book sellers frightened of the establishment figures. Aldington suffered both mentally and physically from what happened. He became financially poorer, and his health deteriorated. He also lost his creativity and urge to write something similar again, and never really wrote anything significant after 1955. He died a poor man, in a quiet part of South France, in 1962. The only joy he had before his death was recognition for his earlier wartime writings in the Soviet Union, which he visited with his daughter on his seventieth birthday.

It could be argued that he was unfairly treated, and suffered too greatly for what he wrote about Lawrence and what he was trying to achieve. It may be that he was too naive and insensitive to the situation, but he was working in an absence of reliable sources, which are now available and better understood today. One thing Aldington did achieve was to start the debate about the complex character that was T. E. Lawrence. His work was able to stimulate further biographies and a better understanding of Lawrence – the man and his motives – in the years following 1955.

This biography is well researched and contains a wealth of detail – so much so, through so many acquaintances and visitors to Aldington, that it is sometimes easy to get lost with who is who and their importance to the story. This was a very complex period of Aldington's life with many journeys, new friendships and literary relationships. Vivien Whelpton has done a lot of excellent research, and demonstrates a clear psychological understanding and

evaluation of Aldington through his writings and comments. In doing so she shows how it was only too easy for him to express hate and anger towards others.

When I presented my paper on Aldington, and the story behind his Lawrence biography, at the Society Symposium in 2010, I felt more sympathetic with his position and the humiliation he suffered following his 1955 biography. However, this biography has demonstrated that Aldington was his own worst enemy in his attitudes and the manner in which he developed animosity and bitterness towards the subjects of his biographical writing. This style may have been therapeutic for him, but it is easy to feel much less sympathy for him now.