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Gender, genre and politics in the literary work of Sylvia Townsend Warner

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‘NEFARIOUS ACTIVITIES’:
Sylvia Townsend Warner, Valentine Ackland
and MI5 Surveillance, 1935-1955

Judith Bond and Mary Jacobs

I am sorry that we are so isolated here, but there is always plenty to do even in such a small village. However, I have a plan which may be of use. I have a small racing car ... and this I could put at your disposal for two clear days a month, with myself as driver. If you have any stuff to be fetched or carried, or comrades to be moved from place to place – It is a fast car and I could cover good distances.

This dashing letter from Valentine Ackland to the headquarters of the Communist Party of Great Britain, dated 4 January 1935, was to have repercussions for the author and her partner, Sylvia Townsend Warner, for the next twenty years. It signalled the beginning of their association with the CPGB and the energetic work which both did for the Party, particularly in the 1930s; it also brought them to the attention of the Security Service (better known as MI5) who were monitoring the activities of anyone suspected of extreme left- or right-wing affiliations during the inter-war period. From the date of this letter until 1955, after which nothing seems to have been recorded, MI5 maintained a close surveillance of Valentine Ackland and Sylvia Townsend Warner.

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was established in August 1920 and soon had 2,500 members. The Government faced the dual threat of internal subversion by British Communists and the popular rise of Fascism. In 1931, the Security Service was given the responsibility for assessing all threats to the security of the UK from these

sources. MI5 took all possible threats seriously, even two women writers in the rural seclusion of Dorset. After Valentine's initial letter offering her services to the Party, the head of MI5 himself, Sir Vernon Kell, wrote to Major L.W. Peel Yates, Chief Constable of Dorset, on 11 January 1935, asking for covert surveillance of 'the man whose signature is enclosed and who uses the address 24 West Chaldon, Dorchester', and who had been 'reliably reported' to have placed the use of his racing car at the disposal of the CPGB. The file shows clearly that the Service, at the highest level, regarded even this kind of activity as a potential threat to security.

On 14 January 1935, MI5 intercepted a letter from Warner and Ackland to the *Daily Worker*, the official organ of the CPGB, asking the paper to report the ongoing Chaldon libel case: 'Any free publicity that we can get we must get! – We have no "pull" and we are writers, and that means a prejudice against us from the start.' From the libel case reports and an enclosed subscription cheque signed by Warner, MI5 deduced that she was also a subject to be monitored. Despite this, it was Ackland whom they found more elusive and difficult to trace. Consequently, MI5 had been grateful to receive on 2 January a report by a local police sergeant, Henry Martyn, on his impressions of Valentine during the last day of the libel case:

Age 28 – 35, 5' 8"-9", slim build, smart appearance, sharp but regular features, pale complexion, brown or auburn hair which is Eton cropped, blue-grey eyes, eyelids slightly heavy, nose aquiline-medium, thin lips – slightly drooping at corners, good teeth. When face is in repose shows slight lines running from each side of nose to each corner of mouth. Refined speech; rather low voice; speech somewhat clipped. Dress:– short caracal coat and Princess Marina hat (Cossack type) with a small red and white feather in side. Dark skirt (medium length), silk stockings, shapely legs ... Miss Warner, I should imagine, is some years older than Miss Ackland.

The MI5 files offer valuable biographical perspectives on Warner and Ackland's partnership, highlighting their different approaches to the shared endeavour of Party membership and

activism. These distinctions are evident in the variety of their letter-writing styles: Ackland wrote intimately, perhaps self-absorbedly, to the busy CP activist Tom Wintringham, founder of *Left Review*. A typical letter dated 15 March 1935 offers four pages of observations about country living, her experiences at school, and some generalisations about the working classes. Enclosing a manuscript, she confides, 'I'm intimidated that you look on me as a "find" – but awfully glad too. I think that with guidance and self-training I will justify you. I hope so. And anyway, I thank you.' Another letter to Wintringham dated 20 March 1935 discusses the publication of *Whether a Dove or Seagull* revealingly:

Damning to come out with Sylvia, you see, and to be judged either as an imitator (which I am not, consciously) or else as a protégée. But we had to do it, and it was a noble thing to do, but very stupid. America was better than England. They like poetry to read, over there ... We made, in all, and in both editions, £5 between us. No use at all.

By contrast, Warner's intercepted letters are brief, well-crafted performances, expertly mediated to their audience.

The MI5 files also illuminate the trajectories of each woman's political engagement. In Ackland's case this moved from initial passionate espousal to ultimate disillusion and withdrawal; in Warner's the trajectory was less dramatic and the exact nature and depth of her continued allegiance remains a matter of debate. An anecdote revealed by the MI5 files appears to contrast the diminished support Warner was giving to the Party in the 1950s with her dynamic and committed work of the 1930s. In the 1950s MI5 developed bugging techniques, and on 11 February 1952 a conversation between the activists Mick Bennett and Reuben Falber was recorded, transcribed and summarised. They discuss Party funds and potential donors, including Warner:

FALBER said she was (or had been) a Party member, "but she never does anything, you see," and he didn't suppose she would bother to re-register this year. BENNETT expressed surprise at

hearing she was a Party member. A story followed about shortage of Party funds in Dorset and somebody who had decided to approach SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER and made an appointment to see her. All that happened was that the comrade concerned spent 30/- in fares to get down to Dorset and then received a donation of half-a-crown.

However, this diminution of activity must be set in the context of other evidence. Unpublished autobiographical notes by Ackland show that Warner's commitment to Communism was still present, albeit reduced, as late as October 1958: 'Today, *a propos* of a strike in England, I asked if she would vote Communist if there were a candidate here now, & she said she thought she would'¹. Although Warner stayed loyal to the Party long after Ackland had publicly withdrawn from it, it was Ackland who initiated their commitment. Warner's writing of the 1920s demonstrates a politicised consciousness in terms of its interest in socially marginalised figures, but it was Ackland who first felt the imperative of aligning herself with Communism against the growth of European Fascism. An early letter to Llewelyn Powys shows Ackland's awareness of the threat posed by Fascist and Nazi ideologies to members of minorities, including those like herself whose sexual orientation placed them outside the sphere bounded by *kinder-kirche-kuche*:

Have you read the Brown Book of the Nazi Terror? If not, you should read it, and I will lend it to you. Apart from the consideration of my own fate, and others like me, if the Fascist State came to rule us in England, it is a Party I abhor so roundly that I can hardly contain myself when there is any discussion of it ... I think perhaps there is a true danger of the madness spreading to England ...²

Warner's retrospective Narrative in *I'll Stand By You* attributes her developing sense of the need to 'take sides' in the Thirties to Ackland's own prior awareness:

Her seriousness made me reconsider the worth of my dislikes. Priests in their gowns, anti-Semitism, the white man who is the black man's burden, warmongers – I had long been sure of them but ... my

convictions remained unacted desires. Perhaps this was not enough.

However, it was Ackland who was to leave the Party both officially and ideologically twenty years later, whereas Warner's Leftist affiliations appear to have survived in some form until her death. Ackland's letter of formal resignation from the Party was intercepted in March 1953. She was soon to replace Party membership with another allegiance: her return to the Catholic faith in 1956, after a thirty-year interval.

Although Warner's anti-clericalism antedated her official espousal of Communism, for her the two ideas were intimately entwined. Her Narrative is remarkable for its evaluation of Ackland's ideological betrayal as a disloyalty greater than her sexual infidelities: she places fidelity of the mind above that of the body. While her accounts in the diaries and the Narratives of Ackland's protracted involvement with Elizabeth Wade White fully convey Warner's pain, the writer is careful not to blame her beloved for it. Here though the tone is different; the sense of betrayal at Ackland's return to the Catholic Church is palpable, as is the atmosphere of reproach and loss: 'this news shook my whole conception of her ... I felt passionately affronted ... I stared at a door closing between us, the sense of proximity had almost drained out of our lives ...'.³ Ackland was quite aware of the damage done to Warner by her decision: '*But the way it alters things for you is really terrifying, my Love*'. In August 1959, fearing she might not survive an operation, Ackland left a letter for Warner to read after her death. It is full of praise and thanks for Warner's role in creating their life together, but contains a significant warning and rebuke for her 'allegiance to an Idea': a clear reference to her lover's unshaken fidelity to Communist ideals, even if by that stage she no longer carries the Party card:

You must look long and seriously into your own mind before you die, my darling: look with truthfulness at the truth: make yourself SEE the dead people, the imprisoned people, the people under torture, under oppression, under compulsion: of course not only in Russia and China and those countries – but at those countries too.

At least LOOK: so that you are not self-deceived. It may not shake your allegiance to an Idea ... But still it troubles me deeply because I think you have refused to see.⁴

This injunction carries some moral weight; less self-absorbed than many of Ackland's letters, it offers a salutary retrospective commentary on the women's activities monitored by the Secret Service for so many years.

The couple's political activities, as evident from the twenty years of their surveillance by MI5, were also interestingly differentiated. Ackland was fascinated by technology, gadgetry and equipment, whether cars, guns or small duplicating machines. The letter which first brought her to the attention of the Secret Service makes Ackland's touching pleasure in her possession of a car, and pride in her own driving abilities, very clear. Quite what uses she felt the Party might have for a two-seater racing car and its enthusiastic driver remain obscure: it was doubtless her own enjoyment of the vehicle that curtailed its availability for Party use to a mere 'two clear days a month'. In an intercepted draft letter intended for the *Daily Worker*, Ackland, trying to raise an army of 49 volunteers to drive to Spain, feels honour-bound to stress that 'owners must realise that their cars will probably not return intact', a point that would have been of keen interest to her. In other intercepted letters we see her earnestly requesting instruction books on the use of hand-duplicators, and advising an Exeter comrade on stationery and equipment suppliers for propaganda production. By contrast, Warner's activities as revealed by the intercepted letters include providing rural rest-cures – featuring her own good cooking – for exhausted Party workers; collecting money for the supply of soap to Spain; and organising exhibitions of children's drawings to show the effects on them of the trauma of war or the distress of poverty.

The MI5 files demonstrate a similarly differentiated division of labour in Ackland and Warner's use of writing for specifically transactional or propaganda purposes. The literary works published by both women in the 1930s amply demonstrate their political convictions, but the MI5 files

show that they were also willing to put their writing skills to many workaday uses as 'weapons in the struggle'. Ackland, for example, devised propaganda slips for insertion into the pages of library books, intending her political messages to reach working-class readers in this way. Her letters show a characteristic pleasure in the mechanics of production and dissemination – 'stuck far in they hold on all right' – but the slips themselves betray a certain naïvety in their tone and contents. Lists of recommended titles are followed by bossy, occasionally hectoring, exhortations to her implied worker-readers: 'Miners? Read Zola's *Germinal*!'; 'Demand these books from your local library!' and even 'THINK!' This contrasts with the political *nous* and literary sophistication demonstrated by Warner's use and understanding of propaganda. *Left Review* regularly ran a competition for worker-writers set by its resident intellectuals. Intercepted letters from Warner to Tom Wintringham and Amabel Williams-Ellis of the journal's editorial board reveal that the competition she set was a departure from usual practice. Rather than encouraging the worker-writers to produce detailed accounts of their daily lives for almost anthropological judgement by middle-class editors, Warner explained she hoped to develop their critical skills by requiring entrants to write and circulate critiques of each other's propaganda stories. A cool appraisal of her own usefulness to the Party as a writer of propaganda and a perceptive grasp of what was likely to appeal to readers is evident in an intercepted letter to Harry Pollitt at Party HQ: she astutely observes that her Medical Unit background has 'considerable sentimental press value'. Warner's approach was calculated, hard-headed and realistic, where Ackland's, invariably enthusiastic, was occasionally misjudged. Warner was also aware of the need to smuggle her political message *incognito* to her readers, revealing that even a children's book she had been commissioned to write on the history of London offered propaganda possibilities. Warner also enjoyed the creation of writing *personae* for propaganda purposes: an intercepted letter to Emile Burns at Party HQ encloses a draft letter purporting to come from

'An Englishwoman'; she suggests he should send it to mainstream newspapers as part of her 'anti-fascist work'. The MI5 file shows that she even sent Burns 'a visiting card – quite sound' in the name of Mrs A. R. Turpin to guarantee the authenticity of the 'Englishwoman's' letter. Mrs Turpin's letter is a clever confection in which Warner, in the guise of a 'British imperialist', decries the failure of Baldwin's government to control the territorial ambitions of Mussolini, thereby advancing an anti-fascist argument within the Trojan horse of outraged Tory patriotism. She relished such writing in disguise: a manuscript addition to her letter to Burns tells him: 'If you approve, I'd like to do some more'.

The MI5 files reveal some curious vacillations by the Dorset police as to Warner's class status and social habits. The local policeman, Sergeant Young, when asked to give a report on the activities of Warner and Ackland in October 1935, had written that:

they appear reserved in nature, taking no part in the village affairs and no subversive activities of any kind has come to my knowledge or taken place locally. There are very few visitors to the house, these consisting chiefly of the Powys family, who are also authors and residing in the same district, but their entertaining is not on a large scale.

However, a bizarre episode described in the files from 1937 reveals a markedly different interpretation of Warner's standing in the local community. Information was provided to MI5 by Mr Pew, principal scientific officer, HMS Osprey. He was concerned about the visit of 'Mr and Mrs Lazarus' to The Seven Stars Hotel, East Burton, Wool. MI5 deduced these were Abe Lazarus (a CP member and well-known trade union activist) and Millie Baruch. Captain and Mrs Bailey, hotel proprietors, and Mrs Turner, manageress, confirmed that the pair acted very suspiciously on their visit: their luggage contained letters from a man in Spain, whose handwriting, when shown an example, Mrs Turner identified as Tom Wintringham's. The dubious couple had been booked into the

hotel by Miss Townsend Warner.

It would appear that Miss WARNER is looked upon in the area as more or less the local squire and moves about the county in well-to-do social circles. For some time past she has been in the habit of trying to get accommodation for her friends from London and elsewhere, and when accommodation cannot be obtained at the Seven Stars Inn she communicates with the Red Lion Hotel, which is within the same area, and if they cannot accommodate Miss Warner's friends she tries to get them rooms at the "Sailors Return", which is in a little village known as East Chaldon.

'Mr & Mrs Lazarus' aroused suspicion because, ostensibly on a hiking holiday, they showed little sign of doing any hiking, and the hotel was conveniently placed for observing strategic locations such as the Tank Training Centre at Bovington and the Whitehead Torpedo Factory in Weymouth.

The manageress, Mrs Turner, evidently an avid reader of other people's correspondence, reported that a note for the couple left by Miss Warner had warned them to be 'very careful'. All this suspicious activity was reported in detail to MI5 by the hotel owners, along with their reluctance to accept any more bookings from Miss Warner. MI5, however, persuaded Captain and Mrs Bailey to continue accepting bookings made by Miss Warner and thereafter to inform Mr Pew, who would immediately contact MI5. As part of the persuasion, the hotel owners were warned by MI5 of their obligation to keep an Aliens Register and that their system of registration needed improvement. The idea of the owners informing Mr Pew whenever Miss Warner made a booking was judged

the better way, as the local police are rather nervous of doing anything with regard to Miss WARNER, owing to her social position in the county, and in particular within this area. From further enquiries made I am of the opinion that there is a small group of people in the Wareham – Wool – Dorchester area who have strong Communist tendencies, but keep their activities confined to their own group, who in turn appear to have some connection with the intellectual group in London.

MI5 seems firmly convinced that Warner was 'the local squire', an assumption rather at odds with her activities. It is hard to imagine someone who was writing articles for *Left Review*, organising anti-coronation celebrations, and challenging the Weld estate over the contaminated water in Chaldon's wells being a member of the 'County set'. After the incident at the Seven Stars Hotel, the Chief Constable of Dorset 'had a word' with Sergeant Young:

Sergt. Young admitted that he knew that Miss WARNER held extreme views, and had many visitors not only to the house but down from London during the course of the year ... He seemed somewhat nervous of making enquiries regarding these people, and said that owing to Miss WARNER's social standing in the county it was very difficult to obtain any information.

Rather a change of heart by Sergeant Young in the two-year interval between his observations.

To what extent were Warner and Ackland aware of the surveillance under which they lived for twenty years? Did Ackland's cross-dressing attract attention? Had their lesbian relationship prepared them for caution, even as their political commitments required public action? When the Head of MI5 made his second request for police observation of the women in October 1935 his letter emphasised: 'I am, of course, anxious that they should not become aware that enquiries are being made about them'. In fact, they seem to have been well aware of the possibility that they were being monitored. One of the 1935 requests from MI5 for surveillance of the couple by Dorset police officers includes the instruction to discover 'whether either of these two appears to be in any way abnormal'. This instruction almost certainly derived from Ackland's calculatedly androgynous appearance and forename, and the plodding report that it elicited from Sergeant Young does not mistake Sir Vernon Kell's implication. Young records that Ackland, who is tellingly described as being 'on the active side', is given to driving, shooting and cross-dressing; Miss Warner 'appears normal in habits'. However, after this initial interest in 'abnormality', remarkably, neither MI5 nor the

Dorset County Constabulary appears to have regarded the matter as worthy of pursuit; the political activities of the women were the focus of enquiry for the remainder of the surveillance for the next two decades. Still, Warner and Ackland were accustomed to the notion that they might be under scrutiny, and even before the doubtless blundering attempts at concealed observation by Sergeant Young, Ackland was well aware that her mail was probably being intercepted. A letter to Warner of July 1935 which she wittily describes as her 'kindness for the Police' refers to the possibility that it will be 'prized open'(sic), and bits copied out to check for 'known and suspected codes'. She adds perceptively, 'it may be that you and I are not yet well-known enough, and our letters are only opened when they go to Tom [Wintringham]'. Ackland and Warner also appear to have been aware of the duration of their surveillance: thirteen years later, Ackland begins a letter to Warner by remarking, 'Have you thought how pleasant it must be for the MI5 man who reads our correspondence, to have our innocent domestic bliss to study?'⁵

An interesting example of MI5's attitude towards the couple's sexuality stems from a cryptic telegram sent by Ackland to Elizabeth Wade White on 4 May 1941. The telegram was intercepted and held while a copy was made and its significance considered. It reads:

ADVISE CAREFUL LIST CRASKE PICTURES HAVE
PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE PERSON [IF] SHE PRODUCES
PICTURE DARK STORM IS MY PROPERTY LETTER
EXPLAINS STOP ALL WELL SOLOMON SEVEN VERSES
SEVEN EIGHT

The Censor has added a note:

LAST FOUR WORDS TRANSLATION FROM BIBLE AS
FOLLOWS:

THIS THY STATURE IS LIKE TO PALM TREE AND THY
BREASTS TO CLUSTERS OF GRAPES. I SAID I WILL GO UP TO
THE PALM TREE I WILL TAKE HOLD OF THE BOUGHS
THEREOF NOW ALSO THY BREASTS SHALL BE AS CLUSTERS
OF THE VINE AND THE SMELL OF THY NOSE LIKE APPLES

The document is stamped 'HELD TELEGRAM AWAITING DECISION MI5'.

It was not until 26 May that MI5 released the telegram so it could reach its intended recipient. During those three weeks its interpretation seems to have caused considerable difficulty. Andrew Lothian of MI5 wrote to 'A. Foyer, Esq.' of the Plain Code Section, asking him to test the telegram and its Biblical reference for code, informing him that both Valentine and Elizabeth were Communists, though he did not know what 'personal relationship' might also exist between them. Foyer replied to Lothian:

There is a firm Alfred Craske Ltd Photo Engravers of 5 E. Harding St EC4. I also wondered if there is a firm dealing with Cinema pictures of that name but I am unable to trace them.

The telegram appears to be in the nature of a warning that some person White is dealing with is unscrupulous and if she produces among others, a picture called "Dark Storm" that really belongs to Acland [sic].

The biblical quotation is of an unusual character – and possibly rather unpleasant. I do not think it is meant for a code. Telegram harmless I should think.

In the light of the extraordinary misapprehensions into which her fatefully erotic Biblical citation initially led the Security Service and its Plain Code Department, Ackland's 1935 reference to 'codes' now seems doubly ironic. Mr Foyer's memorable conclusion that Ackland's telegram was 'unpleasant' rather than political in import is the only other reference to the women's sexual orientation during their long surveillance.

In fact the questions of suspicion and surveillance engendered further and more complex ironies in wartime. Tom Wintringham excited much suspicion for his conspicuous Party activities and was under strictest surveillance. Nonetheless, he was recruited by the War Office in 1940 to train the Home Guard, using the guerrilla techniques he had perfected during the Spanish Civil War.

Similarly, Warner's status as an active Communist proved no barrier to her involvement with ARP or WVS work, nor, initially, to a role in Army education. She was recruited to lecture, first, according to Wendy Mulford's account, to a class of 'young secretarial ladies at Bridport' and later 'to the Army under its expanded educational programme, until sacked for her left-wing views.'⁶

The relationship between Warner and Ackland, the role and remit of MI5 before, during and after the war, and the changing practices and techniques of surveillance itself are all illuminated by studying not only the content but also the physical features of the MI5 files. A letter to the *Daily Worker* is apparently signed by both women; in fact Ackland has signed for both of them. However, the accompanying cheque for their subscriptions is actually signed by Warner herself. The physical properties of these documents suggest that the initiative in asking help from the *Daily Worker* in sympathetically reporting the Chaldon libel case is taken by Ackland, but that the financial follow-through is Warner's responsibility. This is borne out by an intercepted letter from Ackland to Amalgamated Supplies: 'I am glad to say that a comrade has given me the money to buy a small duplicator and I enclose a cheque for five guineas herewith'. The comrade's signature on the cheque is of course Warner's. Even the car, which meant so much to Ackland as a metonym for her effective agency, was registered in Warner's name.

Manuscript additions of two kinds, by higher-ranking officials, are evident throughout. The emendations, exchanges and commentaries added to the margins of the documents, in some instances by named officials (Roger Hollis, later Head of the Service and suspected double agent, is one such), provide a fascinating record of the range of opinion within MI5. As early as autumn 1938 a vigilant official sends a hand-written note asking whether Warner and Ackland should be involved in ARP work in view of their 'nefarious activities'; a laconic manuscript reply from Roger Hollis reassures him that 'H.O. knows C.P. working in A.R.P.' A much later discussion of Warner's suitability as a lecturer to the troops is recorded in an internal summary of items

within her file; no fewer than six named high-ranking officials debate the question in manuscript marginalia before concluding that in view of her long record, 'this young lady' (Warner was then 50) cannot continue to be employed in Army education. More common are the square brackets inked around names cited in letters. These indicate that a file exists or will be opened on the individual concerned, thus facilitating a detailed system of cross-referencing. The brackets are applied to organisations too – the *Dorset County Chronicle* and Amalgamated Supplies are instances. This cross-referencing system then generates further files: memos by Secret Service operatives summarising the content of other letters that contain references to Warner and Ackland. Examples range from accounts of correspondence between *Left Review* staff concerning Warner and Ackland's desire for a house swap, to a summary of a passing reference to unspecified 'advice' received from Ackland made in a postcard from Millie Baruch to Tom Wintringham. This laborious, cumbersome and indiscriminate system of cross-referencing seems all the more extraordinary if we turn from the *materiality* of the files – features that are physically present – to their conspicuous *absences*.

MI5's common introduction to all the files now released into the public domain states that they may have been subject to 'redaction' and certain documents to 'retention' if they contain 'sensitive information'. Discussion of the intermittent and indiscriminate nature of these files must therefore be taken in that context. It is also known that some MI5 documents were lost in bomb damage and flood. Despite these caveats, the 122 Warner/Ackland files now released constitute a patchy and unbalanced narrative. Certain documents are plainly missing from the record by its own admission: a file said to contain a copy of Ackland's reply to Ramona Garcia's intercepted letter about a home for Basque orphans does not do so; Warner's file contains nothing dated between November 1944 and January 1949, yet Major Peel Yates responds to the new Head of MI5 'with reference to your letter of the 29th October, 1948', which had evidently enquired about Warner's current political activities. Such

absences may be due to administrative error, but that can hardly explain the remarkable absence from her record of a significant aspect of Warner's political activity: her diligent pursuit of accommodation and guarantors for endangered European anti-fascist writers seeking refuge in the UK. The Society has particular reason to know of this work; the generosity of its members has recently permitted the purchase of six letters from Warner to Oliver Stonor amply demonstrating it.⁷ However, this element of Warner's political activity is represented in the files by only two passing cross-references. It is curious then that such letters, written at a time – 1938 to 1939 – when surveillance of Warner and Ackland was particularly intense, should be absent from the MI5 files which had nonetheless troubled in 1935 to note their correspondence with fishmongers and the Society of Herbalists. It might be argued that Warner's letters to Oliver Stonor would not have been intercepted because he was not a Party member and therefore not on the Service's radar; however, the content of the letters themselves makes clear that Warner is vigorously corresponding on the refugee matter with Ivy Elstob, Secretary of AWFIL and herself a Party member with an MI5 file; yet there is no trace of these letters in Warner's surveillance record either. Further proof of omission seems evidenced by the absence from the files of correspondence with Julius and Queenie Lipton, both well-known to the police and MI5, and perhaps most curious of all, the absence of the couple's letters to each other, many of which, as *I'll Stand By You* attests, concerned their planned political activity. It seems reasonable to conclude that what we have is the partial record of an occasionally intermittent surveillance.

It is also curious that despite regular descriptions in the files by police and MI5 officials of Warner and Ackland as 'literary ladies' engaged in 'writing of stories believed for various newspapers', no attempt seems to have been made to assess their widely published work for its 'subversive' content. Instead, MI5 operatives seem occasionally to have monitored the Left press for evidence: one file for example contains two press cuttings of Warner's *Daily Worker* article

'The Government and the Farmers'; another memo notes that Ackland has contributed an article on the 'Agricultural Problem' to *Discussion*, though no cutting is included. The surprise here is that while the existence of such minor and fugitive pieces is painstakingly recorded, there is no evidence that Warner's far more overtly revolutionary novels, poems and journalism for *Left Review* and *Our Time* ever surfaced within the Secret Service's consciousness as worthy of their examination.

Inconsistency is also evident in the assessment of Warner and Ackland's political importance by both MI5 and the police force. In September 1935 Ackland had breezily enquired of Wintringham, 'Can you explain to me how these guns work?' Her note was intercepted, provoking Sir Vernon Kell's request in October for renewed police investigation of the women, focusing on their 'subversive activities'. However a month later a note on Ackland's file records that 'after a discussion of her case it has been decided that her correspondence does not appear to be of any particular interest'. Astonishingly, in December 1940 Dorset's Chief Constable assures the Acting Director General of MI5 that 'there is not the slightest evidence that they are or have been politically active'. In 1952, prompted by Warner's interest in positive relations with the USSR during the Cold War period, Sir Percy Sillitoe, now Head of MI5, approaches the Chief Constable of Dorset yet again, this time referring to the couple as 'two women who in the past have been of particular interest to us'. The request elicits a fresh investigation, resulting in a surprising report, dated December 1952, from a Detective Sergeant Parsons. This announces that although there is no evidence of 'the ladies' having any Communist sympathies now or previously,

it is known however that both persons are great readers and that they do possess some literature appertaining to Socialism. This has only very recently come to light and it may or may not be significant.

The assumptions underlying this report are naïve enough,

but the notion that the detective has uncovered potentially 'significant' evidence in the ladies' possession of Socialist literature, and that this information is deemed worthy of a permanent place in their MI5 files is curious indeed. It appears to call into question the purpose and efficiency of the previous 18 years' surveillance.

Ackland's letter introducing herself to CPGB in 1935 had referred both to the isolation and to the political potential of life in 'such a small village'. The MI5 files reveal the women's strategies for coping with the inherent paradox of their position: allegiance to a programme of political activism predicated upon the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, a largely urban phenomenon, while resident in a remote rural location. Despite MI5's conviction that Dorset harboured a nest of Communists in the 'Wareham – Wool – Dorchester area', their early letters to Party HQ suggest otherwise: knowing 'no other comrades in this isolated area' they are keen to hear of 'any local group', but none is forthcoming. Even getting information about national Party activities was difficult; Ackland wrote plaintively to ask HQ for precise details of the whereabouts of a mass CP demonstration planned for Hyde Park in February 1935: 'I am isolated here', she complains. Admitting their rural location as a handicap, Warner and Ackland sought a house exchange with a London comrade: 'We are most anxious to get to Town to get into touch with other members of the party from whom we are completely cut off while we are here. We are in need of instruction.' However, this model of their isolated rural context as only a deficiency or lack was eventually modified; they came to see it positively as a resource that they could offer to the Party. By May 1936 Ackland was joking to HQ that they should establish a local Agit-Prop branch in Dorset: 'It would be a good chance to send various comrades for country holidays'. In fact burnt-out Party activists proved only too pleased to restore themselves at 'The Olde Communists' Reste', enjoying Warner's cookery and conversation. By summer 1937 this had become a regular service to CPGB: an intercepted letter from Warner to Don Melville accedes to his request to accommodate some

comrades: 'We will do our best to give them a good holiday ... We have chosen a house that will be of great value, we hope, to the Party'. Something of the strain such activities involved is evident in a more personal letter Warner sent to Yvonne Kapp in the same summer. August will be 'no joy-ride', Warner explains: 'a boatload of perfectly unknown comrades spending a recuperative fortnight'.

The MI5 files also make clear that Warner and Ackland took compensatory action to offset their isolation in the countryside, keeping in touch with Party matters national and international. They followed contemporary political developments, reading with determination and discipline. Intercepted letters demonstrate both women's easy familiarity with the subtly differing positions of a wide range of relatively obscure contemporary figures on the broad Left: Strachey, Page Arnot, Citrine and Pritt. Lacking local contact with activists, they made efforts to create a network themselves, and actively pursued local causes. A letter to HQ written in May 1936 explains that they have 'started to loan out various Party books to people round about', and that they are prepared to travel beyond the local vicinity, asking to be connected up 'with anyone within 50 miles of here'. Indeed, Ackland was defensive of their rural position when she reminded the metropolitan Wintringham that 'Lenin did not despise the importance of the country workers'. However, the MI5 files show that problems with access to information and people persisted. During the Munich crisis in September 1938, Warner and Ackland could not obtain the *Daily Worker*, a significant loss at a time when information on CPBG's position on impending war was desperately needed, as Ackland's intercepted letter to a London comrade shows: 'Your letter came at the right time, just as we were wanting to know how things were going – The D.W. didn't reach us at all during those days of crisis'. How ironic then that Warner and Ackland's *News Chronicle* letter⁸ attacking Chamberlain and supporting the prospect of war against Hitler was criticised by some nervous urban respondents, who accused these rural residents of 'writing from a safe place and saying we ought to be in London' – where the bombs would fall.

The present writers hope to have suggested here something of the MI5 files' uses and limitations. These fascinating documents provide an oblique but illuminating commentary on Warner and Ackland's views, activities and relationships over two decades. Perhaps they are best understood as a series of curious footnotes, occasionally supplementing the invaluable biographical and critical insights of writers such as Claire Harman, Wendy Mulford, Janet Montefiore, Mary Joannou and Frances Bingham.

- 1 Valentine Ackland, from 161 pages of unpublished autobiographical notes, Dorchester Archive, R(FR)/10/1/2, pp.52-53
- 2 Letter from VA to Llewelyn Powys, Nov.1933, quoted in Narrative 6, *I'll Stand By You*, London, Pimlico 1998, p.122-23
- 3 Taken from Narrative 14, *ISBY*, p.327, 328, 329
- 4 Letter of Aug.14 1959, *ISBY*, pp. 351-52
- 5 *ISBY*, p.133-34, p.223
- 6 Wendy Mulford, *This Narrow Place*, London: Pandora 1988, p.151
- 7 Six 1939 letters to Oliver Stonor and copies of six 1938 letters to E.T.Eames now in the possession of the Society
- 8 *News Chronicle*, Oct. 3rd 1938, p.6