

14. The Public Face

Novelist, Biographer, Memoirist and Anthologist

While the scope of Aldington's output during the American years illustrates his versatility, it also suggests desperation. His seven-and-a-half year sojourn in the United States, with its combination of extensive travel and residence in a variety of communities, produced no material for poetry or prose. Several years later he would tell Martin Secker that he had 'a half-formed subject' for a short novel in a south-west Florida setting, but the idea came to nothing.¹

We might have expected his marriage, fatherhood and the strong, if few, friendships of this period, as well as his exposure to a new environment, to have enabled him to throw off the emotional burdens of the past and to seek imaginative inspiration in the world around him. Instead, the familiar pattern reasserted itself – in New York, in New England, in Washington, D.C., Florida, Taos and Los Angeles – of initial excitement and hopefulness followed by disenchantment and recurring bouts of anxiety and depression. It is important to recognise, however, that he carried with him to America the problem he had lived with all his adult life, compounded now by the war and by his responsibility for his young family: his need to earn a living from his writing. The war itself – and perhaps his isolation from it – was a further cause of anxiety.

Rejected Guest, mostly written at the Villa Koechlin before the move to America, came out of the stable that had produced *All Men Are Enemies* and *Very Heaven*. Its close resemblance to those earlier novels not only demonstrates the narrow, and very autobiographical, range of Aldington's preoccupations, but suggests a loss of inventiveness. Once again, he took a phrase from a Romantic poet as his title, this time Shelley.² The 'rejected guest' in question is David Norris, the illegitimate child of a young British officer killed in the First World War. Brought up by his maternal grandparents in impoverished and isolated circumstances, he tries on their deaths to use his small inheritance to gain himself some higher

education. He makes himself known to his wealthy paternal grandfather, a baronet, with the intention of asking for a loan to complete his studies. Instead, his grandfather lavishes money on him but requires him to abandon his studies and to live on the Riviera with a guardian in order for his identity not to become public. Here David falls in love but this apparently idyllic relationship is brutally terminated by the outbreak of the Second World War and the intestate death of his grandfather. At the end of the novel – like Chris Heylin in *Very Heaven* – David returns to England, penniless, alone and with no prospects.

One of the most successful aspects of the novel is its evocation of place: the interwar utilitarian town of 'Ruxton' and David's sordid London lodgings give way, in the second half of the narrative, to the brilliant and sensuous beauty of the Mediterranean:

April, we know, is the cruellest month; but at Saint-Australe it was beautiful. Snow-bearing east winds from the Alps had gone, and the mistral itself grew rarer. Long ago the swallows and swifts had come darting and sweeping from across the sea, a small black arrow-storm in the vanguard of spring. In the sheltered valleys of mimosa and holm-oak the first nightingales startled the air with brief fragments of unpractised song. Like a golden wave slowly flooding the mountains, the broom and thorn broke into yellow flower, with a foam of white cistus. As in the Spring poems of the Anthology, the wine-dark sea calmed itself into smiles, and navigation became safe even for the intrepid Hellenes of old and the modern Mediterranean fishers.³

The hills, sea and weather of the Riviera both influence and reflect David's circumstances and moods in a lightly applied pathetic fallacy. A felicitous touch is that David's guardian's Mediterranean home is – transplanted to the mainland – the *vigie* on Port-Cros where Aldington had stayed with Lawrence, Frieda, Yorke and Patmore in 1928 – and where *Death of a Hero* was begun.

Character types re-emerge from the earlier novels: David's guardian, Mr Martindale, is a variation on Mr Chepston in *Very Heaven* or Purfleet in *The Colonel's Daughter*, intelligent and even at times a mouthpiece for the author, but ultimately cynical, self-serving and thoughtless; Margy Stuart of *The Colonel's Daughter* becomes Diana Rockingham, the woman with whom David falls in love and who carelessly abandons him at the end of the novel; O'Hara and Cowley, the friends David makes in his home town, are shadows of Stephen Crang and Robin Fletcher in *All*

Men Are Enemies; Prince Alleoti, the wise and cultured aristocrat who befriends David is a variation on Henry Scrope of *All Men Are Enemies* or Dudley Pollack in *Death of a Hero*, older male characters whose presence allows the protagonist to air his ideas and concerns in lengthy passages of dialogue, and who offer him guidance and advice which is sound but ultimately inadequate. In keeping with the general tone of *Rejected Guest*, Prince Alleoti turns out to be a fraud – at least in David’s view, an ‘absentee Calabrian landlord’ entertaining the young man with his ‘urbane intellectual parlour tricks’ and ‘fake Hellenism’: ‘The old man wasn’t a fool; he had both feet firmly planted on a 20th-century income in order to live in a cloud-cuckoo-land utopia of the 5th BC.’⁴

In addition to this cast of main characters we have vignettes of literary society very like those in *Death of a Hero* in their accuracy, acuteness – and malice. Here the two writers satirised are H.G. Wells and Michael Arlen. Wells had never expressed much interest in Aldington and had taken Patmore’s side when he left her; but Arlen had always been an amiable acquaintance. Another malicious portrait is of David’s London landlady, ‘built on a flabby Rubens scale’, who ‘mythologised herself and everything about her with impudence and self-deception’. In case the reader misses the allusion, her name is Watkins.⁵

The novel’s major weaknesses are ones we have encountered before: an intrusive and urbane authorial voice which disengages the reader from the world of the narrative; and a naive and passive central character. Aldington explicitly calls our attention to David’s weakness, describing him as one of ‘the silver change of humanity, the people who cannot find repose in the commonplace, who are aware of the great struggle of minds but are not quite good enough to take any real part in it’.⁶ Like George Winterbourne (another *naïf*), Chris Heylin and Georgie Smithers, David is presented to us as a victim of his social and family circumstances, although the reader may feel that the protagonist carries some responsibility for the tragic outcome.

The extensive passages of authorial comment that weaken *Very Heaven* are gone, replaced by David’s long conversations with Martindale, Alleoti and Diana. However, rhetorical flourishes abound: ‘Rosamund Norris had two or three nice dresses and no brains to mar her prettiness or interfere with romance’; ‘Having lost her man through a stray shell, Rosamund went off to make shells to destroy other women’s men’; ‘It is the misfortune of the self-educated that they invariably associate with their mental inferiors, and hence rate themselves too high’; ‘[Martindale] went in for the maximum of good living with the minimum of responsibility’; ‘There can be little doubt that his first real love affair has a very stimulating

effect on the human male. He becomes fully aware of what a remarkable chap he is.⁷ Here reader engagement with the narrative is sacrificed to short-term entertainment.

The *TLS* review was critical:

The distaste or disgust or 'disillusionment' that is so pronounced in Mr Aldington's novels is not abated here. Once more he disapproves of a great many things – of snobbery, prudery, industry, Christianity, numerous forms of art and literature. The motive of his criticism is often plain enough, springing as it does from an acute and deeply fretted sensitiveness; between an antiquated ideal and the commercialism of our day, he suggests, lies a morass of the spirit in which normal humanity founders. With all the good will in the world, however, it cannot be said that this all-inclusive condemnation of his is delivered here with sufficient imaginative force or weight. David, no doubt, is the type and symbol of a frustrated generation, the rejected guest at the feast of life. But you cannot make a good novel out of frustration alone or out of the indictment of an entire civilization.⁸

The *Times* reviewer focused on the authorial intrusions:

Mr Aldington is one of the most personal of authors. To read one of his novels is like having the next-door flat and seeing him several times a day. He is always dropping in to see how his characters and the reader are getting on together, and this habit, which is at first amusing, becomes wearisome.⁹

Life for Life's Sake has a very different tone. The memoirs, subtitled *A Book of Reminiscences*, were written for a middle-class American audience typified by the readers of *Atlantic Monthly* where it was serialised. It is chiefly about Aldington's place in the literary world and is reticent about his private life, which barely intrudes on the narrative. The first five chapters focus on his upbringing in rural England, and here his ability to evoke the spirit of place is strongly in evidence. There is little hint of disharmony or disadvantage; only his schooling is criticised: 'My days at school were . . . a perpetual struggle against a conditioning which was repulsive to me.'¹⁰ There follow four chapters about his life in the literary world of pre-war London. The portraits of Lawrence, Pound, Ford and Eliot have none of the vitriol of those in *Death of a Hero*. Of Pound he concedes, 'It seems to me hard to deny his flair or that he has at least

a streak of genius', and of Ford, 'I have known many men in my time, but few so fundamentally innocent of real harm', and he speaks of the generosity of both men towards other artists.¹¹ The portraits of Lawrence and Eliot come in the wartime and postwar chapters. The profile of Eliot is restrained and focuses on the way in which he 'succeeded . . . by merit, tact, prudence and pertinacity . . . in imposing his personality, taste, and even many of his opinions on literary England'.¹² As for Lawrence: 'Of all human beings I have known he was by far the most continuously and vividly alive and receptive.'¹³

Three chapters deal with the war and its aftermath and a further eight are devoted to the 1920s, Aldington's retirement to the rural home counties society of Berkshire and his visits to Italy and France, ending with (a version of) the events at Port-Cros and the writing of *Death of a Hero*. The 1930s and his travels throughout that period are covered swiftly in the final two chapters. Along the way there are many other portraits: of H.D. ('I have never known anybody, not even Lawrence, with so vivid an aesthetic apprehension') and of Yeats, Monro, Hulme and Gaudier-Brzeska, Orioli and Douglas, Joyce, Wells (a far more charitable portrait than in *Rejected Guest*), de Gourmont, the Sitwells, Storer, Read and Barney; and of less prominent friends and acquaintances such as MacGreevy, Prentice and Frere, Gribble, Slonimsky, Henry Church, Fallas and Whitham. One of the most sharply critical evaluations is of Read:

[H]is poems seem to me to lack the passion which gives life to even the worst splurgings of D.H. Lawrence, and the intellectual concentration which so effectively conceals Eliot's emotional sterility. . . . [M]uch of Read's work suffers from a kind of metropolitan provincialism, addressing itself to a small group of super-aesthetes whose mental fashions change as quickly as those of *couturiers*.

Not only what he wrote of Douglas himself but also his account of the 'Maurice Magnus affair' were badly received by Douglas, a refugee in Portugal when the memoirs appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*. Aldington would return to the Magnus story in biographies of both Lawrence and Douglas in the 1950s and consistently took Lawrence's side in the matter. Magnus, an American, had been one of Douglas's acquaintances and it was through Douglas that Lawrence had come to know him. Magnus was a spendthrift and constantly in debt. He received a small loan from Lawrence and subsequently followed him to Sicily to ask for more money, with which he travelled to Malta where he was pursued by the

Italian police for his debts and committed suicide to avoid imprisonment. Douglas was his literary executor and agreed that Lawrence should write an introduction to Magnus's memoirs of his wartime experiences in the Foreign Legion. Taking exception to the account of events that appeared in this introduction, Douglas published a pamphlet entitled *D.H. Lawrence and Maurice Magnus: A Plea for Better Manners* in which he blamed Lawrence for Magnus's death, asserting that Lawrence had been too mean to give Magnus enough money to escape imprisonment. In *Life for Life's Sake* Aldington demands:

Why on earth should Lorenzo have given more than half the small sum he had in the world to a comparative stranger who, he had every reason to think, was a waster and perhaps a crook? Norman had much more money than Lawrence, and Magnus was *his* friend, not Lawrence's.¹⁴

However, the tone of the book is generally cool and urbane. One of the few departures from this is the impassioned account of the 'indifference verging on hostility' with which the civilian world treated 'the men of the returning army' in 1919. Furthermore:

It was not enough that the returning soldiers were snubbed and left to get on as best they could. Our dead were insulted; our battlefields were made a show for money. . . . Every night as I read or lay sleepless I heard the raucous shouts and whoops of drunken revellers, a strange disorderliness in the decorous West End. I am no enemy to rejoicings, but this debauchery over ten million graves seemed to me indecent. I saw nothing to rejoice about, having too many vivid recollections of endless desolation and rows upon rows of wooden crosses.¹⁵

On his experience of the war itself he is more detached – deliberately: '[W]hat I have set down here has been the trifling, not the tragical. To have re-lived it all once in the making of another book was strain enough.' He admits, however, that: 'Unexpectedly, in a flash, it may break through that laboriously built wall of forgetfulness. Certain smells, sounds and sights are the battering rams which suddenly demolish the wall and let the memories escape.'

On his personal life he is brief – and in some cases disingenuous. He is candid about the break-up of his marriage in 1919: '[T]hrough my own folly or worse, I had got my personal life into a tragical mess, which

added to my difficulties, and resulted in separation from H.D.¹⁶ However, the equally dramatic events of 1928 are accounted for with no sense of personal responsibility: 'I missed most of my twenties, when most people have a lot of fun . . . there was a repressed young man under my sedate exterior clamouring to be heard. I let him be heard. And why not?'¹⁷ The break-up of his relationship with Patmore (who, along with Yorke, is never mentioned) and his elopement with Netta are lost in an invented narrative that has him deciding in 1935 to spend 'the rest of [his] life' in the United States. In Connecticut that year, he maintains, 'I made up my mind that henceforth I would make my headquarters in America.' Subsequent events are subsumed into this construction: 'Twice the complications of life took me back to Europe for rather long periods, one of them being my second marriage and the birth of my daughter, about eighteen months later; but at the third attempt I succeeded in getting permanently free from European entanglements.'¹⁸

The New York Times focused on the 'fine and meticulous reticence' that seemed 'determined to keep *Life for Life's Sake* on an even and detached keel': '[T]here are moments when the private memoirs, the unwritten confessions as it were, peer through the more objective pages, but these moments are fleeting, swift shadows glancing across the more solid aspects of things . . .' The reviewer called the work 'a book of pictures, of personalities, of places, of literary urges and movements', and commented on the skill with which the author brought people and places to life. He concluded: 'He has brought us the sense and spirit of vanished times and he has done it without hurting any feelings or baring any wounds or betraying any confidences, and that is something indeed in a period when a civilised reticence is considered either Victorian or cowardly.'¹⁹

Whether there was a market for the book in Europe Aldington would never discover. Frere consistently refused his requests for Heinemann to publish it, partly because he felt that it would have little appeal for a British audience that, unlike Aldington himself, had endured the deprivations of the Second World War and its aftermath and felt some resentment towards wartime expatriate writers, but also, surprisingly in the light of the book's genial tone, because he feared that several of the portraits would at best make Heinemann unpopular in literary circles and at worst attract libel charges.²⁰

The Viking Book of Poetry of the English-Speaking World, published in September 1941, was the product of extensive reading and research, drawing on all Aldington's expertise on poetry from *Beowulf* onwards, and necessitating meticulous selection. Personal inclinations are occasionally discernible, as in the provision of six poems by Lawrence and five by H.D.

when most contemporary poets are represented by one or two. Yeats and Hardy both have six, but Robert Frost a surprising five. Swinburne has ten and William Scawen Blunt a remarkable twelve, while Browning's fifteen contrasts with Tennyson's seven.

Predictably perhaps, although the anthology consisted of over 1,200 poems by about 300 known poets (and a number of anonymous ones), and the selections were generally well-judged and even-handed, many of the reviews consisted of adverse criticism of the contemporary choices. When the book appeared in Britain in December 1947, the *Manchester Evening News* reviewer called the last hundred pages 'a serious blemish on a selection which, for some two thirds of its length, is very good indeed'.²¹ However, the book fortuitously appearing in Britain in the run-up to Christmas, Edward Shanks commented in the *TLS* that he could think of nothing finer to put in the hands of a young person beginning to take an interest in poetry.²²

It is an indication of Aldington's financial concerns, but also perhaps of an awareness that he had run dry of creative ideas, that he took on towards the end of his residence in Hollywood the even more laborious task of compiling an anthology of poetry of the Western world for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In fact, the work, though completed, was never published. Anthologies were becoming his means of earning a living – and gaining in the process some sense of scholarly achievement: in 1946 there were the *Great French Romances* and the Viking *Portable Oscar Wilde*; and over the following two years he would work on a Walter Pater selection and an anthology of the writings of the Aesthetes.²³

His foray into biography – the first since his *Voltaire* in 1925 – was extremely successful. As he had done in the earlier book, he expertly synthesised vast quantities of information into a balanced and well-proportioned narrative – from which Wellington emerges, as Selwyn Kittredge observed, 'as a living, breathing human being'.²⁴ Aldington's command of his material is most evident in the chapters that deal with the Peninsular War and the Waterloo campaign. The military historian Cyril Falls, reviewing the book on its publication in Britain in 1946, called it 'firmly and decisively written' and commended its good military detail, particularly with regard to the Waterloo campaign.²⁵ Graeme Cooper, a contemporary authority on the two campaigns and an experienced guide on those battlefields, comments on the insights the book furnishes into Wellington's decision-making and strategic thinking, demonstrating his ability and effectiveness as a commander.²⁶

Although the reader is aware of the author's presence, shaping, analysing and reflecting, that presence is never intrusive, the voice always informed and authoritative but also good-humoured and measured.

This is a particularly impressive achievement in the closing chapters, which deal with Wellington's disastrous political career after 1819. With respect to the Duke's misjudgements, Aldington points out that he had spent few of his adult years in the country and consequently had little understanding of either the English people or the Industrial Revolution, against which two powers he:

fought blindly and disastrously for his reputation . . . an interesting example of a man brilliantly successful in a war where (unknown to himself) he was backed by the will of his own people, the spirit of the times, and the good wishes of mankind, turning to failure when that support was withdrawn because he failed to recognise the signs and trends of the newer age, a fresh generation, another world.²⁷

Never excusing, but always explaining his subject's attitudes, behaviour and actions, he reminds the reader that the Duke had been conditioned 'by his birth and upbringing, by his profession and career and interests, to complete identification with the aristocratic party and a firm (if naive) faith that they, and they alone, made the strength, safety, happiness and glory of the realm'. He continues, in a passage that reminds us of his penchant for satire: 'He could scarcely have mistrusted the people more if he had been one of the people's friends, those Whig peers who jogged along on £40,000 a year and jeered at Tories and *jacquerie* alike over 10 p.m. rere-suppers of oysters and hot pheasants wheeled round on trolleys by obsequious flunkys.'²⁸ 'Common sense,' he concludes:

is valuable; but it doesn't cover everything as charity is said to do. In those days there was a need for faith, almost a mystic faith, to believe that these ignorant violent people could in their children become decent civilised people if only they were freed and decently treated. But you had to take the risk of freeing them. Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, had too much common sense to believe in freeing them, too great a feeling of responsibility to the throne (Prinny and his brandy bottle) to take the risk.²⁹

When the book was published in Britain the historian Charles Webster noted Aldington's success in communicating his own pleasure to the reader and remarked how much he had enjoyed 'those spirited pages in which every now and again a modern idiom links up the campaigns with our own experience'.³⁰ The *Daily Telegraph* reviewer thought the book

‘sensible and just’: ‘Under [Aldington’s] brush . . . we see the firm features of a man great in character, foresight, courage, quickness of apprehension and mastery of the science of war.’³¹ That year, the book was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography.

The final production of Aldington’s years in America was the novel *The Romance of Casanova*, completed on New Year’s Day 1946 and published later that year. A spin-off from his involvement in the editing of *Great French Romances* for the Pilot Press, it is a derivative *genre* piece, although an accomplished one, in which the political intrigues of eighteenth-century Venice are darkly evoked and set pieces such as Casanova’s escape from the Leads vividly realised. The intention for the tale to become a screenplay for a period adventure film is transparent, and Anthony Powell, reviewing it in the *Daily Telegraph* when it appeared in Britain in January 1947, found it to be ‘rather in the manner of Baroness Orczy’. He might, with equal validity, have compared it to a Dumas novel. However, the *TLS* reviewer identified one interesting feature of the narrative: the way in which it casts the protagonist as ‘the tool of women, not their master’; certainly the female characters are represented as more intelligent, determined and active individuals than Casanova himself.³² The most enthusiastic review was in *The Manchester Guardian*, where Charles Marriott commended the way in which Aldington’s ‘firm, light hand . . . moves confidently about eighteenth-century Venice’ and found the writing ‘straightforward, smooth, flexible, and . . . sinewy’.³³

Creatively, the years in America were disappointing. Just as he had earlier come to accept the end of his career as a poet, Aldington had discovered that he could no longer write novels. He had realised, however, that his erudition and passion for literature could earn him a basic living, if publishers could be persuaded that there was a market for his proposals. More importantly, his one success had been in the field of biography, which drew on both his meticulous scholarship and his skills as a writer.