

Introduction

Volume One of this biography covered eighteen years of Aldington's adult life, ending with the publication of *Death of a Hero*, his novel of the First World War, in 1929. During those years he was a founder member of a new poetic movement and the literary editor of a modernist journal. He went on to serve as an infantryman on the Western Front and, when the war ended, to endure a decade of post-traumatic stress – at the expense of his marriage to the American poet H.D., his subsequent relationship with Dorothy Yorke, and many friendships, such as those with Frank Flint, John Cournos, T.S. Eliot, Harold Monro, D.H. Lawrence, Bonamy Dobrée and Herbert Read. He published five collections of poems and three long poems as well as being a major contributor to several anthologies;¹ he worked as a reviewer and critic for several prominent journals; and he published over a dozen translations as well as selections of his essays and critical writings and a literary biography of Voltaire.²

Death of a Hero was a departure – in several respects: it was his first novel; it signified the end of his 'poetic' persona (although he would publish two more long poems); and, with its withering contempt for his native land, it launched him on the expatriate existence and the combative relationship with the English literary establishment that would characterise his later life. For now, his passionate relationship with Brigit Patmore and the enthusiasm with which he flung himself into a volume of war stories and a second novel, into travel and into a number of new friendships were indications of a renewed vitality. 'In the autumn of 1929,' he wrote later, 'it seemed to me that I could accept the remainder of life with a certain amount of confidence and cheerfulness.'³ There were more short stories to come, as well as six more novels, some of them as disquieting as *Death of a Hero*. More controversially still, there were memoirs and biographies: of Wellington; of the nineteenth-century naturalist and eccentric, Charles Waterton; of D.H. Lawrence; of Charles Prentice, Pino Orioli and Norman

Douglas; of Robert Louis Stevenson; of the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral; and, most contentious of all, of T.E. Lawrence, the man Aldington began by admiring but for whom he came to feel contempt.

Inevitably, there were other lovers. Other struggles. Other fraught relationships – and several fulfilling ones. There was the joy, as well as the anxiety, of parenthood, particularly when it became, as it did from 1950, single parenthood. There was the return into his life of H.D. and, more surprisingly still, of her partner, Bryher.

Aldington's dysfunctional upbringing and his war experience continued to influence his personal life and behaviour (and, in the case of the war, his physical health and well-being too). They were also played out in novel after novel; but so were his love of nature and the physical world and his passionate beliefs in individuality and in the power of love between a man and a woman. The public image of him for the last sixty years or more has been of an isolated and embittered figure, an image which many attribute to the appearance of his 1955 biography of T.E. Lawrence and the fury with which it was received by the political and literary establishments. Yet that reputation began much earlier, as can be seen from remarks made by C.P. Snow in the booklet he wrote to accompany Heinemann's reprinting of six Aldington works in 1938:⁴

The bitterness is there all right. But it only predominates in one or two books, and in them is accompanied by much else. In everything he has written we ought to find many qualities far different and far more important. In order to get all we can from him, we need to understand the 'bitterness', put it in its place, and see beneath it the particular conception of life, the particular kind of passion and sensitivity, of which it is only one result . . .⁵

As we set about evaluating Aldington's later life and work, we might do well to bear in mind Snow's advice about how to read his complex personality.