

Introduction

Aldington published his memoirs in 1941, calling the book *Life for Life's Sake*: hedonism was his credo. Interviewed in 1930 at the age of thirty-eight and at the height of his success as the author of the bestselling *Death of a Hero*, he told the journalist Louise Morgan, 'I like travelling, conversation, gluttony and wine-bibbing, swimming, the movies. I like, too, architecture, painting and sculpture as "objects of contemplation". I like walking. And, above all, I like making love.'¹ With the exception of the movies, the 19-year-old poet would have said much the same, although the gluttony and wine-bibbing were perhaps later additions to the repertoire. The writer added, 'I've read extensively in the literature of the past – French, Italian, Greek and Latin as well as English'. At nineteen, Aldington had already embarked on that programme of reading. Its importance for him, then and always, was its capacity to inform and illuminate 'the life of the here and now – the life of the senses'. 'If we do not live in these we scarcely live at all'.²

Aldington's life-story in the period covered by this volume is dominated by three beautiful, remarkable and tenacious women: his first lover, Brigit Patmore, to whom he returned at the end of the 1920s; Hilda Doolittle, or H.D. (*passim*), with whom he lived for less than five years but whom he was to love for the rest of his life; and Dorothy Yorke, the *femme fatale* for whom he left H.D. Yorke became his companion throughout the ten painful years of his recovery from the effects of the war and the failure of his marriage to H.D., only to be discarded as he emerged, chrysalis-like, in 1929.

In the dedication of *Life for Life's Sake* Aldington wrote: 'Yeats used to say of George Moore: "Other men kiss and don't tell; George Moore tells and doesn't kiss." I would give a great deal to write as well as George Moore, but in this respect I prefer to be like other men.' This reticence with regard to his long-term relationships (four in all) and

to his numerous other sexual liaisons was partly due to his respect for the women involved; it was also, of course, self-preserving, particularly after his attempt to be 'modern', open and honest about his affair with Dorothy Yorke effectively destroyed his marriage in 1918. He was a very private man throughout his life; surprisingly, given his gregariousness. His daughter told the current writer that her father failed to tell her in 1950 that her mother had left the two of them permanently, and never spoke with her about the reasons for that abandonment.³ This despite the fact that the relationship between the 12-year-old Catherine and her father was a very close one. Nor did 'Catha' know of the existence of H.D. until she met her as an adult; and even then she learned nothing of the intimate relationship her father had shared with the elderly poet. She remarked in 2000, 'For cultivated and analysed people, they were much given to silence! They had words for writers, but few for their children.'⁴

Much earlier in his adult life, Aldington had lost a child: H.D.'s baby was still-born in 1915, when she was twenty-eight and her husband twenty-two. The couple's suppression of their feelings in the aftermath of this trauma was a significant contributing factor in their subsequent estrangement. Julia Ashton, H.D.'s alter-ego in her autobiographical novel, *Bid Me To Live*, thinks, 'She had lost the child a short time before. But she never thought of that. A door had shuttered it in, shuttering her in, something had died that was going to die. Or because something had died, something would die.'⁵

Aldington's reticence poses a problem for the biographer. For some relationships at some periods there is extant correspondence; that between himself and H.D. from 1918 until her death in 1961 is the most important; but after their separation he destroyed all their pre-1918 correspondence and her letters to him until 1920. After 1920 their correspondence ceased for nearly a decade.

The literary biographer who believes that the life illuminates the work hopes to find that the converse is also true. Aldington's novels, particularly *Death of a Hero* and *All Men Are Enemies*, are indeed strongly autobiographical. Both books demonstrate powerfully the impact of the war on him, at the time and in the aftermath. Nevertheless, the scrupulousness which prevented him from 'kissing and telling' extends to his fictional work: those who have attempted to see H.D. and Dorothy Yorke (also known as Arabella) in Elizabeth and Fanny, the two leading female characters in *Death of a Hero*, have found that the fictional women are not accurate reflections of the real. Aldington insisted to H.D. that his models were actually those celebrities of the

Paris bohemian scene, Nancy Cunard and Valentine Dobrée (with both of whom Aldington conducted liaisons), but that Elizabeth and Fanny are replicas of these two women is also unconvincing. It is in Aldington's poetry that we find an authentic treatment of each of his significant love affairs at its most intense: in *Reverie* (1917), *Images of Desire* (1919), *The Eaten Heart* (1929), *A Dream in the Luxembourg* (1930) and *The Crystal World* (1937).

However, Aldington and his lovers figure prominently in the writings of others; in the writings of the lovers themselves, and of 'third parties', both groups often having resentments to off-load. These works are either memoirs or *romans à clé*, and many of them are very revealing. Of course, such works can be traps for the unwary. The novels are far more illuminating than most of the memoirs (his own included), which suffer either from inaccuracies of memory or from being exercises in self-promotion. The novels, partly because they were written so soon after the events they narrate, often burn with pain or bitterness and lack the creative detachment that turns life into literature. Such are John Cournoos's *Miranda Masters* (1926), Brigit Patmore's *This Impassioned Onlooker* (1926) and *No Tomorrow* (1929), and Jennifer Courtenay's *Several Faces* (1930). While equally revealing, D.H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* (1922) and Louis Wilkinson's *The Buffoon* (1916) display more cold malice than white heat.

H.D.'s novels stand apart from the rest. They are remarkable for being both vividly close to the events and polished works of art. No biographer can ignore their invitation to stand in the wings and watch the action unfold. She was a meticulous observer of the world immediately around her. Of course the perspective is partial, but its absence of bitterness (though not pain) helps us to trust the story. She worked consistently through the decade following the war to make sense for herself of the troubled events of her recent past, in *Palimpsest* (1926), *Paint it Today* (composed 1921), *Asphodel* (composed 1921-1922), *HER* (composed 1926-1927) and *Bid Me To Live*, which, although not published until 1960, was begun in 1918.

While Aldington did not betray his lovers in his fiction, he was less generous towards certain of his fellow-writers and towards his parents. The former are savagely satirised in *Soft Answers* and *Death of a Hero*, the latter in several of the novels but principally *Death of a Hero*. This leads us to a second problem for the biographer: Aldington's public reticence extended to his family. The reader of *Life for Life's Sake* is led to assume, through omission, that he was an only child; in fact he had three siblings, admittedly much younger than himself, Margery, born when he was six

years old, Patricia, born when he was sixteen, and Tony, born two years later. There is very little extant correspondence between him and the rest of his family; mostly postcards sent on his first visits to Paris and Italy. However, we have the damning portraits of his parents in the novels – and the passages of his conversation about them that appear in H.D.'s *Asphodel*.

Equally damning of his parents and of his early life in general is the bleak poem 'Childhood'. The social and emotional circumstances of his upbringing were clearly an important influence on his personal development and on his later social attitudes, but we must piece them together from some very partial evidence. This volume begins with an examination of Aldington's life from the moment in 1911 when he embarked on his literary career and a life of his own choosing; but we shall 'roll back' to the problem of his childhood in the second chapter.

The biographer must also piece together the true picture of Aldington's war experience to fully reveal his character. In the past his military experiences have been neglected by biographers, despite the evidence in his poetry and the fiction of the great impact they had on him – and the post-traumatic state in which he was left for several years after the war. Barbara Guest, H.D.'s biographer, comments that, 'His army career had not been all that disagreeable. It is only necessary to compare his book [*Death of a Hero*] with Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* to realise that Aldington's experiences are not so desperate or tragic as he would have us believe. . . . The truth seems to be that he never fired a shot. He had managed to be sent from camp to camp in England, rising in rank, until he had finally applied for a commission. . . . his regret seems mainly to have been for the waste of time and the needless postponement of his real career.'⁶ Despite the fact that Charles Doyle calls this account 'not entirely unfair', it is nonetheless a complete distortion of the facts of Aldington's military record and its impact on him, as we shall show in due course.⁷

Love, childhood and war: they can help us to understand this man, so apparently contradictory in his life and his work. A romantic idealist but also a sensualist; an aesthete and a sceptic; a feminist who loved and respected women but who ended more than one relationship with excessive ruthlessness; a poetic innovator who resisted modernism; a rebel who was also a traditionalist. A poet, soldier and lover.