

Preface

'Do we need another biography of Richard Aldington?' the current writer was asked in 2008. The answer she gave was a strong affirmative. It is now nearly twenty-five years since Charles Doyle's biography, years in which Aldington has become no more familiar to the reading public, even to those who are keenly interested in the literature of the First World War. True, his admirers have done him proud: the 'New Canterbury Literary Society', an association of Aldington enthusiasts, produces a quarterly online newsletter; the late Professor Norman Gates followed his critical evaluation of the poetry and his checklist of the Aldington correspondence with *Richard Aldington: An Autobiography in Letters* in 1992; and Caroline Zilboorg's edition of the Hilda Doolittle–Aldington correspondence, *Richard Aldington and H.D.: Their Lives in Letters 1918-1961* (2003), is the most thorough and sympathetic study ever attempted of the relationship between the two poets. But the wider public still remains ignorant of this extraordinary man and writer. This in a period marked by a revival of interest in the literature of the Great War (to which, in both verse and prose, he made a vital contribution), along with the publication of compelling recent biographies of several of its writers, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon and Edward Thomas.

Warmth, passion and vitality characterised the life and work of Richard Aldington. However, he was also that Renaissance figure, a man of letters. (The fact that such personalities are uncommon today is indicated by the fact that there is no gender-neutral term.) For the first half of his life he was a poet, critic and translator; he then became a novelist. In his later years – and controversially – he was a biographer. Men of letters are often neglected precisely because of the breadth of their achievement. Aldington the young Imagist is familiar to poets and academics and has recently appeared in a fine group biography of those

colourful characters, *Les Imagistes* (Helen Carr's *The Verse Revolutionaries*, 2009); but Aldington the poet and chronicler of the First World War and its impact on his generation has been much neglected in recent years, despite Michael Copp's 1992 edition of his war poetry, *An Imagist at War*. Aldington, almost uniquely among the war poets, addresses the plight of the survivor in the aftermath of war.¹ Fortunately, Penguin have now re-issued (in the Penguin Classics imprint) the 1929 edition of Aldington's war novel, *Death of a Hero*, a best-seller at the time of its publication and described by George Orwell as 'much the best of the English war books'.² Aldington's short stories of the war (collected as *Roads to Glory*) are also available, and were published by the Imperial War Museum in a new edition by David Wilkinson in 1992.

It is with the earlier years of Aldington's adult life that this volume is concerned. These were the years in which he figured as one of the Imagist poets and in which he fell in love with, and married, another of them; the war years, in which his personal and literary life fell apart; the post-war years, in which he painfully tried to put his life together again, and to re-establish his literary career; and, finally, the weeks at the end of the twenties in which he wrote *Death of a Hero*, his blistering attack on all that had made that terrible war possible, and his own 'goodbye to all that'. He would never again be domiciled in England.