

1. A Sociable Life

Travel, Friendship and Patronage

1930-1931

In 1930 travel was still a novelty, a privilege won by the success of *Death of a Hero* – and Aldington's gift to Patmore. They spent the first two months of the year in North Africa. Aldington had asked Henri Davray to use his contacts with the French government to arrange passes, travel and accommodation in Tunisia and Algeria.¹ They were thus able to tour both countries freely and cheaply by car and train. He had also arranged to write an article about each country for *Nash's Pall Mall Magazine*.²

In Tunisia they based themselves in the capital but spent a fortnight covering some 850 miles of the interior by train and car, travelling by train to Kairouan and then south-west and inland to the oases of Nefta and Tozeur, then by car across to the coast at Gabes and on to the island of Jerba. Their return train journey took them north along the coast to Sfax, inland to El Djem (where Aldington admired the Roman amphitheatre, 'standing up immense in the twilight against a huge, bare plain'), then back up to the coast at Sousse and on to Tunis.³

Anthony Clarendon, the protagonist of *All Men Are Enemies* (1932), is unimpressed by the art, architecture and culture of Tunisia, but overwhelmed by the natural landscape: on the night train from Kairouan to Tozeur he is electrified by the sight of the desert in the hours before dawn, 'the dome of the sky clear and vast, filled with the white of the moonlight which shone over a great sea of lion-coloured sand'. He is standing on a siding as dawn finally breaks: 'The light shone on a desolation, but its silence was majestic.' It is this silence which moves him: 'The silence, the space, the limitless on and on of the desert were intoxicating . . . the almost ecstatic peace which gradually occupied your whole nature as you rode in the sunlight over the sand in the brisk scentless air.'⁴ In a throwback to George Winterbourne's adulation of the fighting infantry in *Death of a Hero*, Tony also admires 'the dignity and self-possession . . . the complete poise and self-harmony [of] the men coming in from the desert wrapped in their burnous'.



Nancy Cunard and Brigit
Patmore, 1930

In February Aldington and Patmore moved on to Algeria, where they made a round trip of over 900 miles, crossing the border at Gardima and travelling west to Constantine, then south to El Kantara and Biskra, and pushing down into the Sahara Desert at Touggourt before turning north to head for Algiers. After the barrenness of Tunisia, Northern Algeria surprised them with its 'flowery landscape, wooded hills, trees coming into bud, blossoming fruit trees and grass meadows . . . the almond gardens in full bloom, the olives and cypresses, the vineyards and young wheat'. In Constantine it was again the men that impressed Aldington, with 'the physique and somewhat vacant hauteur we have learned to associate with warriors'. Further south, he was appalled by the tourism of Biskra but liked Touggourt where, once more, it was the people, with 'their quiet satisfaction in living', and 'the spaciousness and silence of the desert' that made an impact upon him.⁵

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Back in Paris, the couple continued to see the friends they had made there: Nancy Cunard and her current lover, the black musician Henry Crowder; the Irish writer Thomas MacGreevy, no longer lecturing at the *École Normale Supérieure* but surviving on odd jobs of translation work; and Walter Lowenfels, the American poet, and his wife, Lilian. However, the relationship between Lowenfels and Aldington soon began to unravel – and that with Cunard would not last much longer.⁶

Flush with money and success, Aldington attempted to sponsor other writers through the institution of two prizes. He and Cunard arranged for the Hours Press to offer £10 for the best poem in English on the theme



Samuel Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy in London in the early 1930s

of time. By the deadline, 15 June, little of any merit had been submitted; but that night Samuel Beckett's poem *Whoroscope* was slipped under the door of the Hours Press shop in the Rue Guénégaud. Both Cunard and Aldington recognised at once the extraordinary talent at work.⁷ (Beckett, hard-up though he was, spent the prize money on a meal for MacGreevy, Aldington, Patmore and himself at the Cochon de Lait.)

Meanwhile the other prize had become contentious. Edward Titus, owner and editor of the expatriate literary journal *This Quarter*, had agreed to institute a 'Richard Aldington Award' for 'the ablest young American poet'.⁸ Aldington would provide an annual prize of 10,000 francs, 5,000 from his own pocket and the remainder from other sponsors. His favoured candidate for the first award was Lowenfels. However, not content to let events take their course, Lowenfels started to harry Aldington. On the latter's return to Paris Lowenfels threatened to call a press conference for American journalists and announce the result. In a reference to Lowenfels' father's manufacturing business, in which the poet had worked for some years – and would be forced to work again on his return to the States in 1934 – Aldington commented tartly to MacGreevy: 'You can't bring the morals of the butter business into literature.'⁹

The affair dragged on for months. Lowenfels tried to cause trouble through an anonymous letter to *This Quarter* suggesting that *The Imagist Anthology*, which Chatto & Windus were about to publish, was a hoax. Titus sent the letter to Chatto for comment and Charles Prentice consulted Aldington, who had no doubts about the identity of the writer. He told Prentice: 'Walter . . . has become the egocentric and egomaniacal

raté – a most unpleasant form of the genus artist, which abounds in wet purlieus of Montparnasse.¹⁰ At the end of the year he wrote to Titus from Italy to ask what was happening about the award.¹¹ It says much for his integrity that he still favoured Lowenfels, arguing that Titus's preferred candidate, e e cummings, already had an extensive reputation. Not until the following summer was a compromise hammered out (and only after Titus had dispatched an envoy to the south of France to act as mediator): cummings and Lowenfels would share the prize. Announcing the award, Titus referred to Aldington's 'iron fist within a velvet glove'.¹² It was an early indication of how intransigent he could be. There was to be no further award: Aldington had only 5,000 francs to spare in 1932 and *This Quarter* ceased publication.

Most of his attempts to support aspiring writers were more private and more successful. He had first corresponded with James Hanley in 1929, in response to the latter's praise of his poetry, and he was swift to offer to obtain a typewriter for him from 'a wealthy friend' (probably Henry Church) as well as to read Hanley's manuscripts.¹³ He also sent him money and advised him about pursuing a career in journalism to finance his creative writing. He wrote the introductions to two of Hanley's first three novellas, *The German Prisoner* and *The Last Voyage*, mounting an impassioned defence of the writer's habit of grim realism; and he used his column in the *Sunday Referee* to recommend Hanley's subsequent work. James Reeves also received encouragement, after sending Aldington in May 1930 a proof copy of his review of *A Dream in the Luxembourg* for the *Cambridge Review*. Reeves, then a twenty-year-old undergraduate at Jesus College, visited Aldington in Paris that June. Aldington and Patmore had taken a three-roomed apartment in the Rue des Ursulines (their first and only attempt at home-making in Paris). Reeves found Aldington 'kind, pleasant and interested in the ideas of a young unknown man concerned with literature'.¹⁴ Later in the year Aldington attempted (unsuccessfully) to place with Chatto an anthology of young Cambridge poets, including Reeves, as well as advising the young man on his attempts to gain a foothold in reviewing. Beckett, MacGreevy's friend and fellow countryman and his successor at the École Normale Supérieure, was another beneficiary, and not only through the Hours Press publication of *Whoroscope*; he was commissioned at Aldington's instigation to write a monograph on Proust for the Chatto Dolphin imprint, Aldington's brainchild.¹⁵

The writer on whose behalf Aldington dedicated most of his efforts was MacGreevy.¹⁶ He gave him financial support and had him to stay at his rented villas in the south of France in the summers of 1930 and 1931, as

well as financing MacGreevy's visits to himself and Patmore in Venice in November 1930 and in Florence in February 1931, from where they spent two months together touring Italy and travelling through Austria, Germany and Switzerland back to France. Aldington would later write that 'there never was a more good-humoured fellow-traveller or one who gave more by communicating a fine appreciation'.¹⁷ The main intention behind these arrangements, however, was to enable MacGreevy to write and to help him establish a working routine – always a priority for Aldington himself, wherever his travels took him and in whatever accommodation he was housed.



Thomas MacGreevy, 1930

He persuaded Prentice to commission MacGreevy for two of the Dolphin monographs on contemporary writers, one on T.S. Eliot and the other on Aldington himself.¹⁸ At times, however, he despaired, writing to him from North Africa in January 1930: 'You're a lazy man Mr M'Greevy, Sir. You have about three times as much ability as I have, and you wrap your talent in a napkin. Beware of Judgement Day.'¹⁹ At the end of the year he told Alexander Frere Reeves of Heinemann: '[Tom] got quite a kick out of Venice, and went off full of beans and good intentions. . . . I think [he] is determined to get away from his present scratch as scratch can existence, but we shall have to keep him up to it.'²⁰ He was probably right to recognise his friend's natural laziness but perhaps wrong to assume that MacGreevy should be taking the same path as himself; 'If you can pull off a novel, you will find that everything becomes plain sailing,' he told him.²¹

Although the two never fell out, the friendship faded as Aldington perceived that the novel was never going to be completed and that MacGreevy was reverting to 'scratch as scratch can'. By the end of 1933 MacGreevy was in London, supporting himself on reviewing and translating, and a disappointed Aldington wrote to Frere Reeves: 'What I object to in Tom is that he acts as if his poverty were our fault instead of his own.'²² He would reflect in *Life for Life's Sake*:

Tom MacGreevy had all the gifts of a writer, except the urge to write . . . [H]e hadn't in him that aggressive daimon who after each failure to reach to imagined height drives a man back to his desk to try again. His creative impulse was satisfied by the undoubted influence his talk had on a sympathetic audience; and that is the danger of having the gift of conversation.²³

MacGreevy, although in Paris between April and November of 1933, was not invited that year to the villa Aldington had taken on the Côte des Maures, and the correspondence between them became intermittent for the remainder of the decade, although they probably met up when Aldington was in London, where MacGreevy eventually established himself as a prominent art critic. It was Aldington's disappointment in MacGreevy's failure as an imaginative writer, not their differences of personality – or belief (MacGreevy was a devout Catholic) – that drove them apart.

Aldington's relationship with Cunard soured quite soon and she remained bitter towards him for the rest of her life. On their return to Paris in 1930 Aldington and Patmore had continued to see her regularly, although her lifestyle was more chaotic than their own and Patmore remained wary of Cunard's predatory behaviour towards men. For all her hedonism, Cunard was serious about the Hours Press and Aldington agreed to give her what would be 'positively [his] last war story'.²⁴ Entitled *Last Straws*, it came out in January 1931 and was sold out before publication.²⁵ However, it was the direct cause of their estrangement. Cunard had departed with Crowder for the south of France, leaving her friend Wyn Henderson as temporary manager of the Hours Press. Henderson dispatched a cheque for advance royalties to Aldington, now in Florence for the winter, but he returned the cheque, saying that he had given the story to Cunard, not to a 'manager' and that any communication should come from Cunard herself.²⁶ At first Cunard did not realise the intensity of his anger; she wrote a warm, friendly letter in early March, giving news of herself and Crowder and suggesting that, 'Later, you and I if you will, can do more serious things. There *must* be Time here.'²⁷ However, Aldington had already written to Patmore (visiting London to see her sons):

Still not a word . . . about my story and not a penny of money. How foully dishonest! She goes and spends on niggers & saphs the money she owes me. To hell with her. I am finished as far as she's concerned. When I get my cheque from her – *fini, mais fini*. Rotten little beast.²⁸

The casual homophobia is characteristic; the racism is not. Indeed, in her memoir Cunard recalled: 'To see Richard and Henry laughing together, to hear them talk about America, especially about the ironies of the race and colour question, was very worthwhile.'²⁹

The exchange escalated until Aldington resorted to a letter of complaint to the Society of Authors. That organisation pointed out that both individuals were Society members, but offered to arbitrate. By now Cunard had folded up the Hours Press, all her efforts for the next four years being devoted to her new project, *The Negro Anthology*. Aldington received no satisfaction and in July 1931 he resigned from the Society.

Given his savage satire of Cunard in *Soft Answers* a year later and their battle over the reputation of Norman Douglas in 1954, her lasting hostility towards him is understandable but in her memoir, written shortly before her death in 1965, she acknowledged his 'generosity of spirit' in the days of their early acquaintance, instancing his support for Hanley and, particularly, his loyalty to D.H. Lawrence. She also expressed her lasting admiration for *The Eaten Heart* (which she published in 1929) and remarked of *Last Straws*, the grim tale of three war veterans which had been the cause of the rift between them: '[A]lthough the story upset several of the critics, it was convincingly written; it was meant to be bitter, and bitter it was. What is wrong with that?'³⁰