

Dear Friend of Le Lavandou

Henry Williamson

A tribute to Richard Aldington reproduced from: Richard Aldington: An Intimate Portrait edited by Alister Kershaw and F-J Temple. (Southern Illinois University Press, 1965)

In the spring of 1949, my wife and I motored from Norfolk to the Riviera, to stay for our honeymoon at Le Lavandou, where Richard Aldington was then living. This visit was proposed by a young friend of Aldington's, who had come from Australia to meet three writers, among others – Roy Campbell, Richard Aldington and myself.

Alister Kershaw I had already met in Devon. We had bathed and walked together, and motored in my 1938 2-litre Aston-Martin, and when he had gone back to London we had kept in touch. I already knew, and greatly liked, Roy Campbell; and it was during an evening at the Savage Club in London that Alister declared that I must meet Richard, who had returned from the United States after the war and rented a villa on a hillside above the coast east of Toulon.

It was the first time I had motored in France since the war of 1914-18 with its occasional lorry-hops. From battered Calais the road ran to Arras and Cambrai, and on through Beauvais to Paris, where we arrived in the early morning, and then on to Fontainebleau and the route to the south. We were in no hurry; the weather was fine, leaves were out on the trees, it was April – down the Rhône valley, our first *virages*, and in the evening Le Lavandou. Alister Kershaw had found us a room in the Sablons d'Or, where we were to have our meals. Nightingales were singing on the hills, our host had a gramophone amplifier in his vinery, where we sat and drank champagne with the moon shining through the glass overhead. I had never been so happy – Chopin, moon, nightingales: all the compost of the past, memories of boyhood before 1914, of the war and nightingales in the Ancre valley and under Messines hill, and before the *Siegfried Stellung*, all poetry and beauty seemed to have become real at last upon the shores of that clear, tideless sea.

Aldington was a shy man, I knew; but soon it was plain that he was more guarded than shy. He was hospitable and kind, in a remote way; he had been hurt in his early years, one saw that in much of his writings. And having lived out of England for so long, he had lived under the pain of his early memories. I recalled how he had written to me in 1930, when I had published a book about walking over the battlefields of Flanders, Picardy, and Artois, and the *Times Literary Supplement* had quoted part of the preface wherein I had written that my father had, in 1919, been angered when I had said that the Germans were brave soldiers, and generally had fought cleanly and as courageously as the British; he had very nearly called me a traitor, being much agitated and still hurt by the war propaganda. I was sorry I had written that passage to convey a criticism which had been based on imperfect sympathy: for my father had been a special constable all during the war, and had been blown up by a Zeppelin bomb and covered by powdered glass; but more injurious than that had been the lack of bodily action on the battlefield which had released mental tensions among the combatants, and given them a wider vision with the hopes of a League of Nations which would make war a thing of the past.

This I wrote to Aldington, and had no further communication with him until, following another bitter war, I was sitting in his villa among the aromatic shrubs under the hot sun of April and May, determined not to speak of my own writings or air any opinions, but to listen to him and learn about the Côte d'Azur and its

wild life, about which he had a great knowledge, particularly of butterflies.

His face lit up when he talked as he told me about his boyhood in Kent, but at other times he was inclined to be bitter when he spoke about England. Having been away, except for brief visits, since the late twenties, his mind was still of the twenties; preserved like whisky kept in a glass bottle, in which it is unable to mature. Kept in the wood, it loses by evaporation and absorption, thus it matures. Of course I did not tell him this; it would have been not only tactless but unkind. He still suffered those strains and hopeless flings-aways that most of the immature survivors of the infantry war – we who had gone out almost without having shaved – had suffered in those early postwar years; the barbed wire was still encircling his heart, the iron fragments of shells in the bone of his skull. But of course one knew that was only part of the story; for a division within the spirit occurs in childhood, and the war was but a visible extension of that split between a child's parents. The lonely, rebellious soldier was the lonely, unhappy child, who in periods of frightful misery occurring occasionally among normally happy comrades bears the entire war upon his shoulders, and if he survives may be upset or driven into the solitudes of his own soul until, by miracle, true love comes to dissolve the strictures of the past.

Richard, one divined, was still a lonely man, bound by invisible fetters forged in the shadows of childhood. Proserpine had not come to him, through the shades of a mortified past. Gradually he revealed himself to me, a youth with the love of the true England, its countryside, orchards, and white cliffs of Dover, the pebbly shores and the racing tides of the Channel – memories overcast by the petrification of past despairs. I was told that his mother had been a strong, self-willed woman who had dominated both a gentle husband and a gentle son. This, it seemed to me later on, was the key to his gradual dislike turning to contempt when he learned that T.E. Lawrence's mother had ruled her sons and their father with a self-will tautened at times to fury by her inner unresolved problem: she a Calvinist, believing literally in the Bible as God's word. "God forgives the sinner: but never the sin."

We returned to Le Lavandou in 1949, in the early autumn. Richard still lived in his villa, but his wife had returned to live in England. His love was for his daughter, a young girl who appeared to be living a life of her own, living in the mind, as indeed, we all come to live sooner or later. Catherine was devoted to her father. She had the gift of composure, a perception above the ordinary, and was among other things an enduring swimmer.

Alister Kershaw had helped Richard greatly by his coming. He looked after the poet's correspondence; he was a courier between London and Le Lavandou, proposing books which Richard might care to consider writing, and arranging terms. For once a worthy young man had been able to prove his worth.

I have many letters from Richard, the majority of them discussing a new work he was preparing, a biography of T.E. Lawrence. I had met Lawrence in the late twenties, and liked him greatly; I owed much to him for encouragement and criticism. At the same time, while I saw how the book was to progress – the letters from expressing wonder eventually became scornful and then dismissive of the "hero" – I did not allow this to alter my affection for "Riccardo".

Many times my friend suggested that I should leave my work – which was being written continuously, often seven days a week for months on end, sometimes starting at 3 a.m., for I was sleepless and worried about my ability to carry out what had been planned to be started in 1929 and had been delayed by circumstances until 1949 – and have a holiday with him at Montpellier, or later still in the Cher where Alister had a house. Alas, I did not go to visit him; then one day I heard he

was dead; and later still I found myself alone, and the future uncertain, or rather it now seems to be as certain as that of my dear friend of Le Lavandou days.

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