

## The Powys and their circle as seen by Alyse Gregory

ALYSE GREGORY<sup>1</sup> who married Llewelyn Powys, was herself a writer. Born in New England into a well-to-do family, she had led an adventurous life, had been a prominent organiser of women's suffrage parades, had worked for a time in an organization to help immigrants, financed by the Carnegie Foundation (thus meeting for instance Thomas Masaryk, the future President of Czechoslovakia). In 1921 she became managing Editor of *The Dial*, a prestigious New York literary review. It was there that she met the young Llewelyn Powys who was starting to make a name for himself as a writer. They became lovers and despite her misgivings—she called marriage “unacknowledged warfare”—she finally agreed to marry him. In 1925 Llewelyn suddenly decided to come back to England, which meant she had to leave her country, her friends, her eminent position at *The Dial*, to live in another country and share his life in relative isolation, first in a coastguard's cottage above Weymouth, and then inland at Chydyok, near Chaldon Herring, where they lived next to Gertrude and Katie Powys. She knew all the members of the Powys family, was fond of most of them. Llewelyn had been suffering from tuberculosis since his youth and soon after their wedding became seriously ill again. Alyse was his wife, his daily companion and secretary, but also his nurse. A sensitive, cultured, and idealistic woman, she did not have an easy life with Llewelyn. He soon presented her with the opportunity to test her generosity, for he was only faithful to his own cherished principles of preferring his own happiness to all else. He had a passionate love affair with a young American poetess, Gamel Woolsey, who was a few years later to live with Gerald Brenan. In 1936 Alyse and Llewelyn left England for Clavadel in Switzerland where he died exactly three years later, 2 December 1939. Alyse then led in Chydyok a rather solitary life, devoted to nature, to walks along the sea, to reading and music, and to her journals which she kept almost to the end. She would sometimes visit Theodore at Mappowder. and also went to see JCP and Phyllis in Corwen. She sometimes went to London where she had friends, to Paris once, and twice she travelled to the United States to visit her sister and some friends from *The Dial* days. But as she became older, she dreaded becoming a burden to her family. She put an end to her life 27 August 1967 at the age of 83.

Apart from *The Cry of a Gull, Journals 1923-1948*, (ed. Michael Adam, The Ark Press, 1973)—an arrangement, but not her own of the Journals—she wrote several novels, including *Hester Craddock* (Longmans, Green and Co, 1931/republished Sundial Press, 2007), a volume of Essays *Wheels on Gravel* (John Lane The Bodley Head, 1938), an autobiography, *The Day is Gone* (E.D. Dutton, 1948), and many articles published in *The Dial*, *The Adelphi* or Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*.

I have chosen to give Alyse Gregory's portraits of the three brothers a prominent role in this *lettre*. A talented memorialist, she was not well served by her modesty. Her Diary has both style and elegance, as I hope will become clear. In a future issue I intend to offer portraits by Alyse of other members of the Powys circle. (J.P.)

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see *Alyse Gregory, A Woman at her Window*, J. Peltier, Cecil Woolf, 1999

## Extracts from a Diary<sup>2</sup>

Llewelyn

May 4, 1930

As I look back on our years together, L's and mine, I ask myself have I been happy? I cannot say that I have not for there have been hours, days, long, long periods when I have felt a deep *positive* happiness in our love. But always this fear for the future has—sometimes visible, sometimes invisible—accompanied me...



A youthful Alyse possibly in Paris  
courtesy Powys Society Collection, Dorchester

May 5, 1931

I, who have always been strong in my secret power, content with his self-engrossment, knowing that it was nourished in his love for me—now I bear, in my vigilant and solitary spirit, the knowledge that only on the slender thread of our past, his knowledge of my love, his respect for my integrity, can I hope to compensate to him for what remains a sorrow unhealed.<sup>3</sup>

(...) And when I see him thus, his eyes evasive, almost frightened, I could go howling into the night, and so we drive each other further and further apart, and this increases our unhappiness. But then, when he came to me in my room as I

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<sup>2</sup> Extracts from Alyse Gregory's unpublished Diary, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> From *The Cry of a Gull*, p.49

lay on the bed, I felt all my love and pity for him liberated, and I put my arms around him, & he went over again the story of his loss<sup>4</sup>, and I consoled him with all my strength and we embraced and slept in peace.

*May 23, 1931, Weymouth*

I turned to L. thinking I would try to tell him how I longed to help him, and as I did so he dropped on the beach and lay with his eyes closed, his head thrown back against the sands, absolutely still, his arms extended, and I stood staring at him as if he were a stranger washed up by the waves. Never have I seen a head so beautiful—and how could I, who had not even a poet's tongue, who had neither youth nor beauty, dare offer him my worthless heart.

*August 13, 1931*

In silence we undressed and put on our dressing gowns, carried out the cat, and started towards the gate. Dark clouds hid the stars, yet we could see the horizon and the bare outline of the downs, the sea far below, our foot falls making a faint rustle as we stepped through the tall wet grass. The night was full of disastrous mysteries and L's figure, my heart's core, seemed to say "It is another I want. Give me back the one I love." Then his words fell upon my ear: "Is there not room for me to have her in this large night?" And the words "in this large night", so eloquent of his feelings, pulled down the night skies and I cried out asking God to take my breath from me.

*Clavadel, [Switzerland] Christmas Eve 1938*

L. had had a headache for two days, but was a little better and very pleased with the little house (a gingerbread Hansel & Gretel House which Lisaly had given him). We gave each other our presents, L. always in bed. And then later I came in and L. was sleeping and he looked so pale, so thin, his face so beautiful but mask-like, that the tears rushed to my eyes and all was a void where he was not, and only my love for him real, the love I feel in every fibre of my being.

**Theodore<sup>5</sup>**

*September 28, 1946*

... caught my bus for Mappowder where I spent three days, walking morning and afternoon with Theodore, and reading aloud to him after we had been to church. Those were moments full of poetry, sitting in the little ancient church with a faint light showing through the windows and a screech owl hooting outside, Theodore's sober figure with his silvery hair and look of dedication behind which is so ironic and nihilistic a view of existence. I questioned him closely as to his views on immortality. He said it was the most arrogant presumption on man's part to suppose he was immortal: "We come out of nothingness and go into nothingness. That is all we know, all else is dreams and arrogance." He lives, so he feels, the life of a fugitive in his home, suffered and goaded. This does not worry him.

(...) Most of all I remember T. in his grey-green coarsely woven coat that had been Bertie's, and was entirely worn out in places, his head so striking, his eyes evasive, a little mocking, full of lights, a character so unique that I have never met

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Brenan had just won over Gamel from Llewelyn

<sup>5</sup> Alyse Gregory had already portrayed him previously. See *Recollections of the Powys Brothers*, Belinda Humfrey ed., Peter Owen Ltd, London, 1980, pp.146-8.

his like and never shall.

*June 19, 1947*

I went to Theodore's on the 11th. No one now has so great a power of moving me. His sober head with its hair no longer silvery grey but snow white, his docility behind which so much wisdom is stored, his modesty, wit, compassion—all win me to him, but it is much deeper than the sum of his qualities. (...) I see him moving through the rooms, or seated reading, an old, solitary man, with no one that has ever really understood him, or been to him a true companion (...)

With T. I gain strength and wisdom. We catch miraculous intimations of eternity mysteriously and these alone give meaning to life.

*May 31, 1950*

Spent from Wednesday to Friday at Mappowder, too many conflicting emotions. Theodore says there are four Gods—God the Mother, to whom we can turn, meaning the earth, nature; God, the Father, completely out of reach, with whom we can have no contact or know anything about, God the Son and God the gnome (like Milton's Satan). He says that all creatures, all nature, the greatest genius, the most pampered nobleman share with the beast, the falling leaf, the nothingness of everything. All share it yet each is alone in it. It is the same in death as in life, annihilation and immortality are each equally false, there is only nothingness, consciousness in itself is nothingness. Which means, as far as I can see, that we are nothing because we can never know what or even if we are, which seems meaningless. Yet it was not at all a kind of nihilism as he expressed it, but a positive belief that upheld him. I would hesitate to express my truths lest they shrivel in the utterance or lie like corpses to be stepped over between me and another.

*July 28, 1951*

My three nights at Mappowder (18 to 21). My walks with T. every day, in the early morning, in the afternoon and in the evening—sitting in the shade in the hay fields, the air full of the scent of new mown hay. We talked of Violet, of Lucy, who, he said, was a mother worshipper, and that the whole Indian culture and religion were based on Mother worship—a companionship dear to my spirit—his beautiful head with its crown of snow white hair. Sitting so silent at the table while V. and S.<sup>6</sup> chattered. When I protested at their bantering attack V. said “We have to tease him, he is so solemn”, but he is never solemn. He is amazingly gentle, considerate, uncomplaining—but he conserves himself apart, goes his own way, his incomparable wit sheathed; open to all and at the same time impregnable.

## **John and Phyllis**

*Phudd Bottom, Christmas Eve, 1930*

We motored through the snow to J's and P's, every roof covered with a heavy blanket of snow, the sky getting redder and redder. (...) I sat up and talked to John. How safe their house seemed against the cold and dark,—the little Christmas tree, the dog coming out from under the sofa to snatch at a piece of popcorn—P's little ornaments chosen with such exquisite taste, a spirit of harmony filling the rooms, with their old rugs and old furniture—and P. speaking

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<sup>6</sup> Susan: the name generally used for Theodora, Theodore and Violet's adopted daughter

to J. with so undoubting a voice, and he looking at her as if she were his very life.

*Corwen, September 15, 1953*

And then Phyllis on the platform—so changed and yet to me as always, incomparable, almost alarmingly slim in her black dress, a little round hat with a narrow brim and earrings—in the pouring rain we carried my things to the hotel and then walked up the long steep narrow winding road—and John like a vision, his hair silvery white, she had made him leave it long for my visit, because I have always said it was a national disaster when any Powys cut his or her hair. J. likes his shaved close to his head. He says it is because his grandfather, his mother's father, whom he hated with a fierce hatred, was proud of his long curly hair.

Their room has the elegance and charm which P. always gives to her rooms, however small, all grey with grey satin cushions and covers, two small electric stoves which J. keeps lighted most of the time — he on his couch lying against the cushions under the bright light (fluorescent, usually my abomination)—amazingly vital, open to every word, ready to respond to contrarities of every kind, fertile in variation, and P. floating in and out, losing nothing, with a look at once mocking and caressing, and a detachment hinting a whole world of insights, of *arrière-pensées*, of secret illuminations. (...) I asked J. if he thought often of his childhood and he said the thought of his childhood was 'sheer pain', all except the time at Weymouth; and he described the misery of his school days at Sherborne where the boys mocked him. How he resembled Katie at those moments, demonic! He said his feelings were hurt because Mrs Playter (P.'s mother) said he had a good disposition, that all he had was cunning, he had always had a bad disposition, but he had developed cunning to the last degree; and I said it was merely a measure of his success that he had been able so to deceive a kind person like Mrs. P. He said he was a born actor and a person that he disliked he was apt to rush at and welcome as if he were the one person in the whole world he most wanted to see. And yet behind all this fantastic whirl of words, the image of himself he projects, are the most solid, old fashioned virtues of compassion, resolution in the face of misfortune, fidelity to friends, generosity, uncomplaining endurance—what is that standard of behaviour to which he seeks to attain *through cunning*! It is not to impress, it is in self-defence. How like Theodore, too, who propitiates and retreats. Both he and P. begged me to write about the Powys family—'all the ins and outs'—but I could not and would not—Lucy with her almost pathological abhorrence of being talked about at all; Littleton with his monstrous illusions. J. said he did not care at all by how many his books were read. He 'like Goethe' created his own world and wrote his name across it. There is nothing too trivial to discuss with him—he gives his concentrated attention to every word—content to listen or to respond with that freshet of surprises conversation with him always contains. (...) P. walking with me in the dark, all that passed so long ago binding us together. She has retained her Americanisms much more than I, in the best sense. When she kissed me good-bye she said "I never loved you so well". (...) I see J's extraordinary head with the beautiful silvery hair and his high colour and fresh skin and the little room with the low table by the window where P. and I had our teas and suppers so daintily prepared—all those years she had been unable to leave J. and now they talk of going to France if they have to give up the house—that is either alarming or pathetic.

**Alyse**

*April 24, 1948*

Last night I walked to the cliffs by moonlight across the field past the alarmed sheep. I stood for long looking at the shimmering reflection of the moon on the water and tried to realize how single and irremediable is the fate of every creature, from the swallows that are just newly arriving to their haunts in the barn to man swimming in illusions, nurtured in dread, and reared in ignorance.<sup>7</sup>

*April 2, 1950*

A marvellously happy Sunday, a combination of tranquility and elation. Walked up to the cliffs in the stormy winds, long purple shadows lying across the racing waves, the gulls flying wild, delicious solitude, felt strong and free of limb, with no barriers, no regrets, no fear, pure sensation—everything shining, glittering, dancing after the rain and now back at my window.

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<sup>7</sup> From *The Cry of a Gull*, p.142