

The Quiet Ticking of Minutes

Isabelle Stuart

Harriet Baker, *Rural Hours: The Country Lives of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Rosamond Lehmann*. Allen Lane, 384pp., £25 cloth.

AS ITS NAME SUGGESTS, *RURAL HOURS* TELLS THE STORY of three writers who were only ever intermittent ruralists. Sylvia Townsend Warner, Virginia Woolf, and Rosamond Lehmann all wrote their major works in London, and biographers usually capture what these snatches of country life signified with a vague gesture: a bolthole, an escape, a peaceful foil to the real life that happened in town. But the best biographies can offer an antidote to vagueness, and Harriet Baker's achievement lies in the unusually vivid attention with which she sketches out what those rural hours meant to these three women.

The writers came to the countryside at very different phases in their lives. Woolf's country house was meant firstly as a place of healing, where her mental illness could slowly subside and her sense of self emerge from the tangible details of rural life that she meticulously notates in her diaries from Asheham, her rural Sussex rental house. For Townsend Warner, riding high on the sudden success that greeted her 1926 novel *Lolly Willowes*, a tiny, isolated cottage provided the opportunity to carve out a new life which could accommodate a new lover, the androgynous poet Valentine Ackland, as well as her budding communist principles. Lehmann, on the other hand, was on the run: fleeing wartime London as well as a painful divorce and trying to establish a rhythm with her young family and a new, married lover, Cecil Day Lewis. Baker's overarching suggestion that these rural spells were a creative forge is sometimes less interesting than all the other things she shows these interludes offered them: space for unconventionality away from prying eyes, time for slow recuperation, and a stage for hard-won self-reliance.

Rural Hours spans the two world wars, picking up on a moment of transition for each of these writers, when they were caught between city and countryside. Such a fitful structure is striking: it extends the arbitrariness that governs any group biography—taking up a handful of lives at the expense of others—to the chronological structure of the work, selecting episodes to represent a life as well as lives to represent a period. But Baker puts this selectivity to good use, picking over the ordinary country days, the days where, as Woolf puts it, “nothing strange or exalted” happened. Rather than compressing monumental developments into a few minutes of reading time, *Rural Hours* attempts to recreate the experience of living that life, encouraging the reader to inhabit the quiet ticking of minutes passing by as these women write shopping lists, forage for mushrooms, or supervise repairs.

Luckily for those who think this sounds like heavy going, the three women at the biography’s center are highly charismatic country subjects. They bring the distinctive humor and acute social observations that characterize their novels to bear on their often-eccentric country lives. The freshness with which they saw the world around them catches in the mind: from the image of Townsend Warner in her glass snail of a bathroom, floating serenely among the frothy green of the sycamores that fill her garden, to the filigree drama of a piece of fish “grilled with a slip of banana lied along it like a medieval wife on a tomb.”

As a biographer, Baker is unusually wary of drawing facts from fiction, focusing on archival materials more than on the published fiction. For the most part this restraint is admirable: an academic by training, she reads instead for the changing habits and routines that subtly shaped the form of the women’s prose. In this way, Lehmann’s shift to short stories emerges from wartime interruptions in her cottage; the flashcards Woolf kept for her husband seep into her compressed diaristic observations; and Townsend Warner’s penchant for lists and small material details carries into the attention to objects that pervades her novels. Such observations do reflect back onto the texture of their fiction, but it occasionally feels as though we’re losing the wood for the trees, the novels for the record cards. These are novelists whose work bristles with characters shaped by the countryside, and some of their most striking sentences capture moments of profound communion with rural landscapes. Think of Lolly Willowes, the title character of Warner’s first novel, yearning for the witchy Chiltern Hills, where “like embers the wet beech-leaves smouldered in the woods,” and where she lays her cheek against tree trunks to listen for the rising sap of spring; of the nostalgic seaside landscapes in Woolf’s *The Waves* and *To The Lighthouse*, which loom vividly as their inhabitants drift in and out of focus; of the strangely seductive river that wends its way through the lives of the children in

Lehmann's *The Dusty Answer*, "scattered over with fierce, fire-opal flakes" or "moon-coloured, with a dying flush in it." Even the most vividly written shopping list couldn't compete, and Baker's relative lack of attention to these novelistic passages can't help but feel like a loss.

Baker's own prose is earnestly luxuriant, every phrase finely finished. When in 1930 Townsend Warner buys a ramshackle, leftover Dorset cottage, intending for it to be an occasional retreat, we are told: "But her heart snagged on the cottage, and the woman she had invited to lodge there, and from that point onwards, she went back to London infrequently, and then hardly at all." Like Townsend Warner's original intentions, the sentence peters out to a leisurely halt, containing the slow movement of the years within it. Alongside such attentive details, the biography's structure can occasionally feel unwieldy. The book is adapted from a PhD thesis, the traces of which are still visible in its three hefty central chapters, long enough to make one wish for a brisker thematic trot across these lives. Similarly, these three women's country lives are not equally compelling. Lehman's ordinary lovesickness in particular pales in comparison to the other two, especially the gloriously eccentric Townsend Warner; it would be difficult not to be charmed by her projected country cookbook, which was to include chapters on "Other Herbs than Parsley" and "Unusual Breakfasts." But *Rural Hours*' distinction is that it sets out to do something fresher and perhaps more usable than objective, narrative biography. It seeks to recreate these writers' "happy undistinguished days, ripe & sweet & sound; the daily bread," as Woolf describes her time in the country. In that, it succeeds enchantingly. A