

Portraits by Joy Finzi

Special Collections featured item for January 2011 by David Knott, Visiting Research Fellow.

Drawings held at the University of Reading Special Collections Services.



The University of Reading Special Collections holds seven portrait drawings by Joy Finzi. The group comprises three of Edmund Blunden, and one each of Helen Thomas, Sylvia Townsend Warner (*image shown left*), Valentine Ackland, and David Jones. The drawings were presented to the University by the artist, in 1974, along with the literature collection of her husband the composer Gerald Finzi (1901-1956). It was Joy Finzi's intention to recreate, in the Finzi Book Room at Reading University Library, something of the look and atmosphere of the

original room in the Finzis' home at Church Farm, Ashmansworth. To this end she designed the room to incorporate the wooden shelving, the book collection and some of the furniture and objects originally present (the Finzi collections are now held in closed access storage at the Special Collections Service at Redlands Road, Reading). These portrait drawings were part of her scheme. The three Blunden portraits can be seen in the image of the Finzi Book Room shown below. They also

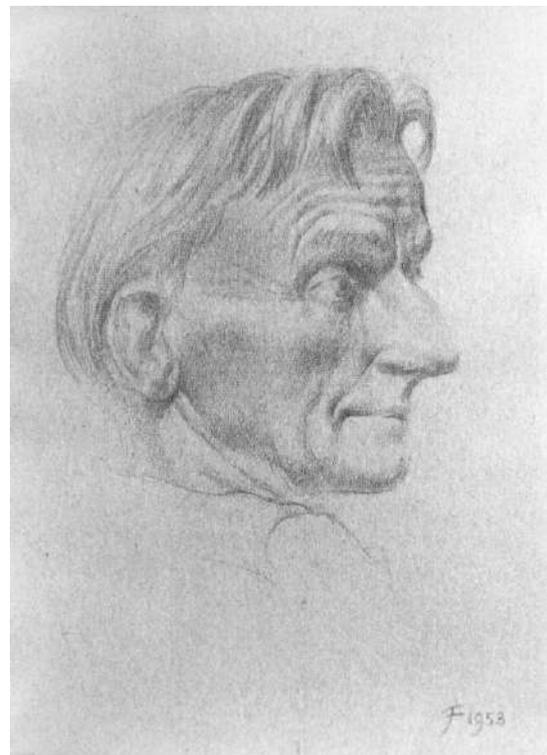
complement the Finzi manuscripts, presented at the same time, in which her sitters feature prominently.



Joy Finzi (1907-1991) was born Joyce Amy Black in Hampstead. She studied sculpture and pottery at the Central School of Art and Design in London, under John Skeaping, but these activities did not survive long in the busy and demanding life that followed her marriage to Gerald in 1933. Later she turned to the more manageable medium of drawing, beginning with a portrait of her elder son Christopher, in 1937.

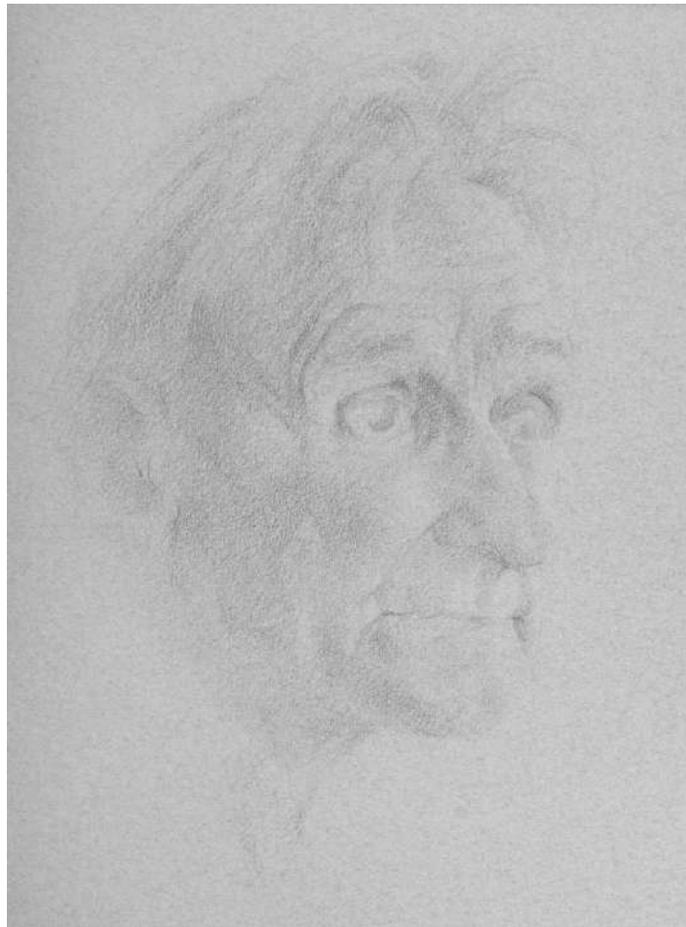
With the encouragement of Gerald she embarked on a series of such works which continued into the 1980s. In them she appears to have found her true *métier*. Joy Finzi's subjects were drawn particularly from among the wide circle of friends and acquaintances the Finzis entertained at Ashmansworth, including writers, artists and musicians, but also individuals from many walks of life, and not infrequently their children too. She preferred to draw them when they were engaged in absorbing work or relaxing conversation. To paraphrase her own observations, she aimed to catch the fleeting aspects of their characters, which, though laid down in the face tend to disappear in movement. Almost invariably she worked in pencil, or, perhaps more accurately, graphite, on coloured textured papers, including Fabriano Ingres among others. Her portrait of Ralph Vaughan Williams (1947), in the National Portrait Gallery, is on a blue tinted paper, now faded through exposure to light, in

graphite, strengthened with black and heightened with white chalk (information supplied by Dr T. Moreton, Collections Registrar, National Portrait Gallery, after consultation with the Museum's paper conservator). Her drawing of Malcolm Lipkin (1969) is in red chalk; her Blunden portrait of 1953 (shown below right) in, perhaps, a brown pencil. Of her portrait of Gerald (1940) she wrote that she only found it possible to start with a 'dappled faintly coloured paper, over which I flit'. The Reading group, apart from the two earliest Blunden drawings, are from the period of her widowhood and several, if not all, were with her at Bushey Leaze, the cottage at Chieveley she occupied from 1974. These portraits have been greatly admired and are distributed in public and private collections. In 1987 a selection of them was published under the title *In that place*. It reproduces forty-seven examples, including the seven described below. Each portrait is accompanied by a commentary from the artist, which is invaluable in recording her relationship with the sitter and the context in which each work was made. All seven were also included in the exhibition *Vivid life: portrait drawings by Joy Finzi* at Newbury District Museum in 1996. The University of Reading is particularly fortunate to possess such a fine and coherent group of Joy Finzi's portraits, and it is to Joy herself that thanks continues to be due.



Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), poet, writer and teacher

The Finzis' great friendship with Edmund Blunden began in 1947 when he collaborated with Gerald on an ode for St Cecilia's Day. He became a frequent visitor to Ashmansworth, and edited his edition of Ivor Gurney's poems there in 1953. Joy made all three of these portraits of him at Ashmansworth, drawn perhaps, as were a number of artists, by his expressive eyes. Those of 1952 (*image shown above left*) and 1953 (*shown above right*) are the earliest of this Reading group of Joy Finzi drawings and comparatively early in her total oeuvre. Barry Webb, Blunden's biographer, has written of her 'penetrating perception'. Many of Blunden's own works in the Finzi collection were presented by him and bear affectionate inscriptions. In addition there are 68 letters and cards from Blunden to Mrs Finzi from 1957 to 1967 among the Finzi manuscripts (MS 1399/3/3).



Edmund Blunden (1896-1974), poet, writer and teacher (1962) (unfinished sketch)



Helen Thomas (1877-1966), writer and widow of the poet Edward Thomas

Helen Thomas, the widow of the poet Edward Thomas (1878-1917), was the author of two famous works based on their life together - *As it was* and *World without end*. She lived at Eastbury, Berkshire, with her younger daughter Myfanwy for the last thirteen years of her life. Joy Finzi records first meeting her in the chemist shop Boots in Newbury in the early nineteen-fifties, but Helen never knew Gerald Finzi, which was particularly unfortunate as they could have shared an enthusiasm for Thomas Hardy. After Gerald's death the two women became close friends, Joy driving Helen around the countryside, to concerts in Newbury and to the theatre in Stratford and Oxford. She also arranged the recording of Helen reciting the poems of Edward Thomas, and facilitated the commissioning and installation of the Thomas memorial window by Laurence Whistler at Eastbury. Little is recorded about the circumstances of the making of this portrait (*image shown above*), drawn in 1960 when Helen Thomas was in her mid-eighties. The Finzi papers collection contains letters from Helen Thomas to Joy Finzi dated 1960 to 1966 (MS 1399/4/5); other letters with

transcripts 1961-1971 (MS 1399/4/4); also to Gwen and Vernon Watkins 1955 to 1967 (xerox copies and transcripts, MS 1399/4/6); also 30 letters to her from Sylvia Townsend Warner dated 1962 to 1966 (MS 1399/3/6) and 26 from Valentine Ackland dated 1962 to 1964 (MS 1399/3/7).



Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893-1978), writer and poet.

Sylvia Townsend Warner first met the Finzis in 1955, when Gerald consulted her on a point relating to early English church music. She had worked on the Tudor Church Music Project in the 1920s. Among their mutual friends were the artist Reynolds Stone and his wife Janet. The friendship of Joy and Sylvia deepened after Gerald's death in 1956. This portrait of Sylvia 'looking out from within' (*image shown above*) was drawn in June 1960 at Frome Vauchurch, Maiden Newton, Dorset, the house Sylvia shared with her long-term partner Valentine Ackland. Joy reported the occasion as 'an afternoon of pleasure' and noted Sylvia's enjoyment of being drawn. Sylvia was required to talk during the sitting to achieve an effect of animation. Joy

was one of the trustees of Sylvia's estate. There are 30 letters from Warner to Helen Thomas dated 1962 to 1966 in the Finzi manuscripts (MS 1399/3/6).

The Finzi collection also holds Warner's *Wave Without Sky* - her first collage, made for Valentine Ackland at Christmas 1958, and bequeathed by Valentine to Joy in 1969.

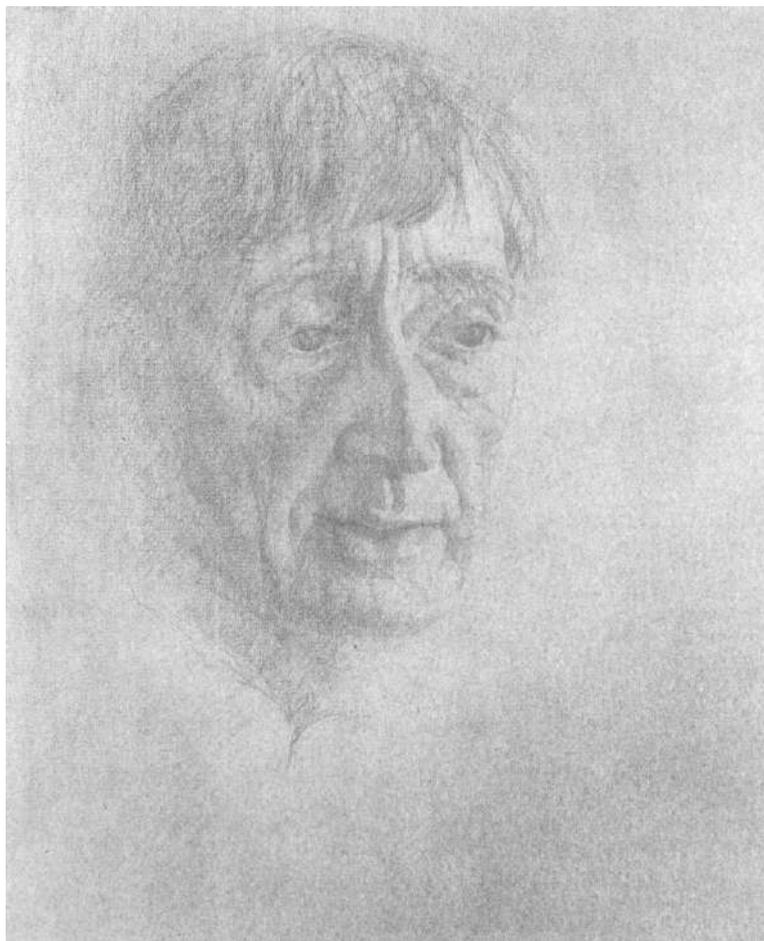


Valentine Ackland (1906-1969), poet

This portrait (*image shown above*) was made at Sylvia Townsend Warner's request the day after Valentine Ackland's death at Frome Vauchurch in November 1969. The artist wrote that she drew what Sylvia saw and what she would treasure. It has been cited as an example of the speed at which Joy could draw.

There are 26 letters from Valentine Ackland to Joy Finzi, dated 1960 to 1967, and a further 12 from 1966 to 1969 among the Finzi manuscripts (MS 1399/3/4 and 3/5). In addition there are a further 26 from Ackland to Helen Thomas from 1962 to 1964

(MS 1399/3/7). Typescripts of Ackland's poems arranged by Sylvia Townsend Warner are also among the Finzi papers held at Reading.



David Jones (1895-1974), artist, writer and poet

Joy Finzi became acquainted with David Jones through the artist Richard Shirley Smith. She often visited him in his cold boarding house rooms in north-west London, where this rapid sketch (*image shown above*) was made in 1966, whilst Jones was talking to his friend Jane Carter. Joy felt some trepidation at the prospect and subsequently described Jones's face as looking as if it was made of white run-down candle wax with a sense of crucified lines she could not fully draw. Her misgivings were imparted to Helen Thomas, who, in a letter to Joy of 1966 imagined both the artist's eagerness and the difficulties which the project was likely to engender (Finzi MS 1399/4/5).

In a letter to Joy of 25 March 1971(?) Jones acknowledged her various letters which he had failed to answer, and spoke appreciatively of her efforts to arrange a meeting

with the French critic Louis Bonnerot (Finzi MS 1399/3/1). Bonnerot later published work on Jones, as poet and artist, and in a letter of his own to Joy wrote of her 'untiring devotion to David' (Finzi MS 1399/3/1 - 7 June 1971).

References

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- Harman, Claire. *Sylvia Townsend Warner : a biography*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989.
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- *In that place : the portrait drawings of Joy Finzi*. Marlborough: Libanus Press, 1987.
- Jordan, Rolf (ed.) *The clock of the years: an anthology of writings on Gerald and Joy Finzi ...* Lichfield: Chosen Press, 2007.
- *Joy Finzi 1907-1991: tributes from her friends*, c. 1991.
- Thomas, Myfanwy (ed.) *Time & again : memoirs and letters : Helen Thomas*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1978.
- *Vivid life : portrait drawings by Joy Finzi*. Newbury District Museum, 1996.
- Webb, Barry. *Edmund Blunden : a biography*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990.

Catalogue of portrait drawings by Joy Finzi held at the University of Reading Special Collections Services

NB. Please note that the images used in this Featured Item are black and white reproductions of the originals.

Edmund Blunden

- 1952 Signed: F 1952. Pencil on darkish grey-green paper, white highlights; beneath a mount with aperture approx. 28.5 x 21 cm.; framed and glazed; label of Alfred Stiles & Sons, Hammersmith. Inscribed by the artist on the backing board: Edmund Blunden 1952 by Joyce Finzi. Exhibition label (N.F.S.).

- 1953 Signed: F 1953. Brown pencil(?) on pale grey-green paper; beneath a mount with aperture approx. 29 x 24 cm.; framed and glazed; label of Alfred Stiles & Sons, Hammersmith. Inscribed by the artist on the backing board: Edmund Blunden by Joyce Finzi 1953.
- 1962 No signature visible. Pencil on light greenish paper; beneath a mount with aperture approx. 30 x 27.5 cm.; framed and glazed (no label). Artist's typed slip on back: EDMUND BLUNDEN unfinished sketch. Exhibited at the Imperial War Museum 2008-9.

Helen Thomas

- 1960 No signature visible. Pencil on light greenish paper; beneath a mount with aperture approx. 29 x 22.5 cm.; framed and glazed (no label).

Sylvia Townsend Warner

- 1960 Signed: F 1960. Pencil on darkish grey-green paper, white highlight; beneath a mount with aperture approx. 39 x 29 cm.; framed and glazed; label of Alfred Stiles & Sons, Hammersmith. Inscribed by the artist on the backing board: Sylvia Townsend Warner by Joy Finzi 'looking out from within'.

Valentine Ackland

- 1969 No signature visible. Pencil on light grey laid paper; beneath a mount with aperture 48.5 x 36.5 cm.; framed and glazed (no label). Inscribed by the artist on the backing board: Valentine Ackland Poet 1969. On her death bed. Misdated 1961 in *In that place* and *Vivid life*.

David Jones

- 1966 No signature visible. Pencil on light grey paper; beneath a mount with aperture approx. 34 x 28 cm.; framed and glazed (no label). Inscribed by the artist on the backing board: DAVID JONES talking to Jane Carter - 1966. Joy Finzi. Misdated 1961 in *In that place* and *Vivid life*.