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## Once a Wood, Always a Wood: Woodland, Witchery and Rewilding in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*

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### ABSTRACT

This article will read Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926), which sees spinster aunt Laura escape the strictures of middle-class urban domesticity and move alone to the Chilterns, where she discovers that she is a witch and makes a deal with the Devil, within the specific context of its historical moment and geography, and suggests ways it points towards our own moment also. Utilising current ecocriticism alongside notions of enchantment and countryside histories, it will suggest that in Warner's novel, we can see the beginnings of contemporary ecological concerns modelled, along with methods to address these concerns also, depicted through Laura's idiosyncratic relationship with the Devil and the woodland he lives in; through this, Townsend Warner implies that passivity, gentility and mutuality are key modes of human interaction with the natural world, given the novel's implication that trees are our past, present and future, always waiting to take hold again.

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In *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape*, ecologist and botanist Oliver Rackham outlines the process of natural succession: 'the spontaneous replacement of one kind of vegetation with another' (1978, 19). He suggests that 'the natural tendency of almost any land in Britain is to turn into [...] woodland. Let a field be abandoned – as happened to many fields down the centuries – and in ten years it will be overgrown with scrub (which is young woodland) and difficult to reclaim; in thirty years it will have "tumbled down to woodland." The same would happen, and often is happening, to most chalk downs and heaths, and to some moors and mountains' (1978, 19). This process that Rackham identifies is something we can locate in what is perhaps an unlikely source written some fifty years previously to Rackham's study: *Lolly Willowes* by Sylvia Townsend Warner, written in 1926, sees the aptly named Laura Willowes – a middle-class 'spinster' aunt who is made to go by the name Lolly by her family – leave her brother Henry's home in Apsley Terrace, London, in 1922 and move alone to Great Mop, a hamlet in the Chilterns. Warner's genteel prose and protagonist soon, however, belie something more fierce, feral and uncultivated as Laura discovers that she is, in fact, a witch and enters into a pact with the Devil, who appears to her one day in the woods while whistling to himself and wearing 'gaiters and [...] corduroy', for even the Devil in this novel is a little genteel

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(Warner 2012, 168). Their unusual, cordial and disarming relationship comes to signify and even exemplify a particular model of human engagement with the natural world that we might bring to bear on our contemporary ecological situation and that, concurrently, characterises the natural world's engagement with what is human also.

Critical work regarding this text has been relatively contained and has focused on a confluence of sexuality, conflict and imperialism, and how the text operates in a fantastic mode, sitting within a realm of ambiguity between polite realism and something more troublingly psychological. Bruce Knoll suggests that in her novel, Townsend Warner seeks 'to break down the dualism between aggressiveness and passivity' (1993, 344) as a means of acknowledging and combating the restrictions and tensions within these specific cultural contexts that define and contain Laura. It is surprising, then, that existing criticism has not taken account of the real and imaginary presence of woods and trees within the novel (despite its being populated with them), the manner in which the narrative repeatedly reconfigures people in organic, natural or zoomorphic forms, and the ways in which Laura's relationship *with*, and man's relation *to* nature and to woodland in particular, are also framed in a way that also resists binary frameworks. Rather than one anchored in dominion or sensory, superficial pleasure, Townsend Warner depicts Laura's connection to the countryside around Great Mop, facilitated through its Devil, as one that balances reciprocity, connectivity and admiration in such a way that we might call it enchantment. Patrick Curry defines enchantment as 'an experience of wonder. Variations include awe, amazement, astonishment. It can vary in intensity from charm, through delight, to full-blown joy' (2019, 7). Though Laura's quiet, albeit very constant and focused relationship with nature sits at the more low-key, subtle end of this proposed spectrum, the nature of the relationship, very specifically wrought by Townsend Warner, models Curry's assertion that enchantment 'is nothing if not a relationship between two subjects (the other subject can be almost anyone or anything) and for the enchanted person, the other's value is intrinsic. It needs, and can find, no further justification; we have reached the bedrock' (10). In this article, I will rectify this previous critical absence in relation to a text only recently re-released by Penguin and subject now to a burgeoning new audience and critical focus in exploring Townsend Warner's presentation of woodland in relation to witchcraft and enchantment to suggest that enchantment is what we should be aiming at in our relationship with the natural. I will also connect the text and its relational model to concepts surrounding the 'management' of nature from both the novel's contemporary time period and our own, specifically considering more recently identified ecological processes like Rackham's succession and the notion of rewilding.

The area Lolly moves to from London, the Chilterns, gently rolling hills rich in chalk soil, flint and beech trees, is one of the most heavily wooded areas in England – over one-fifth woodland and much of it ancient – and was declared an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1965. In 1926, when the novel was published, the nation was still recovering after the brutal mechanics of the First World War and the General Strike, called by the TUC in response to poor working conditions and stagnant pay, saw millions of people strike over nine days and began to reacclimate the nation's political leanings and alter people's relationship to industry, society and each other. Nature had also begun to take hold in real and metaphorical terms: the London suburbs flooded after 18 days of rain, A. A. Milne published Winnie the Pooh's adventures in One Hundred Acre Wood where 'in that enchanted place on the top of the forest, a little boy and his bear will always be playing',

the location a facsimile of Five Hundred Acre Wood in Ashdown Forest, East Sussex, and Patrick Abercrombie, renowned town planner and architect, published *The Preservation of Rural England* and subsequently became secretary of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (now the Countryside Charity), which first sought to halt the spread of ribbon developments, to create green belts and to provide reasonable access to the countryside for the urban population within its general remit of the protection of green spaces.

After the mechanisation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these events formed part of a shift in the 1920s towards contemplating and appreciating the natural, and towards considering the value and quality of English countryside and how to best preserve it. Indeed, in his tract, Abercrombie suggests that ‘the greatest historical monument that we possess, the most essential thing which is England, is the countryside, the Market Town, the Village, the Hedgerow Trees, the Lanes, the Copses, the Streams and the Farmsteads’ (1926, 6). However, he points out that this idyll was at the time being threatened and altered too quickly by various developmental factors, including the rise in motor transport, evolving farming methods, afforestation, urban decentralisation, allotments and the ‘week-end habit’ urban and suburban dwellers developed regarding visiting the countryside, changes all robustly taking place despite the economic depression within this period. He presents this threat as one urgently in need of a resolution, and a resolution that did not allow the countryside to become simply another item of consumption or convenience tendered out to interested parties within an economic framework: ‘[t]here is therefore no time to be lost if the English countryside is not to be reduced during this century to the same state of dreary productiveness to which the English town sank during the industrial revolution of the last century’ (13).

It is preservation and a distinct form of anti-productivity that is also the quiet driving forces of Townsend Warner’s contemporaneous narrative. Knoll suggests that ‘Townsend Warner presents the process of urbanization, certainly for Laura as one of moving from life to death’ (1993, 252): Laura finds her busy, herded role as ‘Aunt Lolly’ gently but relentlessly tedious and feels, having spent her early life in the country, that London is not meeting her needs; she is framed from childhood as having more affinity with the natural world than with the terranean trappings of the constructed human one. A ‘gentle creature’, she is ‘absorbed’ into her brother Henry’s household after the death of her father. While she articulates this process as feeling like a piece of furniture that is being passed around, ‘absorbed’, and fashioned within the text as through a general family consciousness (they are almost robotically all of one mind when it comes to what they think she needs), frames her as something rather more organic, un-designed and enduring (1926, 9). When she is a child, she is left strapped to a Bon Chrétien pear tree by her brothers for a whole day and thinks nothing of it. She is fascinated by her father’s brewery business, and by botany in general, writing her own tract called ‘Health by the Wayside’; in her grief after her father’s death, she stands outside in the garden for long stretches and is perceived by the gardener as something ‘he had planted [. . .] and now saw [. . .] dashed and broken by bad weather’ (38).

Curry suggests that ‘[t]he natural world of your early years really gets under your skin. The spell it casts lasts, so at some very basic level you absorb the seasonal cycle, the angle of the light and the plants and the animals you first encounter, and they remain lifelong benchmarks’ (2019, 75). Enchantment, it follows, is often connected to or elicited by repetitions or memories of these early encounters. Throughout Townsend Warner’s three-

part narrative, Laura is depicted as at her most alive, engaged and indeed rooted either at Lady Place, her childhood home in Somerset, or in her eventually successful attempts in Great Mop to re-establish the unmannered, unbounded and enthusiastic relationship she once had with the countryside after decades of living in the capital, adhering to Henry and his wife Caroline's domestic and industrious timetable. When Lady Place, site of Laura's initial interests and freedoms (even if altered and distanced later by her grief), is temporarily lost to the family after the death of her brother James, she perceives the sensation she feels as both bodily and separate to herself and imagined in natural form: '[t]o Laura it seemed as though some familiar murmuring brook had suddenly gone underground. There it flowed, silenced and obscured, until the moment it should reappear and murmur again between green banks' (53). The brook is both 'under [her] skin' and somewhere elsewhere entirely, in an undefined but still visualised location, darkened and silenced until responsibility for Lady Place is to be taken on by Laura's nephew Titus. Laura images her events and emotions within the natural, blending both her interior and exterior lives and her past and future into an imagined watercourse that is both constant and flowing.

'Metaphor,' Curry states, '[. . .] how we not only think creatively but live – not by ghostly abstraction but the green and gold logic of life' (2019, 26) is key to understanding and recognising enchantment. It is also a key feature of enchantment and its expression, allowing a person or thing to be two or more things at once, not constrained into being wholly one or the other, and people and objects to express things other than themselves also. Laura's early enchantment with the natural world informs both her mode of thinking and its expression and becomes, once she has remembered it, a means of directing her life. She both is and is not the brook, and the brook is all at once itself, a signifier of both a specific part of herself temporarily lost and a manifestation of a more generalised emotional turbulence.

This feature is not solely attached to Laura though. In this text, people and their effects, the world they create, morph into other images of flora and fauna through metaphor and though simile that is, through Townsend Warner's repeated recourse to these fusions, granted extra potency: the name *Willowes* explicitly connects to a particular tree genus and also carries attendant associations with femininity, regeneration and witchcraft based in common folklore; fireworks become a 'thicket of bright sedge scattering a fiery pollen' (33); the group at the witch's Sabbath Laura attends 'wheeled and manoeuvred like a flock of starlings' (161); Pandora, the fiancé of Laura's nephew Titus, eats like a 'bitch that gives suck' (183); and *Willowes* family success is imagined by Caroline as 'the family tree that had endured the gale with an unflinching green heart' (59). Moments of change in the text are also permeated by pungent smells that imply again a kind of brewing or botany taking place under the narrative, and a kind of leakage also between states, 'bruised fennel' or 'bruised grass' scenting Laura's transition into witchery (141; 162), as if her life as she knows it is being crushed underfoot, or ground up as if for a spell, the material of it manipulated to release certain properties. The primary settings of the text are pastoral, and the language and imagery of the narrative create a consistent textual pastoral also, cumulatively pushing its human subjects outside of their realm, reshaping them into non-human, zoomorphic or ecological forms. Human strictures and structures are rendered permeable and open to more primitive, immediate and ever-adapting organic processes in a slow but steady type of succession, to borrow Rackham's term, that ends with Laura and Satan speaking openly about woodland and its longevity at the novel's close. The

human world is overtaken by the animal, vegetable and mineral and people transition between states in both narrative and real terms. Even the way Lolly finds out she is a witch is one of natural becoming and unannounced presence rather than one of ritual and orchestration. A kitten appears from out of nowhere in her home, scratches her and therefore 'She, Laura Willowses, in the year 1922, had entered into a compact with the Devil' (142). She 'becomes' witch organically, overnight, without training, notice, or any explicitly expressed interest in doing so, as if it would always happen if the right conditions presented themselves.

Placidity, inaction, peaceful subjugation – these aren't responses or approaches we would associate with becoming a witch or making a deal with the Devil, or the responses necessary to addressing our climatological or ecological issues; but Warner here presents a different conceptualisation of the human place within nature that speaks to the novel's genteel circumstances. We talk of action currently, and of affecting change through the administration of power in the creation of progress, of curated processes; but the novel looks towards other models of interrelation, or indeed lack of, towards what we might now call rewilding (conservation which is primarily intended to restore natural processes and protect or reintroduce [apex predators](#) and [key species](#), the aim being the creation of ecosystems that require passive management and as little human involvement as possible); through this interrelation, Townsend Warner also points us towards both the unhuman-ness of nature and again the natural enmeshed state and vulnerability of humans. Laura the witch, here, through her connection to the woods and the Devil who lives in them, acts as a conduit for these alternative, complementary approaches.

Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland suggest that '[e]very landscape imaginable carries an intriguing history of representation, varyingly ecophilic (Nature-loving) and ecophobic (Nature-fearing)' and that '[w]oodlands and forests frequently appear in Gothic fiction as ambivalent spaces' (2019, 3). It would be plausible to read Townsend Warner's text as Gothic in this regard, being as it fuses witchcraft, Satan, woodland and someone existing on the periphery of the normal and then, seemingly, beyond it completely. Indeed, before Lolly moves to Great Mop she seems to experience the sensation and space she is craving as a kind of embodied Gothic ambivalence: '[h]er mind was groping after something that eluded her experience, a something that was shadowy and menacing, and yet in some way congenial; a something that lurked in waste places, that was hinted at by the sound of water gurgling through deep channels and by the voices of birds of ill-omen' (1926, 67). This 'something' materialises later as the Devil and the wood, though interestingly here it is Laura 'groping' after or seeking out the as yet unknown presence, which shows no particular sign here of seeking her out – it merely exists, carries on, and it is she who taps into it. The typical (though not mandatory) Gothic formula of menace seeking the human for malicious or resolutive ends is reversed and nor is the menace entirely, or even at all, malignant, but possesses welcoming qualities also. Townsend Warner's presentation of this landscape is neither ecophobic nor ecophilic, but neither is it representative of a typical Gothic ambivalence. The natural world is not trying to scare or harm Laura and neither is she blind to its hazards or afraid of it. Parker states that '[w]hen we imagine the forest, we tend towards extremes. The landscape is commonly read as a binary space – as either "good" or "bad". When it is "good", it is a remedial setting of wonder and enchantment; when it is "bad", it is a dangerous and terrifying wilderness' (2020, 1). Laura's waiting wood does not operate in this binary

fashion nor is Parker's conceptualisation of enchantment (a positive part of a binary) here seemingly quite concurrent with Curry's. Curry suggests that true enchantment is driven by 'only the continued existence and well-being of the beloved other person, place, artefact or whatever' and that it is characterised by 'an unpossessive love of them as 'other' (2019, 13). The wood does not need to be either good or bad, and enchantment is not precluded by it being both. Laura is enchanted precisely because it is both and it is other, and she inhabits it and her new life spent within it with what becomes a content, unpoliced dedication.

This does not happen immediately, though, and Laura struggles to access and resolve the sensations she had experienced in London when she first moves to the countryside. In *Underland*, Robert MacFarlane states that 'we are presently living through the Anthropocene, an epoch of immense and often frightening change at a planetary scale, in which "crisis" exists not as an ever-deferred future apocalypse but rather as an ongoing occurrence experienced most severely by the most vulnerable. Time is profoundly out of joint – and so is place. Things that should have stayed buried are rising up unbidden' (2019, 13). George Monbiot (2015) calls our current state of ecological affairs one of 'extreme depletion', full of 'broken relationships, truncated natural processes, and cauterised ecologies'. Things are altered or ruined by over-engineering and interference in combination with ignorance. When Laura moves to Great Mop, she finds her enjoyment frustrated by such over-planning, over-exuberance and high expectations and repeats the same restless, unsatisfied behaviour she had displayed in London, where she felt constantly driven to go on expeditions to churches, to Paddington Station, to flower shops where she purchases extravagant blooms weekly from far-flung countries to fill her small room with something she feels as a lack and a force: 'Loneliness, dreariness, aptness for arousing a sense of fear, a kind of ungodly hallowedness – these were the things that called her thoughts away from the comfortable fireside' (1926, 67). Laura is therefore in a truncated natural process herself, knowing something is not quite right, but unable to locate yet the source of this disconnect and impelled to try to fix it. She cannot yet see that satisfaction might hinge on reconceptualising herself and her approach that what she needs is to cease this activity as response to her sensation of 'ungodly hallowedness,' a precursor to the Devil and his pastoral – in both senses of the word – neglect, and to make slower yet larger changes instead.

I will return to neglect in due course but, in essence, Laura is trying too hard and looking in the wrong places, for the wrong things, and she is participating still in structures and processes that, though she thinks they will help unlock some aspect of herself, hinder her awakening because they are man-made and prescriptive. However, in London, she buys a map of the Chilterns and an attendant guidebook and obsesses over the details they document – a path, a church, a windmill, lines and dots. Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt suggests that 'Warner uses these map-reading scenes to critique a spatialized Englishness by demonstrating the extent of Laura's spatial politics' (2003, 458). Laura 'sees the surfeit of green [on the map] as an opportunity, but she does not see her opportunity as an effect of map-reading practices that have wider geopolitical implications' (459). Laura's pouring over this map and guide in London and then in Great Mop speaks to her not understanding that the typical, human approach to landscape – one of boundaries, borders, ownership and sites to see – does not deliver a new consciousness and proves



profoundly dissatisfying as it repeats the dominant patterns and rigidity of the man-made and manhandled that creates Monbiot's cauterised ecologies.

Curry suggests that 'there is no method for achieving enchantment, nor re-enchantment. Not in the sense that people want and expect a method, which they think of as scientific but is actually magical: 'if you do this, then that will happen' (2019, 16). Laura's attempt at locating enchantment through a particular – already concretised because the map is edged and finished – methodology leads to mere frustration and, in the novel's terms, a false kind of magic. It is only when she throws the map and guide into a disused well that she starts to unlock the withheld thus far path to becoming the witch she already is: 'she scarcely knew what she had done, but she knew that she had done rightly, whether it was that she had sacrificed to the place, or had cast herself upon its mercies [...]' (1926, 107). Laura has to unlearn the bounded, ordered and unyielding patterns she has so far absorbed and replicated and given in to instinct, intuition and random wandering, which leads her eventually to the Devil in the wood; she has to become of the landscape and not just someone taking up space within it or trying to reconnoitre it, to put an end to the anxious thrumming of her former experiences. This both mirrors Abercrombie's push towards what he calls 'persuasive planning' in 1926, which he frames as a form of innateness and emotional understanding, and a 'lightness' of touch that should accompany and inform any statutory power in terms of rural preservation and development, and pre-empts Monbiot's current recommendation that it is in fact 'immediate, instinctive engagement,' that will form the 'restoration of our broken ecological relationships' (2015).

As characterised by her relationship with the Devil, described at the novel's end as one of 'satisfied but profoundly indifferent ownership' (1926, 203), it is a kind of neglect that proves to be the locus of harmony: Laura burrowing into a wood, sleeping in a haystack, only gently affecting the world around her, while the Devil passes by in turn without disturbing her, preserves and cultivates through relinquishment. Knoll suggests that Laura locates a peace within her engagement with the wood and her resistance of normative expectations for a women of her age and in her social and familial position, and this she has 'achieved [...] without resorting to the traditional male responses of control, domination and aggressiveness, which Townsend Warner sees as antithetical to life. She has not overcome, controlled or dominated anyone' (1993, 360). This relinquishing can be uncomfortable, or scarily exhilarating – the ungodly hallowedness that is making a safety pact with a happily disinterested Satan – but it is this giving over or up that bears fruit, Townsend Warner's transmogrifying people into not-people suggesting that we are not quite as in possession of ourselves as humans as we thought, or as in control of or in-tune with the ecological world around us, that it operates in ways we choose not to see by doggedly pursuing one human-centred relational mode with the natural world, which does not account for the long term in both directions, the past and the future.

Again in *Underland*, MacFarlane discusses the wood-wide web, the communication network made up of fungi that enables forest life to communicate chemically, and the understory, 'the name given to the life that exists between the forest floor and the tree canopy: the fungi, mosses, lichens, bushes and saplings that thrive and compete in this mid-zone. Metaphorically [also], the "understorey" is also the sum of the entangled, ever-growing narratives, histories, ideas and words that interweave to give a wood or forest its diverse life in culture' (2019, 95). This system and place



were only relatively recently identified and labelled, woodland proving to be familiar on the surface, but containing unseen worlds and networks that disrupt our understanding of what trees and plant-life actually are and do. Rackham states: '[h]istorians forget that trees and woodland are living things, and have lives of their own independently of what men do to them. They are not mere artefacts, and are not wholly predictable. As living things, trees are very unlike us and unlike each other. They are much less anthropoid than dogs or codfish; an ash is less like a pine than a dog is like a fish' (1978, 24). Warner again seems to anticipate this network, strata and metaphor and the way in which trees can be 'other', resisting our attempts to foist meaning and function upon them. Though, ironically given how humans are likened to the natural here, the woods and surrounding landscape are anthropomorphised through their description, this humanisation is at the service of their separation from normal human presence and their ability to communicate amongst themselves, moving collectively away from that which they disapprove of. Laura feels like they judge her when Titus visits her in Great Mop and they walk out together: '[s]he thought the woods saw her with him and drew back scornfully to let them pass together', and '[t]he woods judged her by her company, and hushed their talk as she passed by with Titus. Silence heard them coming, and fled out of the fields, the hills locked up their thoughts, and became so many grassy mounds to be walked up and walked down' (1926, 134; 136). A new spring sees Laura, alone again, get closer to the woods: '[s]he lad her cheek against a tree and shut her eye to listen. She expected to hear the tree drumming like a telegraph pole' and that from a hill-top, Laura heard 'the various surrounding woods cry out with different voices [...] the fir plantation seemed to chant with some never-ending rune' (110–111). Alien, ancient and with their own special kind of networked sentience, the woods and their environs here talk amongst themselves, retreating decisively from Titus, who naively surveys them with 'possessive gestures' and rejecting Laura's affection while she associates with him. They have their own terms to be met and their own business to conduct.

The understorey, in the metaphorical sense, and MacFarlane's other buried things that return unbidden are also locatable in *Lolly Willowes* at the novel's end, when Laura sits in the grass and finally talks to her Devil. Rackham, in *The History of the Countryside*, goes on to suggest that '[w]oods do not cease to exist through being felled. Popular writers suppose that a wood gets "exhausted" as if it were a coal mine or a pine plantation. Not so: a wood is self-renewing, and is no more damaged by being cut down than a meadow is destroyed by cutting a crop of hay' (1997, 67). Though Rackham is of course discussing the practicalities of forestry and felling, again we might retro-actively find his ideas in Warner's novel. Succession, natural replacement, is given what seems to be an uncanny edge through its association with Satan here, with the wood becoming a continuous presence even when it is no longer present. It is more than simply uncanny though, continuing to depict Laura's enchantment with her surroundings and she modelling it as a mode of interrelation with the natural world, Curry explaining that in enchantment, even the (eventual) loss of the object or passing of the moment of enchantment produces a pattern where '[e]very presence is attended by an absence, which can then become a strange sort of presence' (2019, 15) and an ongoing sense of appreciation and respect, whether the object is good or bad or both, that continues past any initial moment.

Just as Laura's restlessness and senselessness quelled by considered and beneficial inattention (the Devil passes her by; she does not interfere with the wood but simply exists in it) is again through neglect – what Rackham calls 'human default' – that landscapes can and do change and that the landscape's tendency to become woodland comes to pass – by our sitting back and not meddling, because the wood is always waiting to come back: as Laura's Devil says, 'Once a wood, always a wood' (1926, 189). Human, or what we might think of as 'civilised' life at least is under threat from the weight of natural history, that sits beneath or behind these superficial constructions ready to become natural future, as Lolly's vision suggests: 'Once a wood, always a wood: trees where he sat would crowd into a shade. [. . .] Held fast in that strong memory no wild thing could be shaken, no secret covert destroyed, no haunt of shadow and silence laid open' (1926, 189). Natural processes, and woodland, in particular, can be cut down, removed, or harvested, but linger on regardless, waiting for the opportunity to return, and to bring with them signs of older histories and creatures. Curry suggests, regarding enchantment centred on the natural world, that '[w]ildness, unlike wilderness, can never be entirely kept out' (2019, 85) and that '[n]ature is therefore not under our control. If it appears to be, then it too has been replaced by something else we do think we own and can manage: some version of Nature Inc. arranged to suit human convenience' (2019, 17), that is not in fact nature at all, but a pale, orderly imitation of it we have created. Even in 1926, Abercrombie railed against what he called a 'bogus naturalism', which he conceives as an attempt to either simply mimic older structures and environments through newer ones in a toothless echo or to try to pass off this 'Nature Inc.', the countryside tidied up for the 'weekend habit', as nature proper (1926, 52).

Again, Monbiot (2013) suggests a kind of rewilding is what is needed to get back to some sort of ecological health and to prevent what Abercrombie called 'dreary productiveness' and what we would now label out and out damage. He proposes that during the last interglacial period, this continent and this country had megafauna – something we have now lost – and that our woodland now still bears signs of being adapted to these creatures: rhinos, elephants, etc. Lolly's vision continues, and she starts seeing life as was now ready to make a return, and how vulnerable our man-made world is to these presences, our death-grip on order only worsening this weakness:

The goods yard at Paddington, for instance – a savage place! as holy and enchanted as ever it had been. Not one of the monuments and tinkering of man could impose on the satanic mind. The Vatican and the Crystal Palace, and all the neat human nest-boxes in rows, Balham and Fulham and the Cromwell Road – he saw through them, they went flop like card-houses, the bricks were earth again, and the steel girders burrowed shrieking into the veins of the earth, and the dead timber was restored to the ghostly groves. Wolves howled through the streets of Paris, the foxes played in the throne room of the Schönbrunn, and in the basement at Apsley Terrace the mammoth slowly revolved, trampling out its lair (1926, 189).

The revolving mammoth, the Parisian wolves and Austrian foxes, these are all signs of what was, is and what could be again; the mammoth's revolutions, in particular, suggest a return, a regrowth and a regression concurrently, its lair one not made of malice or malignancy but simply of natural power, and the notion that humans are not head of the kingdom but merely one branch on a tree, that in the end, our civilisation is but a façade built on remarkably shaky foundations. Given that, as Curry states, 'enchantment is wild and unbidable' and 'hopelessly non-modern' (2019, 24), and natural processes create, as

MacFarlane articulates, 'a dynamic [...] seen so often in the underland that it has become a master trope, troublesome history thought long since entombed is emerging again' (2019, 330), Townsend Warner seems to be suggesting here, in her depictions of woodland as connected to witchcraft and a polite but knowing devilry, that if we are wise, we will stop railing against nature as it will best us eventually: either we live with it or it will overtake us, however, in control we may think ourselves to be. Monbiot continues, suggesting rewilding is 'otherwise standing back. It's about abandoning the Biblical doctrine of dominion which has governed our relationship with the natural world' (2013), this doctrine gently mocked at the end of the novel, when Satan asks if he may eat one of Laura's apples in the Mulgrave Folly rather than offering one to her in an inversion of the typical Edenic scene (1926, 192).

It is Laura's passive witchcraft that seems to be fashioned as mediator between woodland and the latent wild; her inherent interest in communication and general enchantment with the natural world across the past, present and future, coupled with her specific inquisitiveness regarding brewing, botany and cultivation in instinctive, bodily terms are both presented as implicit and then somewhat explicit confirmation and culmination of her witchcraft, and connect the conceptual to the actual in the novel. Townsend Warner presents, then, a holistic view of natural interrelationships and, using cumulative natural allegory and imagery, a holistic textual framework also, the one constructing the other: Laura's way of engaging with the natural world is not only metaphorical but also corporeal, witchery here not so much a means of doing 'magic' as if it were scientific methodology but, more importantly, of witnessing it and allowing it to take place, benefitting then from its results. Efforts to understand and gently utilise the natural world, evidenced also by Laura's childhood warden Nannie Quantrell in her belief in 'the property of young nettles' (1926, 27) and in eating and drinking natural products at the right times of the year, and Mrs Leak, Laura's landlady, making 'home-made wine: dandelion, cowslip, elderberry, ash key, or mangold' (1926, 99) and knowing everything, also, about the human, social network of the village, suggest that witchcraft here is an integrative 'state' and intuition, rather than something as forced and insensitive as an occupation, and both a means of generating mutuality and connecting past and future.

In *Lolly Willowes*, then, dominion is replaced by a disruptive placidity, by acceptance and benign neglect. This is not because there is no other choice or pathway, nor is it a kind of impotence or helplessness – as Knoll states, 'Laura's response to her environment is certainly not aggressive, but neither can it be described as merely passive resistance' (1993, 360); it is a choice to stop doing or managing and to start watching, listening and cultivating through active inactivity. If we seek enchantment with the natural world, as Laura does, and as we should if we seek to 'love' it, we have to give it space to operate and position ourselves within, not over, it. Satan, the naturalist, rescues lost souls from their torment through peaceable stewardship and watchful inertia. Human lives and structures, when removed from any connection to nature, do not and will not stand up to the waiting wood or the thawing woolly mammoth. The more we interfere, the more we call up our own curses, or failings. Townsend Warner's novel is fiction, not a manifesto, and I am certainly not suggesting that climate change should be ignored in the expectation that everything will right itself without any interference, but on a smaller, human level and in the response in this text to its epoch – to the unsettling of what is human and what is not and the burgeoning look towards

preservation, what Knoll labels a ‘relationship of reciprocity’ (1993, 357) – re-orient us in relation to the natural world. We have need of the world though in reality, and as Townsend Warner’s trees show, it might have no real need for us. MacFarlane suggests that ‘if there is human meaning to be made of the wood-wide web, it is surely that what might save us as we move forwards into the precarious, unsettled centuries ahead is collaboration: mutualism, symbiosis, the inclusive human work of collective decision-making extended to more-than-human communities’ (2019, 133). We will have to adapt – or indeed unadapt – accordingly and learn to live within, not beyond, our natural confines. Our world can be easily laid waste, like so many nest-boxes, but the natural world is not so easily dismissed and will, of course, outlive us. Reading the novel through its plain air leanings and, indeed, its trees – things to be amongst but leave undisturbed – we can see the beginnings of contemporary ecological concerns and of ways to address these concerns also. Warner magically seems to get to the heart of our current matter – with her witchery, wilderness and woolly mammoths – and brew up the idea that, while what humans have built can be ruined and forgotten, there is in fact, as Rackham states, ‘no such thing as a derelict wood’ (1978, 206).

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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