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TWENTIETH- CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

SECOND EDITION

Harry Blamires

MACMILLAN LITERATURE

TWENTIETH- CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

Harry Blamires

M
MACMILLAN
EDUCATION

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Editor's preface

THE study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts. What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What forces acted upon them as they wrote? What was the historical, the political, the philosophical, the economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, or developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expression? Are there interactions between literature and the art, music or architecture of its period? Was the writer affected by contemporaries or isolated?

Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and of the varying relationships between writers and society.

Histories of literature can encourage students to make comparisons, can aid in understanding the purposes of individual authors and in assessing the totality of their achievements. Their development can be better understood and appreciated with some knowledge of the background of their time. And histories of literature, apart from their valuable function as reference books, can demonstrate the great wealth of writing in English that is there to be enjoyed. They can guide the reader who wishes to explore it more fully and to gain in the process deeper insights into the rich diversity not only of literature but of human life itself.

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

Also by Harry Blamires:

A Short History of English Literature

The Bloomsday Book, A Guide through Joyce's 'Ulysses'

Word Unheard, A Guide through Eliot's 'Four Quartets'

Milton's Creation, A Guide through 'Paradise Lost'

The Christian Mind

The Secularist Heresy

Where Do We Stand?

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Introductory note

THE twentieth century is notable not only for its centrally outstanding writers on whom academic studies of the period have tended to concentrate, but also for a great range of lesser writers who have helped to make the age a richly productive one. A comprehensive attempt is made here to do justice to both categories proportionately. One historic upheaval, the First World War, and one literary group, the major figures of the Modern Movement, have been singled out for special treatment in separate chapters, but otherwise the survey runs in loosely structured chronological sequence, and a system of overlapping the decades, chapter by chapter, is adopted in order to keep the framework flexible. It is obvious that literary history cannot deal with writers in turn according to their dates of birth, for one writer dies at twenty-five while another, perhaps twenty years his senior, does his important work in his sixties or his seventies. Nor can the productivity of the succeeding decades be studied in strict sequence, for when a given writer comes under consideration his work as a whole must be at issue even though it may extend over several decades. The placing of writers in this survey generally depends on the date of their main impact on the public, or on the date of the historic event or literary development with which they are strongly associated. Within the limits of the space available, the aim is to indicate the distinctiveness of individual writers' achievements that may well extend over a lifetime, while at the same time reckoning fully with the changing movements, fashions, and emphases that give the succeeding phases of literary history their special character and flavour. Sub-headings indicate the central interest of succeeding sections but are not to be taken as defining exclusively what they contain.

In the case of plays the bracketed date is not always the

date of publication. It is the date of the play's first impact on the general public whether on the stage or in print.

I should like to express my gratitude to the Editor, Professor A. N. Jeffares, for his very helpful suggestions for improving the original typescript.

The second edition

In revising this book for a second edition the temptation to pack it with additional directory-style detail which would inevitably make it less readable has been resisted. The original text has not been peppered with further titles of later books by well-established writers to whom adequate attention has already been given and whose literary status remains what it was by virtue of their most significant work. Rather an attempt has been made to update the coverage by drawing attention to new writers (and some rediscovered writers) who have become prominent during the six years since work was completed on the original edition of the book. Thus the last chapter, with its sections on recent dramatists, novelists and poets, has been considerably extended. It is hoped now that the book can claim to be a fair survey of the century's literature up to the mid-1980s.

The new century

1900-1914

I Introduction

'HISTORY gets thicker as it approaches recent times: more people, more events, and more books written about them,' A. J. P. Taylor has observed. Literature too gets thicker: more writers, more works, and more books written about both. Moreover the sifting process which publicly identifies literature of quality works so slowly that the contemporary scene is always cluttered with writers who will not survive it, and therefore a survey of recent literature cannot be made without sometimes premature use of the critical sieve. Nevertheless a firm sense of the broad pattern of literary development in our century already exists. The period roughly coterminous with the reign of George V (1910-36) has been recognised as one of the great epochs of English literature. A few writers of the period have been granted the kind of status granted to Shakespeare and Milton, Wordsworth and Dickens, as giants under whose shadow the lesser writers of their age must be judged. In so far as the Modern Movement which they initiated spilt over into the reign of George VI (1936-52) the Georgian periods together contained the most crucial literary developments of the century.

In 1911 George V, as King-Emperor, with Queen Mary at his side, the two sitting crowned and robed on golden thrones, received the homage of the Indian Empire at the Durbar in the new capital of Delhi. From that point the two Georgian reigns witnessed the run-down of imperial power, the bleeding away of life and wealth in two world wars, and massive social upheavals such as strikes, slump, and unemployment: yet the reigns contain one of our richest literary epochs. Perhaps there is no direct correlation between national self-confidence and literary productivity. Is there an inverse relationship? It

may be argued that national events so disturbing and disastrous as those of the years 1910 to 1950 will naturally stir the imaginations of artists and writers, that prosperity and power do not breed fine literature, that Dickens was great not because Victorian England was powerful but because it was wickedly scarred with injustice and inhumanity.

But the Georgian and Elizabethan decades have been years of social progress as well as of imperial decline. They have seen great developments in education, the breaking of the stranglehold of the public schools on government, bureaucracy, and the professions, and the rapid expansion of university provision. The socialisation of welfare services, the ironing-out of class distinctions, the emancipation of women, the more equitable distribution of wealth, and technological progress affecting work, mobility, and domestic comfort have no doubt offset the depressing psychological effects of imperial decline. Now that the United Kingdom is said to be among the 'poorer countries' of Western Europe there is far less of the widespread urban privation and squalor endured when it was the richest. At the time of Edwardian dominion over palm and pine there were two and a half million people in domestic service at home; a sixth of the babies born in Greater London did not live to be a year old; St Pancras Borough Council calculated 1151 'underground dwellings' (slum basements) inhabited by 5000 people during the day and by far more at night. In 1904, 1200 men were killed in the mines and 400 railway employees on the tracks.

Such were the conditions shortly after Queen Victoria died and King Edward VII succeeded to the throne. But political movements dedicated to the achievement of massive social reforms were already in their infancy. There was the Fabian Society which sought the advancement of socialist ideals without revolution and within the democratic parliamentary system. Founded in 1884, it had both G. B. Shaw and, for a time, H. G. Wells among a membership that reached over 3000 by 1914. Keir Hardie, the self-educated miner from Ayrshire and virtual founder of the modern British Labour Party, was returned as Member of Parliament for Merthyr Tydfil in 1900 and increased his majority in three subsequent elections. Meanwhile Emmeline Pankhurst founded her Women's Social and Political Union in 1903 and soon

afterwards militant demonstrations in the cause of gaining full voting rights for women were leading to arrests and imprisonment. The voice of social protest was heard even in the theatre. In Shaw's *Major Barbara*, staged in 1905, the enlightened millionaire, Andrew Undershaft, declared: 'This is what is wrong with the world at present. It scraps its obsolete steam engines and dynamos; but it won't scrap its old prejudices and its old moralities and its old religions and its old political constitutions.'

Not that progressive social legislation was lacking in the early years of the century. In 1902 the Education Act of Balfour's government made the county and county borough councils responsible for both primary and secondary education. In 1908 old-age pensions were introduced and in 1911 Lloyd George's National Insurance Act set up the State system for financing workers' medical treatment by weekly contributions from employers and employees. Such political moves towards ameliorating modern man's lot were corroborated by discoveries and developments in technical fields destined to transform daily life. 1903 saw the first motor taxis on the London streets, the Automobile Association was founded two years later, and Bleriot flew the Channel in 1909. At the same time the expansion of the telegraph and telephone systems and the growing use of electric lighting and power were symptomatic of technological change that was going to free those two and a half million domestic servants without depressing the standard of home and public life.

But the spirit of an age which its literature embodies cannot be summed up simply in terms either of national wealth and power or of social justice and mechanical progress. There are securities of a profounder kind affecting man's sense of his place in the scheme of things. In the early years of the century Einstein's theory of relativity demolished the Newtonian principles on which the framework of the physical universe had seemed to depend. Meanwhile Freud disturbed man's confidence in the rational and moral framework within which human behaviour had seemed to be subject to regulation and control. Henceforward great movements towards emancipation and social reform were to gain ground alongside a weakening of religious faith and a tottering sense of man's ability to control his own destiny. The First World War seemed to con-

firm that man could not look after himself and that, when it came to the crunch, Christianity, the religion of the civilised West, did not work. Developments in the field of philosophy were also disturbing. The fortresses of metaphysical and idealist tradition were assaulted. G. E. Moore, the Cambridge philosopher, published his seminal *Principia Ethica* in 1903 and initiated a lifetime's work in ethical theory. His insistence on analysis of language and concepts used in philosophical discourse began a process which continued after the First World War under the influence of Wittgenstein. Philosophy began to abdicate its claims to anything more ambitious than analysis of the machinery of discourse. Great metaphysical systems, explicating the nature of being and the destiny of humanity, were to become museum pieces like other more expensive Victorian constructions.

A symbolic farewell to such grandeurs seems retrospectively to be detectable in the deep lamentation over the loss of the *Titanic* in 1912. The vessel had summed up the unsinkability of class, wealth, and the engineering triumphs they could well afford to purchase. The self-confidence which had built the Euston arch and netted the country in railway lines was geared to the transportation *en masse* of first, second, and third class passengers and suitable attendants. The packed liner and the packed railway train were representative social hierarchies on the move. By contrast, when the twentieth century constructed its motorways, it made provision for everyone to scurry about independently on his own business or pleasure, and the beetling mini could run rings round the limousine at points of congestion.

It will not do to over-simplify the changes brought by our century in terms of the collapse of a settled, traditional order, political and social, moral and cultural. The fashionable myth of escalating emancipation from traditional forms and disciplines will not survive serious study of our age's literature. In the work of the Moderns what looks at first sight like a disintegration of form very often turns out on closer inspection to be an extension of the range of perception and representation according to a logic inherent in traditional modes of expression. Nevertheless literature, and indeed the other arts, have experienced innovatory movements since the turn of the century which have made the 'twentieth-century'

label a readily recognisable if not easily definable one. An air of excitement, often too of controversy, attended the first appearance of works which developing taste has gradually found less sensationally novel than at first they seemed. There was a storm of indignation in 1908 over the sculptor Jacob Epstein's nude 'Figures' on the British Medical Association's building in the Strand. Artists, of course, tended to challenge established *mores* by their personal conduct as well as established taste by their work. The colourful figure of the virile, nomadic painter, Augustus John, bestrides the pages of the diarists and chroniclers of the first quarter of the century. John, the dominant portrait-painter of his day, who was commissioned to paint the members of the Versailles Peace Conference, left memorable studies of Yeats and Hardy. But in the artistic field perhaps the most influential event of the pre-war period was the Post-Impressionist Exhibition organised in London in 1911 by Roger Fry, who succeeded in his aim of making the work of Cézanne accepted in Britain. Rejecting the evanescent appeal of the Impressionists to the observer's feelings, Cézanne sought to catch the permanent nature of things by emphasising form rather than atmosphere, and he exercised a crucial influence on Picasso.

While Roger Fry brought Cézanne to London, Sir Thomas Beecham, the conductor who had become lessee of Covent Garden Opera House in 1910, brought the Russian Ballet. Diaghilev and Nijinsky toured European capitals in 1911 to 1913, bursting upon the West with a company which put the male dancer back into the centre of things and, whilst giving impeccable performances of the established repertoire, also introduced choreography alive with new mimetic artistry and dramatic power. Igor Stravinsky's music for the ballets, *Petrushka* and the *Rite of Spring*, startled by its challenge to harmonic and rhythmic convention. But musically the period from 1900 to 1914 was also the age of Puccini's *Madam Butterfly* and of the *Sea Symphony* by Vaughan Williams, who cultivated a recognisably English idiom by drawing on the native folk-song tradition and on English Tudor music. Above all it was the age of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* and of those two symphonies whose broad nobility and brooding meditateness voiced both the external grandeur and the inner apprehensiveness of the Edwardian Age.