

MACMILLAN ANTHOLOGIES  
OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

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THE  
TWENTIETH  
CENTURY  
(1900–present)

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(1900)

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*Edited by*  
Neil McEwan

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## General Introduction

There can often be a gulf between the restricted reading required by a school, college or university syllabus and the great expanse of English literature which is there to be explored and enjoyed. There are two effective ways of bridging that gulf. One is to be aware of how authors relate or have related to their contemporary situations and their contemporaries, how they accept, develop or react against what has been written by their predecessors or older contemporaries, how, in short, they fit into the long history of English literature. Good histories of literature – and there is a welcome increase of interest in them – serve to place authors in their context, as well as giving a panoptic view of their careers.

The second way is to sample their work, to discover the kind or kinds of writing they have produced. Here is where the anthology contributes to an enjoyment of reading. It conveys the flavour of an author as nothing but reading that author can. And when an author is compared to his or her fellow writers – a thing a good anthology facilitates – the reader gains several extra dimensions, not least an insight into what thoughts, what fears, what delights have occupied writers at different times. To gain such insights is to see, among other things, the relevance of past authors to the present, to the reader. Reading an anthology shows something of the vast range of our literature, its variety of form and outlook, of mood and expression, from black despair to ecstatic happiness; it is an expansive experience widening our horizons, enhancing specialised study, but also conveying its own particular pleasures, the joy of finding familiar pieces among unfamiliar, of reacting to fresh stimuli, of reaching new conclusions about authors, in short, of making literature a part of oneself.

Anthologies also play a part in the life of a literature. If we are the beneficiaries of our literary inheritance, we are also trustees for it, and the maintenance of the inheritance for future generations requires new selections of properly edited texts. The Macmillan Literary Anthologies, which have followed on from the Macmillan Histories of Literature, are designed to present these texts with the essential pertinent information. The selection made of poetry, prose and plays has been wide and inclusive, authors appear in the order of their dates of birth,

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texts – with the exception of the Middle English section – are modernised and footnotes are kept to a minimum. A broadly representative policy has been the aim of the general editors, who have maintained a similar format and proportion in each volume, though the medieval volume has required more annotation.

ANJ  
MJA

## Introduction

Many of those who knew what was happening felt the 1914–18 war to be the end of an era. News of the death toll on the Western Front caused profound dismay. Henry James feared that ‘the treacherous years’ had betrayed all nineteenth-century hopes of ‘betterment’ – a disillusionment ‘too tragic for any words’. National sentiment among intelligent members of the ruling classes was altered by the carnage at the battles of Mons, the Somme and Passchendale: the soldier-poet Wilfred Owen condemned ‘the old lie’ that it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country. Fastidious readers found Rudyard Kipling’s tone wrong, in the Imperialist hymn ‘Recessional’, when it was published in 1897; after the war it became fashionable to mock such an unquestioning patriotism, especially for those who welcomed the Russian Revolution of 1917. Poems such as Kipling’s ‘The Land’, which celebrated a serene unchanging rural England, came to seem naïvely ‘pre-war’, another old lie in a country where millions lived in urban poverty. The idea spread that the Victorian age and its Edwardian aftermath had been founded on lies.

The apocalyptic mood of the war years added impetus to the effect of discoveries in science and philosophy, as they gradually filtered into the awareness of educated people. Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* (1901) undermined nineteenth-century common sense about the workings of the mind, and Albert Einstein’s *Special Theory of Relativity* (1905) upset assumptions about external reality. Various schools of philosophy tended to weaken confidence in reliable knowledge. The human mind, it was argued, imposes structures which we take for reality, so that the world is man-made and might be remade. Such ideas were dizzying. The Russian and Italian Futurists called for the ‘abolition’ of almost everything in previous culture. Spokesmen of the Swiss Dada movement declared that we can only be sure that everything is meaningless. Just at the time when technology, by producing motor-cars and aeroplanes, showed the power of reason when applied to things, ‘advanced’ thought denied its value when applied to human life. The Modernist movement in the visual arts thrived in this revolutionary atmosphere. The Post-Impressionist exhibition in London in 1910 presented a demanding challenge to

English popular taste, but Modernists knew that Cubism, then three years old, was even more radical and believed the new painting conveyed something profoundly new in twentieth-century sensibilities. Virginia Woolf announced that 'human nature changed' in 1910. She and others of the *avant-garde* looked to literature to catch up.

Several gifted writers thought in terms of such a challenge. D. H. Lawrence saw the war as the end of 'everything', and was full of dreams of a better world to be reborn like the phoenix. He argued for a new creed to emancipate 'the whole man – and woman – alive' from ugly industrialisation and Victorian respectability, and for fiction, free from 'the old stable ego of character', able to show the passionate, aggressive undercurrents of human nature. His finest works, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (New York, 1920), are, none the less, recognisable as novels. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Paris, 1922) makes far more drastic departures from traditionally realistic storytelling. T. S. Eliot's *Prufrack and Other Observations* (1917), *Poems* (1920) and *The Waste Land* (1922), difficult poems in which there is no evident interrelationship among the parts, looked equally revolutionary. Eliot knew Joyce's work and followed his example in drawing on the widest resources of language and varying style, from lyrical verse to scraps of public-house conversation; like Joyce, he mixed, as unpredictably as possible, fragmentary allusions to history, past literature and myth with vignettes of contemporary life, to convey a sense of deracinated and unreal modernity.

These writers were not only original but very good indeed. Eliot's control of rhythm and concentration of effect – in which he was aided by the American proponent of 'Imagist' terseness, Ezra Pound – are startlingly beautiful, even for readers who find modern life less hopelessly disintegrated than *The Waste Land* says it is. The richness and inventive energy of Joyce's prose and the fluent verve of D. H. Lawrence are compelling. It is natural for British literature to claim Eliot, who was an American citizen until 1928, the Irish Joyce, and the Anglo-Irishman W. B. Yeats, who figures with them in accounts of the Modernist movement. It is not necessary to sympathise with Yeats's eccentric mystical and political system of thought in order to admire the wide range of his mature poetry, intensely evocative in symbolist lyrics, sometimes frankly angry about old age. One of his finest short poems, 'The Second Coming' (1921), expresses the worst modern fears, as the slouching beast replaces Christ, in words which sound natural and tremendous. Another symbolist, Virginia Woolf,

abandoned conventional story-telling and realism (which she called 'infantile') in her later novels; she wrote with delicate vivacity, in them and in essays and letters too. All these innovators in the literature of the second and third decades of the century had difficulty in establishing the validity of their work; Joyce and Lawrence were banned for indecency. They succeeded because they wrote so well.

The academic community which, since the 1920s, has become an influential arbiter of literary judgement, soon welcomed them as the principal authors of a new phase in literature. They were especially attractive because they offer such rich opportunities for rival interpretations, and for annotation: Eliot, Joyce and Yeats are more densely associative than any mainstream English writers since the seventeenth century. Newly created departments of English literature formed a canon in which Lawrence and Eliot, Joyce and Yeats are central; and 'new' critics valued ambiguity rather than clarity, symbolism rather than realism, and radical experiment rather than discreet modification of narrative and verse techniques. Major Victorians still productive after 1900 were, if possible, claimed for the 'Movement': Henry James and Joseph Conrad benefited, gaining wider attention than they had in their lifetimes. There was a tendency to dismiss from serious consideration such writers as Arnold Bennett who could not be assimilated, and to purvey the belief that superior new writing must be 'difficult'. This has been unfortunate, because much of the best modern literature cannot be judged by Modernist criteria.

English writers born between 1900 and 1914 – the first generation for whom twentieth-century conditions were normal – include Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Anthony Powell, John Betjeman, W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, William Golding and Roy Fuller. Most were at school during the First World War. Growing up, they were likely to meet ideas too new to be met in the classroom. When Graham Greene, for example, ran away from his public school, his parents sent him to a Freudian psychoanalyst. When these men began writing in the later 1920s and the 1930s, Modernism was a fact of contemporary literature; their elders had been the iconoclasts. Theirs was a natural response; they admired, and wrote differently.

There were other examples of new work by older writers. Thomas Hardy had completed his career as a Victorian novelist before 1900. His honesty and pessimism sounded up-to-date to young people in the 1920s determined to be un-Victorian. His legions for his wife Emma –

of which 'The Going' is the finest – are timeless in their appeal. A. E. Housman, too, expressed private unhappiness with grandeur: 'The troubles of our proud and angry dust / Are from eternity, and shall not fail'. W. H. Auden, who was to be *the* poet for most of his contemporaries, found encouragement in them to abandon the style of his early imitations of Eliot. He was able to revitalise traditional verse forms in crisp, idiomatic language, informal but authoritative. For the enigmatic, alienated voices of Eliot's *Prufrock* and *Sweeney*, he substituted the voice of a man speaking to men and women – of contemporary events (with a sympathy for Left-Wing convictions in the 1930s) and of the classic themes of lyric poetry. After 1939, when he moved to America, Auden grew in fluency and versatility, leaving a body of poems which are distinctly of our time, and good by old criteria. There have been various developments in English verse since 1945. William Empson (among older writers) and Geoffrey Hill are tough, erudite and oblique; Roy Fuller, Philip Larkin, D. J. Enright and others vaguely grouped as 'the Movement' are lucid, colloquial, and unafraid of old-fashioned disciplines.

There has been no radical, Joycean break with the past in English prose, despite the Modernist assertion that realism and story-telling were discredited. Ramshackle English society remained, after 1918, too worrying, amusing and interesting for new writers to ignore, and they portrayed it with a zestful sense of emancipation from Victorian restrictions. Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918), elegant and ironic, implied that the culture of the last century had been bogus and stuffy, verbose and vulgar. This limited view became, for a while, very influential. But eras retreat rather than end; Victorian beliefs and doubts persisted into the age of motor-cars and votes for women, and relations between modern and older values are complicated. One of the liveliest advocates of social and political change was George Bernard Shaw, whose plays urging that poverty is the only crime were founded on Fabian Society assumptions of the late nineteenth century. The idea of a complete end to old ways was alarming as well as exciting. Despite Virginia Woolf's confidence about change, human nature was much the same after 1910 and, freed from civilised restraints in Germany and Russia between the wars, returned to ancient follies and brutality. Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) imagine future Englands where scientific progress has resulted in barbarism. The satires of Evelyn Waugh imply that this has happened already.

Another idiosyncratic novelist, Graham Greene, who made an art from the conventions of the thriller, assumes the modern world to be totally estranged from safe and solid Victorianism, but Anthony Powell's great novel in twelve volumes, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, published between 1951 and 1975, discovers comedy in the interaction of surviving nineteenth-century institutions and manners with modern ways. Waugh, Greene and Powell saw late James, Conrad and Ford Madox Ford as the modern masters of artistic rendering in fiction; they can be seen as followers of James in their concern with form and their respect for the claims of a good story. Among new writers of the 1950s, the novelist Kingsley Amis and the playwright John Osborne, known then as 'angry young men', made fresh attempts to dispel anachronistic stuffiness in British life. For those who think Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, performed in London in 1955, authentically modern in its vision of a purposeless wasteland, such writers as Amis and Osborne can seem unsatisfactory. But Beckett progressed towards silence; most recent English prose literature has been talkative and interesting about what remains of our civilisation.

The most obvious strength of modern British literature is its diversity. Stubborn individuality, in authors who refuse to conform to any movement, is still characteristic. A remarkable number of them have been Christian. It was disconcerting to ideas about the Modern when T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943) made him one of the most distinguished of Anglican poets. Throughout the century, writers have been healthily unpredictable. Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels of dialogue will not fit into any rigid literary historical scheme, and neither will the lyrics of Dylan Thomas, the wartime oratory of Winston Churchill, the light but not lightweight verses of John Betjeman or the brilliant prose fantasies of P. G. Wodehouse. This anthology aims to illustrate the diversity rather than to impose a theory, and to entice new readers into the work of authors – H. H. Munro, Arnold Bennett, T. E. Lawrence – who are not often 'set' for study. It has tried to show too that English writing has retained the power to entertain, without which literature will never achieve anything else.

### *Note on Anglo-Irish writers*

W. B. Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett have been included in this anthology of British literature on the grounds that they were born before Irish independence. William Trevor (see p. 549) has also been considered to have a place in British as well as in Anglo-Irish literature.

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## Note on Annotation and Glossing

An asterisk \* at the end of a word indicates that such words are glossed in the margin.

A dagger † at the end of a word or phrase indicates that the word or phrase is annotated, or given a longer gloss, at the foot of the page.

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## Note on Dates

Where dates appear at the end of extracts, that on the left denotes the date of composition, that on the right, the date of publication.

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