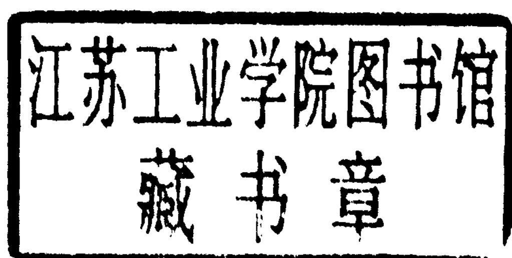
THE WAY WE LIVED THEN

THE ENGLISH STORY IN THE 1940s

EDITED BY WOODROW WYATT

The Way We Lived Then –

The *English Story* in the 1940s


江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章

The Way We Lived Then –

The *English Story* in the 1940s

Introduction by Woodrow Wyatt

8 Grafton Street, London W1
1989

William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd
London · Glasgow · Sydney · Auckland
Toronto · Johannesburg

English Story first published 1941–50 in ten volumes by William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd

Copyright all stories Woodrow Wyatt

This selection first published 1989

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Wyatt, Woodrow
The Way We Lived Then –
[English story. Selections] The Way We Lived Then:
The English Story in the 1940s.
I. Title
I. Short stories in English, 1900 – Anthologies
823'.01'08

ISBN 0-00-223539-0

Set in Linotron Ehrhardt by
Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, Glasgow

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.com

CONTENTS

Introduction by Woodrow Wyatt 7

Elizabeth Bowen
SONGS MY FATHER SANG ME 11

J. Maclaren-Ross
THE HELL OF A TIME 27

Charles Furbank
CONVERSATIONS IN EBURY STREET 33

Angus Wilson
A LITTLE COMPANION 45

Elizabeth Berridge
THE HARD AND THE HUMAN 59

Alun Lewis
THEY CAME 77

Denys Val Baker
GRASS IN WINTER 91

Sylvia Townsend Warner
ARSACE, IL FAUT PARTIR 97

Eric Rae
HAVEN OF DESPAIR 103

Raymond Williams
A FINE ROOM TO BE ILL IN 125

Stephen Spender
THE FOOL AND THE PRINCESS 143

INTRODUCTION

It was Edward J. O'Brien, an American living in England, who fired me with enthusiasm for the short story. Yearly he published in book form his selection of the best short stories, English and American. He included one I wrote in an undergraduate magazine in his choice for 1940. At that time several magazines which used to publish well-written short stories had disappeared. Yet, paradoxically, there was a growing demand for short stories which could be read, in their off duty spells, by those serving in the Armed Forces, the Fire Service and similar organizations when there was not always the inclination or leisure to read and absorb full-length novels.

I went to see Edward J. O'Brien in his pretty house on the green at Gerrards Cross and talked to him about starting a new magazine containing previously unpublished short stories. I believed there were many good writers who, because of their war occupations, were unable to settle down to writing novels. Then paper rationing caused the government to ban new magazines and the only alternative was to seek a publisher who would be willing to publish new short stories in book form. I found him in a little book and paper cluttered attic room in the building occupied at that time by Collins in St James's Place. F. T. Smith was the Managing Editor of Collins, who affected no literary airs, and seemed to me more like an elderly local bank manager than a man of letters. But he was a shrewd judge of what might sell and was amused by my youthful eagerness and conviction that the short story collections I proposed might add new authors to the Collins list which he managed so successfully. He agreed with avuncular kindness to give the project a try.

Initially Edward J. O'Brien supplied numerous names and addresses of likely contributors. I also wrote letters to weekly

papers with literary pages asking for contributions. Short stories rolled in by the hundreds. Many of the writers were unknown, although there was a spattering from people like Sylvia Townsend Warner, a story by whom was published in the First Series and whose story, published in the Sixth Series, is included here.

I read all the stories submitted which seemed to have a spark of interest. They were sorted out and the possibles sent on to me, originally by my first wife, and later by friends, at the various places the Army posted me. I did the final editing for the First Series at Dover, during the 1940 Battle of Britain, where as a Second Lieutenant I was commanding a platoon shelled by the German long-range artillery from France and attacked by German aircraft from overhead. This was a different form of excitement from the thrill I got from handling the manuscripts from which the First Series of *English Story* was to be formed. For the rest of the war the manuscripts followed me and none was ever lost whether they were carted around in the back of a jeep in Normandy or received through the Army post in India.

To the pleasure of Mr Smith and myself the First Series sold 10,000 copies and was a success among the critics. Praise came from the *New Statesman*, the *Observer, The Sunday Times, The Times Literary Supplement*, the *Listener*, the *Scotsman* and others. All encouraged the venture. The critics supported us throughout; James Agate and Stevie Smith wrote appreciatively of later Series. Elizabeth Bowen, reviewing the Fifth Series, described *English Story* as an increasing success. John Betjeman called one Series 'magnificent' and writing of the Ninth Series said, 'Each previous book in this Series has been an equally valuable collection,' while Peter Quennell remarked of the Ninth Series that 'It is a book not to miss.' C. P. Snow called it 'much the best of the nine', and Pamela Hansford-Johnson made similar comments, so the high standards we began with were maintained throughout.

After the war, with the end of paper rationing for book and magazine publishers, and with a less frenetic life for readers,

new short stories in book form began to lose their wartime popularity to full-length novels and other literary forms. The Tenth Series, published in 1950, although selling more than many novels do now, had so dropped in circulation that the publishers understandably thought that ten years had been a long enough run.

The times had their tragedies, their humour and their optimism. In this selection the moods of the war and just after are reflected. The young poet Alun Lewis writes of what befell a soldier returning on leave. The death of Alun Lewis, on active service in Burma in 1944, at the age of twenty-nine was a bitter loss of a life which promised so much for literature. He won for a story in another Series, the £10.00 prize we gave annually in memory of Edward J. O'Brien. £10.00 does not seem much now but its 1989 equivalent would be at least £250.00.

Charles Furbank, a Sergeant, who wrote 'Conversations in Ebury Street', was killed flying with the RAF in August 1942 when only twenty-four. He had not had time to write more than two short stories for the old *London Mercury* and one in the Second Series of *English Story*, but the possibility of imminent death did not cast a shadow over his enthusiasm for life. None of us thought we would be killed and looked forward cheerfully: it is a pity that not all of us were right.

Obviously my choice of stories was influenced by the background and the lives of the writers and myself. Although contemporary in spirit, I hope this selection shows that the stories were more than of transient interest and will repay reading indefinitely. Elizabeth Bowen, Angus Wilson, Sylvia Townsend Warner, J. Maclaren-Ross and Stephen Spender contributed stories, republished here, worthy of the best of their work. Stephen Spender's long story, almost a novella, *The Fool and the Princess* is a remarkable account of an impressionable young married Englishman, attracted by a beautiful Russian girl in a displaced persons' camp in occupied Germany where he was an official immediately after the war,

and accurately and fascinatingly records the political attitudes of his generation.

All the writers included here, whether well-known or not, responded in some manner to the decade of war and its aftermath. It was a period of change, wonderment, fear and hope. It has a literature of its own which, jostled out of memory by the writing of subsequent decades, has largely been forgotten. Now interest is reviving in what the war-battered writers of almost fifty years ago had to say. I hope this volume makes a good introduction for a wider search into the literature of those unusual years.

WOODROW WYATT

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.com

Songs My Father Sang Me

ELIZABETH BOWEN

'What's the matter,' he asked, 'have I said something?'

Not troubling to get him quite into focus, she turned her head and said, 'No, why – did you say anything?'

'Or p'r'aps you don't like this place?'

'I don't mind it – why?' she said, looking round the night club, which was not quite as dark as a church, as though for the first time. At some tables you had to look twice, to see who was there; what lights there were were dissolved in a haze of smoke; the walls were rather vaultlike, with no mirrors; on the floor dancers drifted like pairs of vertical fish. He, meanwhile, studied her from across their table with neither anxiety nor acute interest, but with a dreamlike caricature of both. Then he raised the bottle between them and said, 'Mm-mm?' to which she replied by placing the flat of her hand mutely, mulishly, across the top of her glass. Not annoyed, he shrugged, filled up his own and continued, 'Then anything isn't really the matter, then?'

'This tune, this song, is the matter.'

'Oh – shall we dance?'

'No.' Behind her agelessly girlish face, sleekly framed by the cut of her fawn-blonde hair, there passed a wave of genuine trouble for which her features had no vocabulary. 'It's what they're playing – this tune.'

'It's pre-war,' he said knowledgeably.

'It's last war.'

'Well, last war's pre-war.'

'It's the tune my father remembered he used to dance to; it's the tune I remember him always trying to sing.'

'Why, is your father dead?'

'No, I don't suppose so. Why?'

'Sorry,' he said quickly. 'I mean, if . . .'

'Sorry, why are you sorry?' she said, raising her eyebrows. 'Didn't I ever tell you about my father? I always thought he made me rather a bore. Wasn't it you I was telling about my father?'

'No. I suppose it must have been someone else. One meets so many people.'

'Oh, what?' she said. 'Have I hurt your feelings? But you haven't got any feelings about me.'

'Only because you haven't got any feelings about me.'

'Haven't I?' she said, as though really wanting to know. 'Still, it hasn't seemed all the time as though we were quite a flop.'

'Look,' he said, 'don't be awkward. Tell me about your father.'

'He was twenty-six.'

'When?'

'How do you mean, "when"? Twenty-six was my father's age. He was tall and lean and leggy, with a casual sort of way of swinging himself about. He was fair, and the shape of his face was a rather long narrow square. Sometimes his eyes faded in until you could hardly see them; sometimes he seemed to be wearing a blank mask. You really only quite got the plan of his face when it was turned halfway between a light and a shadow – *then* his eyebrows and eyehollows, the dints just over his nostrils, the cut of his upper lip and the cleft in his chin, and the broken in-and-out outline down from his temple past his cheekbone into his jaw all came out at you, like a message you had to read in a single flash.'

She paused and lighted a cigarette. He said, 'You sound as though you had never got used to him.'

She went on, 'My father was one of the young men who were not killed in the last war. He was a man in the last war until that stopped; then I don't quite know what he was, and I don't think he ever quite knew either. He got his commission and first went out to France about 1915, I think he said. When

he got leaves he got back to London and had good times, by which I mean something larky but quite romantic, in the course of one of which, I don't know which one, he fell in love with my mother and they used to go dancing, and got engaged in that leave and got married the next. My mother was a flapper, if you know about flappers? They were the pin-ups *de ces jours*, and at the same time inspired idealistic feeling. My mother was dark and fluffy and as slim as a wraith; a great *glacé* ribbon bow tied her hair back and stood out like a calyx behind her face, and her hair itself hung down in a plume so long that it tickled my father's hand while he held her while they were dancing and while she sometimes swam up at him with her violet eyes. Each time he had to go back to the front again she was miserable, and had to put her hair up, because her relations said it was high time. But sometimes when he got back again on leave she returned to being a flapper again, to please him. Between his leaves she had to go back to live with her mother and sisters in West Kensington; and her sisters had a whole pack of business friends who had somehow never had to go near the front, and all these combined in an effort to cheer her up, but, as she always wrote to my father, nothing did any good. I suppose everyone felt it was for the best when they knew there was going to be the patter of little feet. I wasn't actually *born* till the summer of 1918. If you remember, I told you my age last night.

'The first thing *I* remember, upon becoming conscious, was living in one of those bungalows on the flats near Staines. The river must have been somewhere, but I don't think I saw it. The only point about that region is that it has no point and that it goes on and on. I think there are floods there sometimes, there would be nothing to stop them; a forest fire would be what is needed really, but that would not be possible as there are no trees. It would have looked better, really, just left as primeval marsh, but someone had once said, "Let there be bungalows." If you ever motored anywhere near it you probably asked yourself who lives there, and why. Well, my father and mother and I did. And why? Because it was cheap, and

there was no one to criticize how you were getting on. Our bungalow was tucked well away in the middle, got at by a sort of maze of, in those days, unmade roads. I'm glad to say I've forgotten which one it was. Most of our neighbours kept themselves to themselves for, probably, like ours, the best reasons, but most of them kept hens also; we didn't even do that. All round us, nature ran riot between corrugated iron, clothes-lines and creosoted lean-to sheds.

'I know that our bungalow had been taken furnished; the only things we seemed to have of our own were a number of satin cushions with satin fruits stitched on. In order to dislodge my biscuit crumbs from the satin apples my mother used to shake the cushions out of the window on to the lawn. Except for the prettiness of the dandelions, our lawn got to look and feel rather like a hearthrug; I mean, it got covered with threads and cinders and shreds; once when I was crawling on it I got a pin in my hand, another time I got sharp glass beads in my knee. The next-door hens used to slip through and pick about; never, apparently, quite in vain. At the far end, some Dorothy Perkins roses tried to climb up a pergola that was always falling down. I remember my father reaching up in his shirt-sleeves, trying to nail it up. Another thing he had to do in our home was apply the whole of his strength to the doors, french window and windows, which warped until they would not open nor shut. I used to come up behind him and push too.

'The war by now, of course, had been over for some years; my father was out of the British Army and was what was called taking his time and looking around. For how long he had been doing so I can't exactly tell you. He not only read all the "post vacant" advertisements every day but composed and succeeded in getting printed an advertisement of himself, which he read aloud to me: it said he was prepared to go anywhere and try anything. I said, "But what's an ex-officer?" and he said, "I am." Our dining-room table, which was for some reason, possibly me, sticky, was always spread with new newspapers he had just brought home, and he used to be leaning over them on his elbows, biting harder and harder on

the stem of his pipe. I don't think I discovered for some years later that the principal reason for newspapers is news. My father never looked at them for that reason – just as he always lost interest in any book in which he had lost his place. Or perhaps he was not in the mood for world events. My mother had never cared much for them at the best of times. "To think of all we expected after the war," she used to say to my father, from day to day.

'My mother, by this time, had had her hair shingled – in fact, *I* never remember her any other way than with a dark shaved point tapered down the back of her neck. I don't know when she'd begun to be jealous of him and me. Every time he came back from an interview that he hadn't got to, or from an interview that hadn't come to anything, he used to bring me back something to cheer himself up, and the wheels off all the mechanical toys got mixed with the beads and the threads and the cinders into our lawn. What my mother was really most afraid of was that my father would bundle us all off into the great open spaces in order to start afresh somewhere and grow something. I imagine he knew several chaps who had, or were going to. After one or two starts on the subject he shut up, but I could see she could see he was nursing it. It frustrated her from nagging at him all out about not succeeding in getting a job in England; she was anxious not to provide an opening for him to say, "Well, there's always one thing we *could* do . . ." The hard glassy look her eyes got made them look like doll's eyes, which may partly have been what kept me from liking dolls. So they practically never talked about anything. I don't think she even knew he minded about her hair.

'You may be going to ask when my father sang. He often *began* to sing – when he hammered away at the pergola, when something he thought of suddenly struck him as good, when the heave he gave at the warped french window sent it flying open into the garden. He was constantly starting to sing, but he never got very far – you see, he had no place where he could sing unheard. The walls were thin and the lawn was

tiny and the air round the bungalow was so silent and heavy that my mother was forced to listen to every note. The lordly way my father would burst out singing, like the lordly way he cocked his hat over one eye, had come to annoy her, in view of everything else. But the still more unfortunate thing was that my father only knew or else only liked, two tunes, which were two tunes out of the bygone years which made him think of the war and being in love. Yes, they were dance tunes; yes, we have just heard one; yes, they also reminded my mother *of war and love. So when he had got to the fourth or fifth bar* of either, she would call out to know if he wanted to drive her mad. He would stop and say, "Sorry," but if he was in the mood he'd be well away the next minute with the alternative tune, and she would be put to the trouble of stopping that.

'Mother did not know what to look like now she was not a flapper. Mostly she looked like nothing – I wonder whether she knew. Perhaps that was what she saw in the satin cushions: they looked like something – at least, to her. The day she and I so suddenly went to London to call on her sister's friend she did certainly manage, however, to look like something. My father, watching us down the garden path, ventured no comment on her or my appearance. However, which ought to have cheered me up, we created quite a furore in the train. We went sailing into the richly-appointed office of mother's sister's friend, who was one of those who, during the war, had felt mother should be cheered up. Can I, need I, describe him? The usual kind of business pudge, in a suit. He looked in a reluctant way at my mother, and reluctantly, slightly morbidly, at me. I don't know how I got the impression mother held all the cards. The conversation, of course, flowed over my head – I just cruised round and round the room, knocking objects over. But the outcome – as I gathered when we got home – was that mother's sister's friend said he'd give my father a job. He had said he could use an ex-officer, provided it was an ex-officer with charm. What my father would have to do was to interest housewives, not in himself but in vacuum cleaners. If it helped to interest some housewives in vacuum

试读结束，需要全本PDF请购买 www.ertongbook.com