



Poetry of the Thirties

introduced and Edited by Robin Skeilton



THE PENGUIN POETS
POETRY OF THE THIRTIES

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OF THE THIRTIES**

**INTRODUCED AND EDITED BY
ROBIN SKELTON**



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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	II
INTRODUCTION	13
A NOTE ON THE TEXTS USED	39
I. IN OUR TIME	
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Autumn Journal, III	45
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : Song for the New Year	47
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : The Magnetic Mountain	49
<i>Stephen Spender</i> : An Elementary School Class Room in a Slum	51
<i>Kenneth Allott</i> : The Children	52
<i>Michael Roberts</i> : In Our Time	53
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : A Communist to Others	54
<i>Rex Warner</i> : Hymn	59
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : The Magnetic Mountain	61
<i>Julian Bell</i> : Nonsense	62
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : The Magnetic Mountain	63
<i>William Empson</i> : Just a Smack at Auden	64
<i>Edgar Foxall</i> : A Note on Working-Class Solidarity	66
<i>Gavin Ewart</i> : Audenesque for an Initiation	67
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : Newsreel	69
<i>Clere Parsons</i> : Different	70
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : O for Doors to be Open	70
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Bagpipe Music	72
<i>William Empson</i> : Missing Dates	73
<i>John Betjeman</i> : Slough	74
<i>Francis Scarfe</i> : Beauty, Boloney	76
<i>Randall Swingler</i> : From <i>The New World This Hour Begets</i>	77
<i>Stephen Spender</i> : The Express	79
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Birmingham	80

CONTENTS

<i>Stephen Spender</i> : The Landscape near an Aerodrome	82
<i>Anne Ridler</i> : At Richmond	83
<i>Charles Madge</i> : Instructions, V	83
<i>Francis Scarfe</i> : Progression	84
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : The Bells that Signed	85
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : Poems, XII	86
<i>H. B. Mallalieu</i> : Two Preludes	87
<i>Robert Hamer</i> : Torch Song	88
<i>Rex Warner</i> : Sonnet	89
<i>Stephen Spender</i> : Easter Monday	89
<i>Stephen Spender</i> : New Year	90

II. THE LANDSCAPE WAS THE OCCASION

<i>Anne Ridler</i> : Zennor	95
<i>Michael Roberts</i> : The Secret Springs	95
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : In September	97
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Poem	98
<i>Geoffrey Parsons</i> : Europe a Wood	99
<i>Stephen Spender</i> : The Pylons	99
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : From Feathers to Iron, 14	100
<i>Rex Warner</i> : Sonnet	101
<i>Peter Hewitt</i> : Place of Birth	102
<i>Bernard Gutteridge</i> : Home Revisited	104
<i>Bernard Spencer</i> : Allotments: April	105
<i>Anne Ridler</i> : Aisholt Revisited	106

III. TO WALK WITH OTHERS

<i>Stephen Spender</i> : I Think Continually	111
<i>Kenneth Allott</i> : Lament for a Cricket Eleven	112
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : A Carol	113
<i>John Short</i> : Carol	114
<i>Michael Roberts</i> : The Child	114
<i>F. T. Prince</i> : The Token	115
<i>John Betjeman</i> : Death of King George V	115

CONTENTS

<i>John Pudney : Resort</i>	116
<i>Geoffrey Grigson : Reginal Order</i>	116
<i>William Empson : To an Old Lady</i>	117
<i>John Betjeman : On a Portrait of a Deaf Man</i>	118
<i>Ronald Bottrall : Epitaph for a Riveter</i>	119
<i>Vernon Watkins : The Collier</i>	119
<i>John Betjeman : Death in Leamington</i>	121
<i>Dylan Thomas : In Memory of Ann Jones</i>	122
<i>Bernard Spencer : Part of Plenty</i>	123
<i>Louis MacNeice : The British Museum Reading Room</i>	124
<i>Geoffrey Grigson : And Forgetful of Europe</i>	125
<i>Norman Cameron : Public-House Confidence</i>	127
<i>John Betjeman : In Westminster Abbey</i>	127
<i>Edgar Foxall : Sea Dirge</i>	129

IV. AND I REMEMBER SPAIN

<i>W. H. Auden : Spain</i>	133
<i>John Cornford : Full Moon at Tierz</i>	137
<i>Charles Madge : The Times</i>	139
<i>Kenneth Allott : Prize for Good Conduct</i>	140
<i>Bernard Spencer : A Thousand Killed</i>	141
<i>Edgar Foxall : Poem ('He awoke from dreams . .</i>	142
<i>Geoffrey Grigson : The Non-Interveners</i>	142
<i>Bernard Spencer : A Cold Night</i>	143
<i>Stephen Spender : Two Armies</i>	144
<i>John Cornford : To Margot Heinemann</i>	146
<i>Stephen Spender : Port Bou</i>	146
<i>Stephen Spender : Ultima Ratio Regum</i>	148
<i>Laurie Lee : A Moment of War</i>	149
<i>Stephen Spender : Thoughts During an Air Raid</i>	150
<i>John Cornford : A Letter from Aragon</i>	151
<i>Laurie Lee : Music in a Spanish Town</i>	152
<i>Laurie Lee : Words Asleep</i>	153
<i>Dylan Thomas : The Hand that Signed the Paper</i>	153
<i>Stephen Spender : Fall of a City</i>	154

CONTENTS

<i>George Barker</i> : Elegy on Spain	155
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Autumn Journal, VI	160

V. AS FOR OURSELVES

<i>W. H. Auden</i> : To a Writer on His Birthday	167
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Autumn Journal, XV	170
<i>John Betjeman</i> : Distant View of a Provincial Town	172
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : Forgive me, Sire	173
<i>H. B. Mallalieu</i> : Lament for a Lost Life	174
<i>Rex Warner</i> : Light and Air	176
<i>Geoffrey Parsons</i> : Suburban Cemetery	178
<i>F. T. Prince</i> : An Epistle to a Patron	179
<i>Bernard Spencer</i> : Evasions	183
<i>William Empson</i> : Reflection from Anita Loos	184
* <i>Dylan Thomas</i> : I Have Longed to Move Away	185
<i>George Barker</i> : Resolution of Dependence	186
<i>Clifford Dymont</i> : The Pharos	188
<i>Julian Symons</i> : Poem ('If truth can still be told . . .')	188
<i>Randall Swingler</i> : Request for the Day	189
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : The Dream	190
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : Lay Your Sleeping Head	191
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Meeting Point	192
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : To a Greedy Lover	193
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : In the Queen's Room	194
<i>William Empson</i> : Aubade	194
<i>Vernon Watkins</i> : Elegy on the Heroine of Childhood	196
<i>William Empson</i> : This Last Pain	198
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : The Conflict	199
<i>William Empson</i> : Homage to the British Museum	200
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : Poems, XXX	201
<i>Randall Swingler</i> : In Death the Eyes are Still	202
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : No Remedy	202
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : May with its Light Behaving	203
<i>C. Day Lewis</i> : The Magnetic Mountain, 24	204
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : An Eclogue for Christmas	205

CONTENTS

V. WHEN LOGICS DIE

<i>Kenneth Allott</i> : Offering	213
<i>Philip O'Connor</i> : Poem ('The clock ticks on . . .')	215
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : Worm Interviewed	215
<i>Dylan Thomas</i> : And Death Shall Have No Dominion	216
<i>Rayner Heppenstall</i> : Risorgimento	217
<i>David Gascoyne</i> : Figure in a Landscape	218
<i>Dylan Thomas</i> : Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines	221
<i>David Gascoyne</i> : Morning Dissertation	222
<i>Geoffrey Grigson</i> : Three Evils	223
<i>Philip O'Connor</i> : 'Blue Bugs in Liquid Silk'	223
<i>Geoffrey Grigson</i> : Before a Fall	224
<i>Dylan Thomas</i> : Twenty-four Years Remind the Tears of My Eyes	225
<i>Hugh Sykes Davies</i> : From <i>Petron</i> ('In the midst of a ravaged city . . .')	226
<i>Hugh Sykes Davies</i> : From <i>Petron</i> ('A spider weaves his web . . .')	226
<i>Hugh Sykes Davies</i> : Poem ('In the stump of the old tree . . .')	227
<i>Dylan Thomas</i> : The Force that Through the Green Fuse	228
<i>David Gascoyne</i> : And the Seventh Dream is the Dream of Isis	229
<i>Philip O'Connor</i> : Useful Letter	232
<i>David Gascoyne</i> : The Very Image	234
<i>Roger Roughton</i> : Soluble Noughts and Crosses	235
<i>Dylan Thomas</i> : I see the Boys of Summer . . .	237
<i>Roger Roughton</i> : Animal Crackers in Your Croup	239
<i>Roger Roughton</i> : Lady Windermere's Fan-Dance	240
<i>Dylan Thomas</i> : Should Lanterns Shine	241
<i>Philip O'Connor</i> : Poems 5-11 ('Captain Busby . . .')	242

VII. HAIR BETWEEN THE TOES

<i>W. H. Auden</i> : The Witnesses	249
<i>Roy Fuller</i> : End of a City	255

CONTENTS

<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Christina	256
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : The Compassionate Fool	257
<i>Geoffrey Parsons</i> : The Inheritor	258
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : Ballad	259
<i>Charles Madge</i> : Delusions, II	260
<i>Roy Fuller</i> : Centaurs	261
<i>John Lehmann</i> : This Excellent Machine	262
<i>Michael Roberts</i> : The Caves	263
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : Time Was My Friend	264
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : Dictator	265
<i>Christopher Caudwell</i> : The Progress of Poetry	265
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : God the Holy Ghost	266
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : The Disused Temple	267
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : Apotheosis of Hero	268
<i>Norman Cameron</i> : The Unfinished Race	268
<i>David Gascoyne</i> : Sonnet	269
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : A Fable	269

VIII. FAREWELL CHORUS

<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : The Sunlight on the Garden	273
<i>Henry Reed</i> : Hiding Beneath the Furze	274
<i>Ruthven Todd</i> : It was Easier	275
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : Prognosis	277
<i>Louis MacNeice</i> : London Rain	278
<i>W. H. Auden</i> : September 1, 1939	280
<i>David Gascoyne</i> : Farewell Chorus	283

INDEX OF AUTHORS	289
INDEX OF TITLES	297

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Introduction

Even before they were quite over, the thirties took on the appearance of myth; the poets themselves, looking back upon the events of those years, saw heroes and dragons in dramatic perspectives, and many of them uttered suitable valedictory sentiments. It is rare for a decade to be so self-conscious. This in itself makes the study of the poetry of the period interesting, for so many gestures are deliberately 'placed' in the period that it is often hard to tell whether a poem is to be condemned for undergraduate and narcissistic posturing, or praised as a truly witty impersonation of the *Zeitgeist* made more subtle by ironic overtones. Is the 'ham' really ham, or a kind of burlesque? This is a particularly difficult question to answer, as burlesque was a favourite device of the poets of the thirties, as also was apparently 'straight' melodrama. It is not always easy to separate the one from the other.

Problems of this kind can, perhaps, only be solved by arranging the poems of the period alongside one another in such a way that comparisons can be made. This anthology is, in part, an attempt at just such an arrangement, and to that extent must be regarded as a kind of critical essay, for the act of selection and of arrangement is also an act of judgement. Nevertheless, it has not been my intention to use the anthology primarily as a vehicle for my own views of the period; whatever judgements may emerge have emerged naturally during the process of trying to present as objective a record of thirties poetry as possible. To do this I had to decide what material could properly come under the heading 'Thirties'. I decided that anything first printed in a book or periodical between 1 January 1930 and 31 December 1939 could be used. I also decided that any poem

INTRODUCTION

appearing in a book in 1940 could reasonably be supposed to have been written during the 1930s and could therefore be included. These limitations were not sufficient by themselves, however. It seemed necessary to define a 'Thirties generation' as well as a 'Thirties period', otherwise the anthology might confuse the picture by including poems written from a different viewpoint by Victorians and Georgians. This 'Thirties generation', once the concept is admitted, almost defines itself. If we take Auden, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice as central figures, we find that the eldest of these was born in 1904. If we look for the youngest poet of any weight to publish a first collection before 1940, we come upon David Gascoyne, who was born in 1916. No younger poet can be said to belong as clearly to the period; indeed, most poets born between 1914 and 1916 first made their impact during the forties. I must admit that 1904 is a more arbitrary date; nevertheless, those poets born between 1900 and 1904 do, on the whole, appear to be writing from a slightly different vantage point from those born only a few years later.

It is easy to see possible explanations for this, though it is dangerous to be too dogmatic. On the face of it, however, it does appear that a man born between 1904 and 1916 differs from anyone born even slightly earlier in having had no real experience of the pre-war period, which was so different from the post-war as to appear almost like a different civilization. The men of the 1904-16 generation were not only deprived of the easy Georgian days, but also pitchforked into a period of intense social tension in which to do their growing up. The older thirties men struggled through their adolescence during the last days of a war and the early confusions of an embittered peace, while the younger ones were adolescents at the time of the General Strike and the Depression. It was not possible to avoid being affected by these matters, however secure one's own personal life might be. Chartism and the Crimean War left many members of

INTRODUCTION

the community completely untouched, but the Great War and the Depression left their mark on every inch of the country. If we make the generally accepted assumption that the years of childhood and adolescence are of fundamental importance to a poet's outlook and development, it does seem reasonable to regard the poets born between 1904 and 1916 as forming some kind of coherent 'poetic generation'. Certainly, it looks as if all these poets *ought* to find themselves with similar attitudes of mind. Life is rarely as neat as the theories which emanate from it, however, and we would do well to be suspicious of anyone who detects absolute uniformity of approach. Nevertheless, as one reads the poetry written by members of this generation, especially that printed between 1930 and 1935, one becomes more and more astonished by the narrow range of its attitudes. Some of this is due to the dominating influence of Auden and his friends. Much of it derives from the apparent wish of so many writers to be part of a 'movement'. A good deal of it can also be explained by the overriding effect of certain key images which are not merely a part of the poetry of the time, but related to current social obsessions. One of these images is that of war.

In *New Country* (1933) Michael Roberts went some way towards identifying the thirties generation in terms similar to ours. In his introduction to this violently propagandist collection of essays, stories, and poems, he wrote:

To me, 'pre-war' means only one sunny market-day at Sturminster Newton, the day I boldly bought a goat for 1s. 9d. and then, shelving all transport problems (we lived thirty miles away) and postponing the announcement to my father, went out into the country and, finding a gatepost for a table, cut out from the *Express* a picture of a dozen Serbian soldiers (we spelt it Servian then) in spotless uniforms, elbow to elbow in a shallow trench, standing exactly like my own toy soldiers, the Royal West Kent Regiment ('The Buffs'), manufactured by Wm. Brittain and Sons Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

But there are others who have even less than a one-and-nine-penny goat for their share of pre-war prosperity; Mr Plomer is older, but most of the contributors to this book are younger, than I. Sergeants of our school O.T.C.s, admirers of our elder brothers, we grew up under the shadow of war: we have no memory of pre-war prosperity and a settled Europe. To us that tale is textbook history . . .

Michael Roberts was born in 1902, and I have made him the only exception to the rule that the poets in this anthology should have been born between 1904 and 1916. He did so much to identify the intellectual *élite* for a great number of people in his anthologies *New Signatures* (1932), *New Country* (1933), and *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) that he could hardly be omitted from the roll call of Thirties' Men, and his own poems have more in common with those of other poets of the thirties than with most of the work published in the late twenties. His character as a spokesman is also valuable to us, for he writes as a representative of a group rather than as a lonely commentator. It is in this role that, later, in his introduction to *New Country*, he explains his Socialist convictions, and goes on to say:

And by social communism I do not mean any diminution or mystical loss of personal identity or any vague sentiment of universal brotherhood: I mean that extension of personality and consciousness which comes sometimes to a group of men when they are working together for some common purpose.

I think some men had just such an experience in the war, and to them it almost seemed to justify the filth and inhumanity of war. It is something rare in our competing, individualist world, and for myself I can point to only one definite example: a fortnight of wind and heavy snowstorm in the Jura when a dozen of us, schoolboys and undergraduates, came to accept each other's faults and virtues as part of the scheme of things, natural as the weather. I don't think I had any love or personal feeling for them at all: we were, for the moment, part of something a little bigger than ourselves. Impatience and fatigue and personal delight and suffering disappeared, and I remember only, at the end of each