

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BRITISH WOMEN'S WRITING, 1900–1950

Edited by

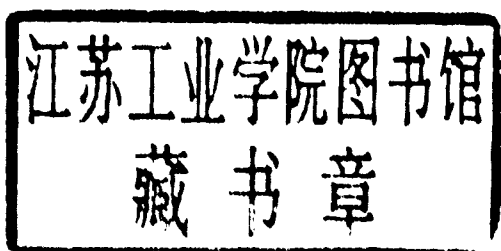
Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin,  
Ashlie Sponenberg



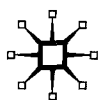
# Encyclopedia of British Women's Writing, 1900–1950

Edited by

Faye Hammill, Esme Miskimmin and Ashlie Sponenberg



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Esme Miskimmin, Ashlie Sponenberg 2006  
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# Introduction

It seems there is a Plan on foot that Ned should be painted by Mr Reynolds who is the Painter à la Mode now. I declare I cannot see why Ned with his Carroty Locks should have his portrait made while my more Worthy Features should go down unrecorded to the Tomb. Have prayed Papa to permit me to be painted by Miss Reid who is also very Modish but he declares he has not sufficient money for two, which I vow is a Monstrous shame.

Cleone Knox [Magdalen King-Hall], *The Diary of a Young Lady of Fashion in the Year 1764–1765* (1925)

When the hilarious journal of ‘Cleone Knox’ was published in 1925, experts were convinced it was a genuine eighteenth-century document, and compared it to Pepys’s diary in importance. The resulting publicity made it a bestseller, and the discovery that it was a hoax was reported on the front page of the *Daily Express*. The perpetrator of this literary sensation, the 19-year-old Magdalen King-Hall, went on to a successful career writing historical novels. One of them, *The Wicked Lady*, has been filmed twice, and the 1945 version was the most popular film of its year in the United Kingdom. Yet despite her impact on her contemporaries, Magdalen King-Hall is not to be found in any literary dictionary or reference work. In preparing the entry on her work for this encyclopedia, it was necessary to collate and compare information from a whole range of print and internet sources, including historical maps of Ireland, genealogical websites, library catalogues and film databases.

We did not wish Magdalen King-Hall to remain ‘unrecorded’, or displaced by her literary brothers. She is one among many fascinating women authors who deserve to be restored to their formerly significant places in the literary culture of the early twentieth century. The provision of reliable information about such authors is among the primary aims of this encyclopedia. We were motivated also by a desire to stimulate interest (among readers, teachers and scholars) in this exciting era of women’s literary history. By choosing a timespan which is narrow in comparison to that of other encyclopedias, we have been able to be more inclusive, to offer a very detailed picture of the range and variety of women’s literary activity in this period, as well as an extensive survey of the secondary material in the form of an annotated bibliography. The other major purpose of this book is to anchor the women’s writing of 1900–50 firmly in its literary, intellectual and historical contexts. We have devoted one-third of the main text to topic entries, giving accounts of genres, aspects of literary culture,

periodicals, popular culture, social issues, politics, and historical events. There are, for example, entries on modernism, detective fiction, censorship, libraries, little magazines, consumerism, domestic technology, the Women's Movement, contraception, the Titanic, the Spanish Civil War, socialism and Mass Observation. The 72 topic entries have been supplied by a range of specialists, including historians, archivists and literary critics, and are designed to provide the kind of detail which will be most useful to scholars of women's writing. Cross-references (indicated in small capitals) direct readers to relevant topic entries, but it will also be helpful to consult the indexes at the end of the book.

The editors of this volume have all recently developed research and teaching projects on women writers in the early twentieth century, and have been confronted by the lack of an introductory or reference guide to the field. We have each had to consult dozens of different sources (literary dictionaries covering the whole of women's writing, monographs on a few authors, historical textbooks and so on) in order to gather the basic material needed to plan and execute our books and courses. This encyclopedia provides a starting point for students, lecturers and researchers interested in any aspect of women's writing in this period. Our entries are long enough to include valuable critical interpretation and quotation, but they also point readers towards more substantial discussions via the secondary references.

We have come up against the usual problems of definition and scope. The category 'British women writers 1900–50' sounded very precise, but proved of course to be quite enormous and very blurred around the edges. We had little difficulty, to be sure, in determining who qualified as 'women', but 'British' is notoriously awkward, and 'writer' almost equally so, while the date range adds a further complication. We have been generous in our interpretations of these terms. The only exclusions in terms of dates were writers whose careers were all but over by 1900, or who had only just begun in the late 1940s. All authors of British birth or parentage were considered eligible, even if they spent many years abroad (for example, Anna Kavan or Rumer Godden) and we have included numerous authors who were born outside the United Kingdom, but lived and wrote there for significant periods. Most of these are from the Republic of Ireland (such as Eva Gore-Booth or Kate O'Brien) or from Commonwealth countries (including Elspeth Huxley and Pamela Lyndon Travers). The majority of our author entries are on women primarily known for their fiction, poetry and drama, whether for adults or children, but we also include writers in other genres who had a significant impact on the literary-intellectual culture of the period. Amongst them are women best known as literary critics and scholars (Q. D. Leavis, Helen Waddell), editors and journalists (Lady Rhondda, Iris Barry), autobiographers and travel writers (Ethel Smyth, Freya Stark) or social activists (Beatrice Webb, Dora Russell). There are entries for 187 authors altogether, and information about a further 66 appears in the



appendix of minor writers, which lists authors about whom too little is known at present to warrant a full entry.

Many difficult choices presented themselves as we drew up and revised the list of headwords and word lengths. A large proportion of our editorial decisions have been taken in consultation with our contributors, and their interests, expertise and wisdom have had a significant bearing on the final content and structure of this book. We are particularly grateful for their suggestions for additional, less well known writers for inclusion. Such 'rescued' writers have entries of 200 words, while entries for better known writers were set at 500 words. In most literary encyclopedias, entries vary significantly in length according to the editor's judgement of an author's significance. We have sought to avoid such hierarchical organization as far as possible, aware that the perceived importance of any writer can vary greatly over time, and between different readers and critics. Inevitably, there is a degree of arbitrariness in our 500/200 word division, but we have assigned the shorter length only to those writers about whom little information is available, or who, despite their intrinsic interest, had only a limited output or impact in Britain. Our list of 500-word entries includes a great many authors who would be firmly categorized as minor in a standard literary encyclopedia, or left out altogether, either because they are perceived as too lowbrow (for example, Ethel M. Dell and Florence Barclay), or because they fell out of fashion, despite being greatly admired during their lifetimes (such as Frances Cornford or Elizabeth Taylor). We hope our entries will stimulate further research into the very rewarding writings of these women.

It is not easy to compress complex topics and eventful literary careers into the space of a few hundred words: it is, we have decided, like trying to pack a large duvet into a small suitcase. Considering that our contributors have had to take such pains to keep within word limits, it would seem hypocritical to devote any further space to a mere introduction. Besides, we have just finished writing our own entries, not to mention the bibliography, timeline and appendix of minor writers, and each of us feels tempted to borrow a phrase appended by 'Cleone Knox' to a particularly lengthy diary entry: 'My hand is nearly off have wrote so much.'

F. H.

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# A

## Abortion

Abortion, achieved, or at least contemplated, forms a significant motif in twentieth-century British women's writing. Pioneering fictional depictions appeared in Jean RHYS's *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and Rosamund LEHMANN's *The Weather in the Streets* (1936). Novels, memoirs and biographies reveal common patterns: ineffective gin and hot baths, followed by useless medication, the quest for a contact, the expensive Harley Street operator, the dangerous backstreet abortionist.

Abortion was a criminal act under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act, which did not recognize medical justifications: even so, a few doctors performed discreet operations, costing around £100. During the 1930s, women's organizations supported amending the law, and an Abortion Law Reform Association was formed. In 1938 a government committee was appointed to investigate the subject, while Aleck Bourne, a gynaecological surgeon, operated on a girl of 14 who had been gang raped, to test the law. This case figures in the background of Virginia WOOLF's *Between the Acts* (1941). His successful defence, that continuing the pregnancy seriously threatened her mental HEALTH, established important case law.

In 1967 an Abortion Act legalized abortion on physical or mental health grounds, under medical control, and taking into consideration social conditions. The anti-abortion lobby has so far failed to overturn this.

## Suggested Reading

Brookes, Barbara. *Abortion in England, 1900–1967* (London: Croom Helm, 1988).  
Hindell, Keith and Madeleine Simms. *Abortion Law Reformed* (London: Peter Owen, 1971).

Lesley A. Hall

## Ackland, Valentine 1906–1969

Neglected poet, autobiographer, and long-term partner of novelist Sylvia Townsend WARNER. Born in London, Ackland began writing poetry in her adolescence. Like Townsend Warner, Ackland was deeply committed to the Communist Party, and later to left-wing politics. She produced a documentary on labourers' lives, *Country Conditions* (1936), and wrote for papers such as the *Daily Worker*. Ackland's poetry, the bulk of which was published posthumously in two collections, *The Nature of the Moment* (1973) and *Further Poems of Valentine Ackland* (1978), concerns itself mostly with themes of love, war, the spiritual, and the writing of poetry.

One of her most innovative poetic endeavours was the collaborative production of *Whether A Dove or a Seagull* (1934), with Townsend Warner. Published without attribution, the writers described the collection as 'both an experiment in the presentation of poetry and a protest against the frame of mind which judges a poem by looking to see who wrote it'. In 1949, Ackland wrote the moving autobiography *For Sylvia: An Honest Account*, detailing her early recognition of her LESBIAN sexuality, her relationship with Townsend Warner, which she regarded as the central event of her life, and her struggle with alcoholism.

### **Suggested Reading**

Mulford, Wendy. *This Narrow Place: Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland: Life, Letters and Politics, 1930–1951* (London: Pandora Press, 1988).

Joanne Winning

### **Allingham, Margery 1904–1966**

One of the most influential and experimental crime writers of the twentieth century. Allingham was devoted to her home in rural Essex, setting many of her novels there, and others in Suffolk and London. Her work explores both city and country deviance. Allingham created one of fiction's most enigmatic detectives, Albert Campion. His real name and background are purposefully left vague, but there is a suggestion that he is aristocratic. When he is encountered posing as minor royalty at the start of *Sweet Danger* (1933), the reader is likely to be puzzled. Campion proves to occupy a more habitual role of semi-detached spy for the British government, and he finds himself menaced by a characteristic enemy: a criminal gang operated by a capitalist mogul. Allingham's dark forces come from *within* modernity and so can only be defeated by forces from the margin. Myth and romance can be marshalled to preserve England, in the form of a treasure hunt in *Sweet Danger*, a sacred aristocratic trust in *Look to the Lady* (1931), and a shadowy ritual government in *Traitor's Purse* (1941). The latter novel is narrated by a Campion who has lost his memory so he literally does not know whose side he is on. Here, Campion's ambivalence towards the law is embedded in an experimental literary form.

Allingham's DETECTIVE FICTION is more than simply nostalgic, and does not set a mythical representation of the past against a corrupt present. Rather, it depicts a multi-layered world in which attachment to the past has a dark side, be it the witchcraft that almost extinguishes the heroine, Amanda, in *Sweet Danger* or the dead hand of a deceased painter's will in *Death of a Ghost* (1934). Tradition can be ossified into corruption, as demonstrated by the decayed heart of an established publisher in *Flowers for the Judge* (1936). Indeed, bonding with the past can warp a whole family, as in the mordant relations of

*Police at the Funeral* (1931), in which the rule of Victorian matriarch Caroline has resulted in murderous immaturity in her elderly offspring. Attachment to past hierarchies can be condemned in explicitly modern terms; in *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945), an autocratic aristocrat is described as 'like a beautiful, high powered car driven by an engaging maniac'. Even more bizarrely out of touch with their emotions is the indigent genteel family of *More Work for the Undertaker* (1949). For example, one elderly man's erotic obsession with his niece drives him to hysteria.

If Allingham's villainy is associated with modernity's worship of money, it is also a sign of masculinity in crisis. Crucially, the breaking point occurs when money is used to assert power – the result is murder, frequently followed by madness. Campion himself demonstrates a genuine ambivalence about masculinity and the law. Frequently contrasted to a friendly policeman who believes absolutely in his job, Campion is several times faced with the possibility of killing to protect either his friends or his country. The law appears an inadequate structure within the modern world.

Allingham's work evolved from mythical underpinnings through family psycho-dramas to spy stories. She invented the urban serial killer novel in *The Tiger in the Smoke* (1952), and her influence can be traced in the development of psychological crime fiction. In later life she suffered from undiagnosed manic depression.

### **Suggested Reading**

Pike, B. A. *Campion's Career: A Study of the Novels of Margery Allingham* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987).

Rowland, Susan. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

Thorogood, Julia. *Margery Allingham: A Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1991).

Susan Rowland

### **Appeasement**

A British policy adopted between the wars towards Germany, based on pacification through the granting of concessions. Appeasement sprang from the conviction that Germany was not wholly responsible for WORLD WAR ONE. In 1919, the Treaty of Versailles imposed heavy reparation payments on Germany and limited her armed forces, terms seen by appeasers as punitive and unlikely to bring lasting peace. Throughout the 1920s, Britain sought revision in German repayments and reconsidered German rearmament, hoping to revitalize European business damaged by the war and reposition Germany as an ally rather than an enemy.

Nazism and Hitler's rise to power in 1933 challenged appeasement, although hopes that FASCISM would impede the spread of COMMUNISM westward offset

British hostility. Many appeasers believed that Nazism would reform, but the policy became increasingly unviable as accounts of persecution in Germany grew.

Appeasement was further compromised by the Munich Agreement (1938), when Britain, under the leadership of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, agreed to cede the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia to Germany. Any hope that war could still be avoided disappeared when Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. Appeasement ended and Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September.

### ***Suggested Reading***

Gilbert, Martin. *The Roots of Appeasement* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966).

Marie Askham

### **Ashford, Daisy 1881–1972**

Juvenile author who wrote her major work, *The Young Visitors, or Mr Salteena's Plan*, in 1890, aged nine. Unpublished until 1919, it was then printed with its original idiosyncratic spelling. Still readily available, it has subsequently been staged (1920), made into a musical (1968), filmed (1984) and adapted for BBC television (2003). *The Young Visitors* is a true comedy of manners; the protagonist, Mr Salteena, is 'not quite a gentleman' but wants to become 'the real thing'. Rich in childhood values and misapprehensions about the adult world, it makes hilarious reading. We learn that, before travelling, 'Mr Salteena did not have an egg for his brekfast in case he should be sick.' Meanwhile, another character boasts that one of his 'ancesters' was 'really the Sinister son of Queen Victoria' and, on being interrogated about what this means, admits, 'I dont quite know'. Elsewhere in the story, the Prince of Wales wears a 'small but costly crown' and eats ice-cream.

Margaret Mary Julia ('Daisy') Ashford started her story-telling career at the age of four – dictating her earliest efforts to her father – and continued writing until she was 14. Other pieces were collected and published as *Daisy Ashford: Her Book* (1920).

### ***Suggested Reading***

Barrie, J. M. Preface to *The Young Visitors* by Daisy Ashford (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951) 7–13.

McMaster, Juliet et al. (eds). Annotated edition of *The Young Visitors* (Edmonton: Juvenilia Press, 1997).

Elaine Hartnell

### **Asquith, Lady Cynthia 1887–1960**

Best known nowadays as a diarist, Lady Asquith was also a novelist, biographer, and anthologist. She was born at the family home, Stanway in Gloucestershire

(one of the most beautiful small country houses in England) to Hugo and Mary Elcho, who were 'Souls', that is, they belonged to a group of close friends who in some ways anticipated BLOOMSBURY but were much more monied and less intellectual. Hence, Cynthia's pedigree was illustrious and she had a wide circle of interesting and influential friends. An acknowledged beauty, she was too quick-witted to settle for the comfortable life of a Tory country estate but instead in 1910 she married 'Beb' Asquith, a younger son of the Prime Minister, and began a life of reduced circumstances (given what she had been brought up to expect), cultivating her friendships, enjoying intense but platonic relationships with a succession of men, and bringing up three sons. One of the writers she 'midwived' was D. H. Lawrence, who used her as a model in several short stories and drew on aspects of her life for the heroine of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

When the First World War broke out she began to keep a diary, which remains her most enduring work and deserves to be far better known. It mixes the momentous and the everyday in a fascinating and endearing fashion: for example, she wrote on 23 March 1918: 'The nightmare of the battle now raging oppressed me all day like a heavy weight. I have never been so haunted by the war and, as far as I know, Beb is in the neighbourhood of St Quentin where things seem to be worse... I felt very sick at heart. Stayed in for dinner and read *Women in Love*... Surely (Lawrence) is delirious... or do I know nothing about human beings?' The diary was criticized, for example by Leonard Woolf, because of 'the arrogant frivolity and futility of the aristocratic clique to which Lady Cynthia belonged'. But Leon Edel wrote: 'What comes through the often humdrum story is the deep suffering, the eternal ennui of the home front, a kind of killing of time as a means of insulation against the killing one couldn't shut out.' The diaries were published posthumously in 1968, with a foreword by Cynthia's close friend, the novelist L. P. Hartley.

In the 1920s she began to write articles to make money, because her husband had endured shell-shock in the trenches, and she soon turned to writing books. She was encouraged in her writing by J. M. Barrie, whose secretary she had become in 1918, but his possessiveness was as damaging to the Asquiths as it had been to the Llewellyn-Davies family on whom he drew for Peter Pan. In 1936 Cynthia published *The Spring House*, a semi-autobiographical novel about the war years, for which she had her diaries at hand; and in 1950 and 1952 two volumes of memoirs about her girlhood which are much quoted by biographers of her contemporaries.

### **Suggested Reading**

Asquith, Cynthia. *Diaries, 1915–1918*, foreword by L. P. Hartley (London: Century, 1987).

Beauman, Nicola. *Cynthia Asquith* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987).

Nicola Beauman



## Auden Generation

The term 'Auden Generation' (the title of Samuel Hynes's 1976 book on literature and politics in the 1930s) identifies W. H. Auden as the focal point of 1930s literature. In November 1937, *New Verse* published an Auden double number. This focus was sharpened by Robin Skelton's Penguin anthology, *Poetry of the 1930s* (1964), which identified Auden as the 'Master of the Period' and identified the characteristic poetic voice of the 1930s in a generation born between 1904 and 1916. This disadvantaged women poets, who often start publishing later in their lives; only four of the poets discussed individually in Dowson's *Women's Poetry of the 1930s* (1996) fit Skelton's dates.

Writers connected with the Auden generation often include: Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, Christopher Isherwood, Rex Warner and Edward Upward, although Upward is most helpfully seen as a critical influence on Isherwood and, through him, on Auden. Members of this group associated with women writers and artists, including Rosamund LEHMANN, Naomi MITCHISON and Nancy Sharp, but male critics rarely acknowledge this connection.

The focus on the 'Auden Generation' prioritizes a narrow range of experience; the typical writer is seen as male, educated at public school and Oxford or Cambridge, with interests in the contemporary (1930s critics wrote of the 'pylon poets'). One characteristic style is impersonal, often offering a political or scientific view of people, places or events; at times this becomes exhortatory. The conversational style – best illustrated by Auden and MacNeice's 'Last Will and Testament' in *Letters from Iceland* (1937) – can tend to privilege an inner circle of readers. Marx, Freud and D. H. Lawrence are key influences.

Major political change, whether Marxist revolution or FASCIST counter-revolution, seemed imminent, leading writers to consider their moral responsibility. Connection with others was vital; Isherwood's narrator in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), preparing to lose kinship with ordinary people, concludes 'I am lost'. Love (both specific and general) is frequently evoked, often in parallel to historical events; in 'Fish in the Unruffled Lakes' (1936), Auden evokes love as a model of willing involvement.

Writers saw their own class position as problematic; MacNeice in *Autumn Journal* (1939) writes of public schools teaching 'complete conformity and / An automatic complacency'. However, as Janet Montefiore suggests, such critiques 'implicitly claim . . . universal status for exceedingly privileged modes of social construction'.

## Suggested Reading

Mendelson, Edward. *Early Auden* (London: Faber, 1981).

Montefiore, Janet. *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996).

O'Neill, Michael and Reeves, Gareth. *Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992).

Kathleen Bell

### **Ayres, Ruby M. 1883–1955**

Dubbed 'Queen of fiction', Ruby Mildred Ayres was one of the most prolific and high-selling writers of popular ROMANCE, or as Mary Ellen Chase described it, the reading matter of the third-class railway carriage.

The daughter of an architect, Ayres married Reginald William Pocock, an insurance broker, in 1909, but had no children. She wrote approximately 150 novels, and was at her peak during the interwar years. Titles such as *A Gamble with Love* (1922), *The Second Honeymoon* (1918), *Brown Sugar* (1921), *The Remembered Kiss* (1918), *The Big Fellow* (1931) and *The Marriage of Barry Wicklow* (1920) were the staple of twopenny LIBRARIES. Ayres's stories were regularly serialized in popular WOMEN'S MAGAZINES such as *Woman's Weekly* and she was a regular contributor to the *Oracle*, *Daily Chronicle* and *Daily Mirror*.

Ayres described the kind of girl who might be reading her novels as 'young and romantic', 'a kind-eyed, sentimental under-housemaid'. Although her style was realistic romance, Ayres was aware of the importance of escapism in light fiction. She set out to entertain and viewed her writing as a craft, claiming pragmatically that romance could last if 'mixed with two most important ingredients – tolerance and a sense of humour'.

### ***Suggested Reading***

Mckibbin, Ross. *Classes and Cultures, England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Vasudevan, Aruna (ed.). *Twentieth-Century Romance and Historical Writers* (London: St James Press, 1992).

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