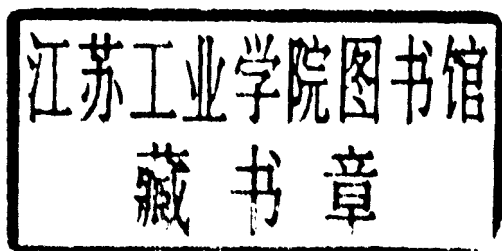


George Watson

*British
Literature
since
1945*

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MACMILLAN

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This argumentative study of the literature of a single island in a single age was written because there is nothing like it, and I thought it might be time there was.

In the 1970s I took to lecturing in Cambridge (and elsewhere) on British literature since 1945 – partly because it looked like an interesting gap to be filled, whether in my home university, abroad in the European Community, or in North America – and more specifically because academia can easily suffer from an arrested sense of modernity, confusing it with Modernism, and it sometimes needs to be told about the glories of recent times. Names stick and do damage; and once a literary movement of the 1910s became known as Modernism, there were always likely to be those, a half-century on and more, who perseveringly thought it must be the latest thing, and they may still need to be shown how anti-modern it is. Eliot, Pound and Joyce published most of their writings before anyone now in his working life was born; and modern literature, it may be worth insisting, did not end with the death of D. H. Lawrence in 1930, with T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* in 1943, or with the plays and novels of an expatriate Irishman in Paris called Samuel Beckett. Harold Pinter already looks a better dramatist than Eliot, and as good as Beckett; Iris Murdoch, among others who gave new life to realistic fiction at about the time of the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953, as considerable a novelist as Lawrence and better than Virginia Woolf. Such, at least, were among the reflections born of a stirring discontent with the continuing prestige of a dilapidated Modernist cult in

the academic teaching of literature. The polemics of Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell, meanwhile, that emerged powerfully in the anti-totalitarian mood of the war against Hitler and the opening of his death-camps in the spring and summer of 1945, struck me as unjustly faded from memory, blanded away by biographers and, by now, remote enough from our own affluent and unapocalyptic age to have become either neglected or radically misunderstood.

The book began, then, as an act of partisanship. I believe the age of the second Elizabeth to have been one of the great ages of the British arts, and humbly share the view of some of its best critics – of William Empson, for example, and Philip Larkin – that the decay of Modernism in Britain before and during the Second World War was a shift of mind to be welcomed and applauded. This has been a half-century marked by a civil war between old-style Modernism and new-style realism, with realism winning: a victory to be applauded on all sorts of grounds, as I believe, and not just literary, since realism is a way of looking hard at the world; and a nation needs to look hard at itself, and report on what it sees, if it is ever purposefully to grow and change. When England changes, as that sympathetic Frenchman André Siegfried once remarked, people say that she is dying, and it is never true. The point is wide-ranging. There have been plenty since the war to say that the novel is dying – or poetry, or the theatre. Some critics love the smell of death. But change is as natural to the system as revolution and stagnation are unnatural to it; and it is not, of itself, alarming. In fact a tradition needs to change in order to preserve itself and its past. Change is less a way of being different than a means of survival and a way of staying alive and afloat.

That, in all likelihood, is a view commoner among novelists, playwrights and poets than among academic

critics: which is why the un-Modernist case may now be usefully recast, as I have tried to do here, in academic terms. The creative intelligence is always the first to know, which is why it creates. In that sense, as I once tried to show in *The Literary Critics*, it is often more critical than the critics, who are by duty and calling concerned with the works of other ages, and who sometimes confuse complexity with profundity, technicality with rigour, and well-publicised disputes about critical theory at international conferences with the life of mind. They easily confuse ideas, above all, especially if neatly packaged and labelled, with thought itself: Modernism with modernity, structuralism and its intellectual heirs with the latest thing, and Marxist theories of history with the way the world is going. Such incidents have done higher education little credit in recent years, and I have already dealt with some recent critical theories in a book called *The Certainty of Literature*. It is astonishing that students, and even some of those who teach them, should be surprised to learn that Karl Marx was a year older than Queen Victoria – a contemporary, as a thinker, of Gladstone and John Stuart Mill; or that 'semiotic', a word mentioned by John Locke in his *Essay* of 1690, was a term known to the eighteenth century. It is not nostalgics among us who are old-fashioned but the avant-garde. While everything around it changes, it somehow strenuously contrives to stay more or less the same.

The creative harvest of Britain since 1945 is huge. With so much to be sifted, the book has been above all a labour of love – sometimes touched, as love-affairs often are, with a sense of the frantic and sudden attacks of exasperated despair. I have been lucky to have had the chance to deliver it – or bits of it – in a university that has allowed me to speak my mind for thirty years, in a faculty usually tolerant of diversity and in a college

unfailing in its kindness. Lucky, too, in a deeper way: to have lived through what I here describe, to have read such books and seen such plays when they were new, and with the shocked and comprehending eye of the contemporary. (One has to comprehend, after all, in order to be shocked.) A pity no one in the age of the first Elizabeth, so far as anyone knows, ever attempted anything like it. This is a book by a contemporary about a nation in its literary aspect, and in a highly fertile age. The arts in that age stand high – some, it may be, even higher than literature, and if the book had been about music I should unhesitatingly have called it the greatest age of all, Benjamin Britten and Michael Tippett having made British music in recent times second to none. In literature it may still be seen as among the greatest: not the equal of the first Elizabeth's, but more distinguished and abundant than that of most of her successors: the best for drama, I suspect, since Shakespeare died, for the novel since the age of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, for polemical prose absolutely. And since critics are supposed to have a point of view and declare it, I may add that Ian Fleming, though not a better writer than Virginia Woolf, by now looks a more compelling story-teller, George Orwell as remarkable a stylist, in his own way, as Samuel Beckett, Dylan Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) the finest book of verse by a British-born poet to appear since the war, and William Empson's *Argufying* (1987) the best miscellany of criticism in English in any age whatever. Such views are not expected to meet with general assent, but at least no one can say he has not been warned.

The book, in any case, is not – or not necessarily – about the best, and I am vividly conscious of how much I have not read, of how much I may have read and forgotten. Historians rightly love the problematical. I have favoured problems and issues here as much as

great names, and am far from offering, even by the remotest implication, a list of recommended reading. Of course some unmentioned works are easily better than some that are mentioned. The book, in short, is more analytic than annalistic. It is too soon for an annal. As for the total shape of the argument, it groups together what seems most naturally to group, and the book is built as a series of debates rather than a synopsis or a chronology. The novel, the theatre, even the short poem, are natural areas of critical debate. Other chapters concern the temper and obsessions of the time, and I have simply let them happen, as I wrote, and ignored the harsh call of consistency. An age is a various and untidy thing; an age one has lived through, irremediably so.

The scope of the book is severely insular, and it deals with writers native to or mainly resident in Great Britain since 1945. That is not because Britain is an island or because the book is the work of a nationalist. I am among the growing number who, even before the belated entry of Britain into the European Community in January 1973, believed its days of unlimited sovereignty are numbered and hope that they are. That does not alter the fact that, for a literary historian, Britain represents a convenient entity to be explored and pondered.

This is a study of differences in similarities, of similarity in differences. If the book is organised, on the whole, by literary kinds or by groups and coteries, I hope too that a sense of background, social and political – one small, interesting island strategically situated off the north-west coast of Holland – has never entirely vanished from view. Even Ulster is not here, being plainly worth a book of its own, especially for its poetry. Insularity is nothing to be ashamed of. For most of human history, after all, it has been easier to travel by

sea than by land, and for millennia the ocean has not locked Britain in but given her the earth to wander in.

That is the dimension of space. As for time, the book is the panorama of an age, and of a long age, not the snapshot of a moment. Even recent history is a kind of history, and all knowledge is of past time. The book has no end-date and could have none, but I hope 1945 will be readily accepted as a starting-point, and one that gives less trouble than any other in living memory would do. Some figures are excluded simply by dates; others by departure. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf died in 1941, for example, and T. S. Eliot stopped writing poems (though not plays) at much the same time. They are too early. Famous expatriates, meanwhile, like Robert Graves, soon to resettle in Spain, or W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood self-exiled in the United States, decided by 1945 not to live here except on a visit, and they too are omitted. So much seems clear. Some figures, admittedly, fall awkwardly across the date-line of 1945, and here I have yielded to instinct and allowed a general sense of their writings to rule. Ivy Compton-Burnett and Graham Greene seem to me inescapably 1930s writers, like Richard Hughes and Joyce Cary – however much they may have written since the war. Tolkien, by contrast, though born as early as 1892 and three years older than Robert Graves, is plainly a post-war phenomenon, however long it may have taken him to conceive and write *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5). Evelyn Waugh and George Orwell are neatly bisected by the Great Peace of 1945, as authors; but since *Brideshead Revisited* and *Animal Farm* appeared simultaneously in that very year, I have devoted a chapter to those authors and those works as an overture. The important thing, as William Empson used to say, is for a critic not to be bother-headed.

Post-war Britain is a rich, sparky culture, and it has

already lasted as long as the age that separates *Hamlet* from Milton's *Poems* of 1645, or *Lyrical Ballads* from *Martin Chuzzlewit*. That is no small bite, and it goes without saying that I have bitten off more than I should ever wish to swallow or even chew. Perhaps, when the chronicle of the age is told at due length and in all its fullness, the perspectives will have changed, and few enough of my judgements will stand. So be it. This is an interim report and no more. But at least something has been set in motion and a start made.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

British literature since the war has been wonderfully served, and in astonishingly quick time, by reference-books and studies. Two works of reference deserve special tribute: I. R. Willison, *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature volume 4: 1900–50* (1972), which deals with writers of the British Isles established by 1950 and their secondary materials; and David C. Sutton, *Location Register of Twentieth-Century English Literary Manuscripts and Letters*, 2 vols (1988), published by the British Library.

For the rest I can give only brief and passing thanks here to a medley of books that have helped in various ways beyond the scope of individual chapters, and not only in literary ways. The fourth volume of George Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* (1968), is a literary chronicle of 1945–50 composed at the time; while Bernard Levin, *The Pendulum Years* (1970), deals combatively with the 1960s. *Age of Austerity 1945–51*, edited by Michael Sissons and Philip French (1963), assembles essays on the Attlee period; *Declaration*, edited by Tom Maschler (1957), essays by Angry Young Writers of the 1950s including John Osborne and Colin

Wilson, to be answered by Anthony Hartley in *A State of England* (1963). Meanwhile Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (1962, revised 1983), is a dissection of politics and society in post-war years; and Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (1970), debates some of the new dilemmas of British fiction.

That is to scratch the surface, and it deals only with what one may happen to have read. Reading is after all only a part of a literary life, and not always the greatest part; and my debt to theatre-visits and to conversations with authors, and about them, exceeds (I suspect) even my debt to books and periodicals. But then when it comes to conversation, and the maturing fruits of conversation, I do not begin to understand how to acknowledge what I owe, or to whom. At least, however, I know how much I owe to Miss Josephine Richardson, who typed; to E. E. Duncan-Jones; and to the dedicatee, with whom I have shared a memorable Cambridge seminar on the literature of the twentieth century.

GEORGE WATSON

*You are a curious people: . . . conscious, as you walk in the sun,
of the length or shortness of the shadows that you cast.*

Paul Scott, *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966)

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1

Crusoe's Island

The image of the island is to be found and cherished, above all, in the stories it has told about itself, and perhaps believed of itself, for nearly half a century since it emerged into the troubled and hungry peace of 1945.

It is an image, by and large, that coheres and satisfies. Crusoe's fabled isle contained all he needed to sustain life – given, that is, that he had rescued so much of use from the wreck, not forgetting a Bible; and Defoe's most compelling point was that the island is a self-sufficient place to anyone who can bring courage to the task of living in it, along with an inherited faith and a few tools. Britain since 1945 has proved much like that, though not altogether like that. It brought ashore from the near-disaster of Hitler's war the survivals of a long literary past, including the longest of all theatrical traditions in human history, and found some surprisingly untraditional uses for them, as Crusoe once did for his tool-kit: most notably the fictional realism that Defoe's novel about a marooned sailor, in 1719, once made the inspiration of all Europe. It has lived, among other things, a life of intricate self-contemplation, rather like Crusoe keeping calendar of the days and weeks and faithfully observing in solitude the ancient usages of his tribe. As one of its authors and artists, a London Welshman, once remarked, Britain is 'necessarily insular',¹ as if its bordering of ocean were somehow intrinsic to it and essential to its whole being. It has watched its own health, too, both physical and spiritual, with an attentive and critical self-reverence. It has regarded itself

solemnly, satirically, whimsically, respectfully. And an age of empire past, it has waited for the world to come to it.

No vain hope, as it happens, for (as to Crusoe) the world came. It is doubtful if, even in the nineteenth century, the power of the British literary mind over the earth has ever been greater than in the late twentieth century. Its language, after 1945, suddenly became the *lingua franca* of the world – the first mankind has ever known – and more than half of the world's mail, it is said, is now in English. Its theatre, since the mid 1950s, has been widely acknowledged the world's wonder. Its fiction is vast, and vastly translated. Its journalism and its polemical tradition, whether in politics or in the arts, is unignorable, its broadcasting the world's delight. Only its poetry, composed in a minor key, is (for better or worse) widely disregarded. In a post-imperial age it has shown a vitality more than sufficient to live to itself.

That self-sufficiency is literary; and literature, it seems clear, easily outpaces most other national endeavours. In no other respect is Britain effectively insular. Its economy, as a world trader, is sensitive to every trade wind that blows. Its defence has been largely the concern of other powers since the fall of Singapore in 1942; and the British independent nuclear deterrent is no more than a phrase, since it is not independent and, as the Falklands crisis of 1982 showed, it does not deter. Its policies, domestic and foreign – not least its tardy entry into the European Community in January 1973 – have been largely a belated reaction to the original achievements of others. Its political system is antiquated, compared with its neighbours, and it enjoys in free Europe the melancholy distinction of boasting no government since the war to represent the majority will. Its public welfare, heralded as a prospect unique on earth when Parliament accepted the Beveridge report in 1943,

was in relative decline as early as the 1950s before its continental rivals; its industrial growth so slow that by the 1970s it was the poorest member of the Community, as it then was, excepting only Ireland and Italy.

Its literary pre-eminence, then, is extraordinary: not just in its sudden and easy victory over such historical rivals as France and the United States but in itself. Britain annually publishes three times as many titles, relative to population, as the United States; and most books published in Britain sell abroad, if calculated as to copies. European cities receive its acting companies as theatrical revelations, never questioning that London is the theatre-capital of the world. It was not always so, even in recollection. And all that is utterly unlike the slow decline of many of its services and manufactures, and utterly unlike the endless, indecisive bickering of politicians elected on minority votes and representing, all too often, the declining powers of sectional interests in unions and industry.

The sufficiency of British literature is almost as remarkable if contrasted with the other arts. London is the great city of art auctions, with New York; but it has never in this century rivalled Paris or New York as a place for painters and sculptors to live in. Since Edward Elgar's first symphony in 1908, British music has enjoyed its greatest age; but in international reputation it has made Britain little more than one musical nation among many. The British film, intermittently lively as a creative form, has seldom contrived to free itself, for long, of a humiliating dependence on foreign capital. Broadcasting is pre-eminent, at least in the ever-creative medium of radio; but television borrows from abroad as much as it creates at home. The Crusoe syndrome is largely confined to the printed book, then, and in part to theatre. In most other matters, since 1945, Britain has been effectively a dependent state, whether in peace or

in war, and the dominance of British fiction across the world is unmatched by almost everything else, though some might hopefully seek exceptions in education, broadcasting and financial services like marine insurance.

The Crusoe syndrome, as I have dared to call it, is nowhere absolute, and British literature since 1945 has succumbed to occasional, and occasionally catastrophic, influences from outside itself. In 1955 London theatre saw Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, a play composed first in French and later in English by a detribalised Irishman living in Paris, and theatrical minimalism was suddenly the rage. On 1 January of that year Kenneth Tynan, then its most eminent drama critic, saw Bertolt Brecht's *Mutter Courage* in Paris, and portentously told his wife 'I am a Marxist'² – initiating a period of left-wing licence-to-bore almost as deadly as James Bond's licence-to-kill. The 1970s saw a brief vogue of denying the referentiality of language, when the jargon of *la nouvelle critique* was earnestly borrowed from Paris by advanced spirits, and novels for a time were called texts and denied social significance. There have been attacks from within, too, on the allegedly crippling tradition of British gentility in poetry and fiction, demands for a more Hegelian style in Anglo-Saxon philosophy, for French critical strategies, and for American fictional tolerance of the unmentionable. No forgotten outcast on a remote island ever had to put up with anything like this. The historian of the new Elizabethan age that began with the death of George VI in February 1952 would dutifully record the passing enthusiasms of the age along with its artistic victories. Britain is an island, but it is not culturally isolated. To be an island is to be exposed to the world, after all, not protected from it, and there is no keeping of foreign fashions out of London. I hope to have done justice to some of these