

MACMILLAN STUDIES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY LITERATURE

· LINDA M. SHIRES ·  
**BRITISH POETRY  
OF THE SECOND  
WORLD WAR**



# BRITISH POETRY OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Linda M. Shires

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MACMILLAN

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First published 1985 by  
THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD  
London and Basingstoke  
Companies and representatives  
throughout the world

Typeset by  
Wessex Typesetters Ltd  
Frome, Somerset

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Shires, Linda

British poetry of the Second World War.

—(Macmillan studies in twentieth-century  
literature)

1. English poetry—20th century—History  
and criticism    2. World War, 1939–1945  
—Poetry

I. Title

821'.912'09358

PR605.W3

ISBN 0-333-36949-1

*For Helen E. Shires  
and  
in memory of Philip M. Shires*

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# Acknowledgements

My indebtedness to others is wide and deep. Without a Harold W. Dodds Fellowship and travel grants from Princeton University, I could not have begun the research necessary for this book. I owe warm thanks to the Reference Department and Rare Books Division of the Princeton University Firestone Library and to staffs of the following collections: The British Library, the Bodleian Library, and the University of London Periodicals Division.

I would like to thank the following Oxford scholars for their excellent advice: Christopher Butler, Valentine Cunningham and Lyndall Gordon. Among the British poets and editors who so kindly gave of their time to meet with me, I owe the greatest debts to: Dannie Abse, the late G. S. Fraser, Roy Fuller, John Lehmann, Michael Meyer, Peter Porter, Howard Sergeant, John Heath-Stubbs and Julian Symons. For answering specific inquiries, I would like to express appreciation to Roger Bowen of the University of Arizona, Gordon Phillips of the (London) *Times* archives, John Gross, then Editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Donald Davie, Philip Larkin, Gavin Ewart and Derek Stanford.

Samuel P. Hynes and A. Walton Litz of Princeton University carefully read this manuscript at various stages of its growth and offered invaluable suggestions for its improvement.

I am happy to have the opportunity to thank a group of scholars and friends who showed continued interest in the progress of this book and whose generosity proved extraordinary: Steven Cohan, Jean Howard, Anne Leugers, Katherine Oakley, Mark Patterson, Katrina Wingfield and Constance Wright. In addition to the great debt to my parents, which I acknowledge in the dedication, I am chiefly indebted to U. C. Knoepfelmacher, who stood beside me from the beginning.

A generous grant from the University Senate Research Committee of Syracuse University aided me in the last stages of this project. To Marilyn Walden in Princeton and to Jean Rice in

Syracuse – my sincere thanks for the final preparation of the manuscript. Finally, the editorial pains taken by Julia Steward have made it a privilege to work with Macmillan.

L.M.S.

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Grateful acknowledgement is also made for the photograph and sketches reproduced on pages 114, 128 and 134, these are reprinted from *Keith Douglas, A Biography* by Desmond Graham (1974) by kind permission of Oxford University Press and Desmond Graham.

# Preface

It is hard to believe that a decade of poetry could be summarily dismissed as a blackout period for art; yet this is still the generally-held attitude towards the 1940s. A myth about this poetic period flourishing in England and America runs as follows: during the war and post-war years, it was impossible to create poems with a keen intelligence, a clear head or a direct voice. John Press has noted the common opinion of the decade as a time in which all sound poetic values were 'debauched, when fecund images proliferated in surrealist luxuriance'.<sup>1</sup> Coherent poetic structures were abandoned or lost in a punch-drunk Apocalyptic fervour and wartime hysteria. The 1940s have been allocated a prime spot in the literary pigeon-hole labelled 'Hallucinatory/Third rate'. Perhaps no modern decade has been stereotyped so unfairly.

We view the 1940s through the distorted lenses of the 1950s poets and critics, many of whom were connected directly with the Movement. Their stereotype, consisting of misapprehensions that have been sustained by major critics up to this day, originally was an act of dissociation and self-assertion. According to their reduction, the only poets writing during the 1940s were Surrealists and Apocalyptics; these poets followed directly on the heels of Auden; and it was not until the Movement that genuine 'poetry' returned.

The Movement and others not associated with it directly distorted the previous decade when they chose the Apocalyptics (a group headed by Henry Treece and J. F. Hendry) and Dylan Thomas to typify the poetry of the period. The romantic Apocalyptics with their cannon and firework display of images and the inferior quality of even their best work stood out as a prime target. Yet no single group, and least of all this one, could be called representative of the 1940s. Furthermore, when they dismissed all poets of the 1940s along with Thomas as 'romantic scribblers',<sup>2</sup> they ignored the best poets of the war years who

deserve re-evaluation. Poets such as Henry Reed, Roy Fuller, G. S. Fraser, Keith Douglas and Alun Lewis hardly fit the label of wild irrationalists.

There has been a general reluctance to examine this decade seriously. Rather, the clichés about the 1940s have been maintained by critics decades later. In his influential essay 'Beyond the Gentility Principle',<sup>3</sup> A. Alvarez reduces the poetry of the 1940s to a reaction against the 1930s. In his over-simplification, he sees the intelligent socio-political poetry of W. H. Auden simply replaced by the disjointed ramblings of Dylan Thomas. His opinions would have been more persuasive if he had dealt with and dismissed the variety of poetic voices or more forcefully illustrated their weaknesses in light of strengths. Instead, he downgrades the decade as a time when poets, for the most part, 'kiss meaning goodbye'.

Kenneth Allott too, in his *Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (1950/62), falsely represents the 1940s. Allott's death in 1973 forbade any more revisions of text or introduction; yet the publishers let Allott's 1950 edition stand unchanged for twelve years until they reprinted the volume with revisions. In 1962 Allott frankly admitted his preference for Graves, Eliot, Auden, Yeats, Larkin and Davie. He declared that if he had had more space, he would have included additional poems of Davie, Larkin, Kinsella, Gunn, Tomlinson, Amis and Hughes. It is significant that in this list of would-be inclusions, there is no important figure from the forties. It seems odd that Keith Douglas, the best of the Second World War poets, finds no place here.

The fifties poets and critics and others prolonging the acceptance of a forties myth actually concentrated on the quantity of bad poetry written then. Or, even more narrowly, they chose the poetry of 1945–50 as representative; but there are two distinct periods in the decade, war and post-war, which should not be confused. This decade had the peculiar distinction of seeing a generation of poets split in half by cultural crisis instead of welded together by external events. Thus the Movement poets – Philip Larkin, John Wain, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings and others – who were born in the same years as the major war poets flowered not in the 1940s but in the early 1950s. In between the departure of W. H. Auden from England and the publicity campaign of the Movement in the early fifties, the schoolfellows of Larkin, Wain and Davie turned towards a war they could not escape. After the

war, social readjustment, paper shortages, and a general intellectual depression shifted attention to an older generation of poets. In the years from 1945–50, Kathleen Raine, Vernon Watkins, George Barker and others regained prominence. Their metaphysical and religious poetry is often erroneously linked with the Apocalyptics who flourished in the 1930s and early 1940s while the poets of World War Two remain ignored.

At a time when the poet's personal identity was severely threatened, when fables and myths were helpless against the reality of Nazi armies and gas chambers, there were poets who remained articulate and careful observers. Thirties poetry has been praised for its objectivity, but the early forties poetry can boast of an objectivity as well. G. S. Fraser, for instance, based in Cairo, writes of his English home and his adopted country with lucid concreteness. His personal landscapes are rooted in facts. The best poetry of the period did not succumb to ornamental falsity, but is characterized by intellectual honesty in the face of disaster and depression. Henry Reed wrote the epigraph for this generation of poets: 'Things may not be the same again; and we must fight/Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping something alive.'

This study views the 1940s historically and concentrates on the younger generation. I do not chart the development or divergent paths of the Auden group: Day Lewis, Spender, MacNeice and Auden. I do not underestimate Auden's influence on British poetry after 1939, but it is not part of my subject. Nor do I emphasize the work of older poets such as Robert Graves or T. S. Eliot. Edith Sitwell, also of an older generation, does not find space here, nor do I treat the period of 1945–50 extensively. I mention it as background to a brief discussion of the Movement's success. My primary concern has been to reconstruct the early forties – its moods and themes – and to discover the various voices and idioms which made up the poetry scene at home and abroad. I have been interested in emphasizing the problem of order and disorder in the poet's world and in his creations during a time of crisis and in exploring the influence of war on post-war poetry.

I would like to add a word about terminology. There was a persistent habit among poets and critics during the 1940s and 1950s of using *romantic* and *Romantic* interchangeably. Most often they are referring to a special temper of mind in which emotion or imagination seems to triumph over formal considerations, not to

the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century. Similarly, when they refer to *metaphysical*, they generally mean speculative or philosophically-oriented poetry, not specifically the Metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century. I have followed them in their use of this terminology.

## NOTES

1. John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 230.
2. John Wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts', *Penguin New Writing* 40 (1950) p. 127.
3. A. Alvarez, 'Beyond the Gentility Principle', *Beyond All This Fiddle* (London: Allen Lane, 1968) pp. 35-6. Also see Geoffrey Grigson, *Poetry of the Present* (London: Phoenix House, 1949) p. 23, and A. Alvarez, 'Poetry of the Fifties: in England,' *International Literary Annual* #1, 1958 (New York: Criterion Books, 1959) p. 98.

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# 1 Endings and Beginnings

## I

'They were all caught and caged; prisoners; watching a spectacle. Nothing happened. The tick of the machine was maddening.' So Virginia Woolf describes the members of the audience at the pageant presentation in her last novel: *Between the Acts*. The spectators represent both the stupefied British public on the eve of war watching the drama of history unfold before them, and playgoers awaiting the transformation of reality into art. Written in 1939–40 and published posthumously in 1941, *Between the Acts* is one of the finest recreations in literature of that transitional period between the 1930s and the 1940s. It captures a particular mixed mood of nostalgia, stasis, terror, and a slim hope for a future – in life or art.

In September of 1939 Virginia Woolf, like many other artists, felt herself on a voyage to nowhere. 'The Hepworths came on Monday', she recorded in her diary.<sup>1</sup> 'Rather like a sea voyage. Forced conversation. Boredom. All meaning has run out of everything. . . . Emptiness.' She tried on September 11 to *anchor* her mind with close work – translating Theophrastus from the original Greek. The experience of war – standing at the edge of it, living through it – was like being at sea on a raft or a liner to a surprise port, or to no port. Like the ocean itself, this widespread war meant danger and possible death as well as adventure. 'War moved', wrote Elizabeth Bowen in her novel *The Heat of the Day*, 'from the horizon to the map'; unlike World War One, it was uncontainable.<sup>2</sup>

It was certainly uncontainable by the old poetic formulae. And in retrospect, there is something especially dramatic about that turning-point year, 1939. By the end of the 1930s, the Auden generation had turned away from social to more personal interests. Autobiography became one of their main forms and a chief element in their work, directly as in Isherwood's *Lions and*

*Shadows* and Spender's 1939 *September Journal*, or indirectly as in the personal statements in MacNeice's *Modern Poetry* (1938).<sup>3</sup> At the end of the decade, these writers were concerned with ordering and structuring statements about themselves. They were preparing, in a sense, the burial tombs of their old selves. It is highly significant that, as Tolley reports, 'Nearly all the important poets of the period produced a volume of poetry in 1939 or 1940 – volumes that often had a valedictory quality, and were certainly the final collections of poetry for the thirties'.<sup>4</sup>

The departure of Auden and Isherwood to America in January 1939 was also symbolic of the end of an era. Auden's leaving, in particular, was resented strongly by certain members of the literary establishment who now felt abandoned by an irreplaceable leader. Yet the view that he *betrayed* his country or his fellow-poets by leaving England in time of crisis is exaggerated and unnecessarily harsh. And although it appears that the nerve of the thirties poetry went dead when Auden left, such linking is an oversimplification. Auden was not running away; he was still admired and respected by some, if not all, of the middle-class establishment. Most likely, several reasons lay behind his decision to go to the United States and settle there. He was disillusioned politically; he had lost faith in his own heroism – that is, he felt overfêted as a leader in the literary circles; and he urgently desired more privacy. America could allow him various freedoms, including greater anonymity and a more private sexual life, which England could no longer so easily provide. His poem 'September 1, 1939', written from New York City, does not proclaim retreat and defeat, as Hewison partly claims.<sup>5</sup> Its title bears witness to confrontation with events; its sentiments stem from disillusionment but not hopelessness; yet its wisdom is that which distance and objectivity afford. Auden does not abandon all hope, only the *clever* hopes of a decade which he feels was not intellectually honest with itself. His feelings are not those of defeat but are stronger ones – fear and anger – which prompt him to enter the fray again but with different weapons. 'I and the public know/What all schoolchildren learn/Those to whom evil is done/Do evil in return.' 'We must love one another or die.' Auden eventually cut the eighth stanza from the text, a stanza which defines the *lie* of a morally and intellectually dishonest generation:



The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual Man-in-the-street,  
The lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky;  
There is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police,  
We must love one another or die.

Dismissing Authority, State, and class structures, Auden terms the beliefs of his generation lies. The Second World War, in his view, was engendered to punish mankind for moral blindness in the politically-oriented thirties. Not only does Auden shift his allegiance to individual morality, but he also gives final warning to the society he once hoped to change. In a society harbouring good and evil elements, he says, men must compromise to find common boundaries. Society must unite in this way or it will fall into anarchy; the poet will now help to 'Undo the folded lie', but he will not be actively engaged politically.

The growing loss of faith in a thirties idealism; the deaths of two brilliant men in 1939, Yeats and Freud; the war in Spain and the mounting power of Hitler and Mussolini; the pessimistic sense of failure which crept into the consciousness of the general public; Auden's and Isherwood's departure; the declaration of war in autumn, 1939 – all these facts create an overwhelming sense of an ending. One of the briefer obituaries to the greatest hopes of the thirties poets was written by Randall Swingler in *Our Time* (May 1941). There he hoisted the coffin of the Auden generation into the grave:

The war has put an end to that literary generation. All their fantasies have been outdone by the reality. Auden's conspiracies, legendary plots, amazing assaults upon social life, look silly and childish now before the blatant conspiracies and villainies of real politics. Nothing is left of their imaginings but the twilight, peopled by the ghosts of literary values long defunct. . . .

Perhaps the strongest statement in support of this sealing off of the thirties is made in MacNeice's introduction to his *Collected Poems*