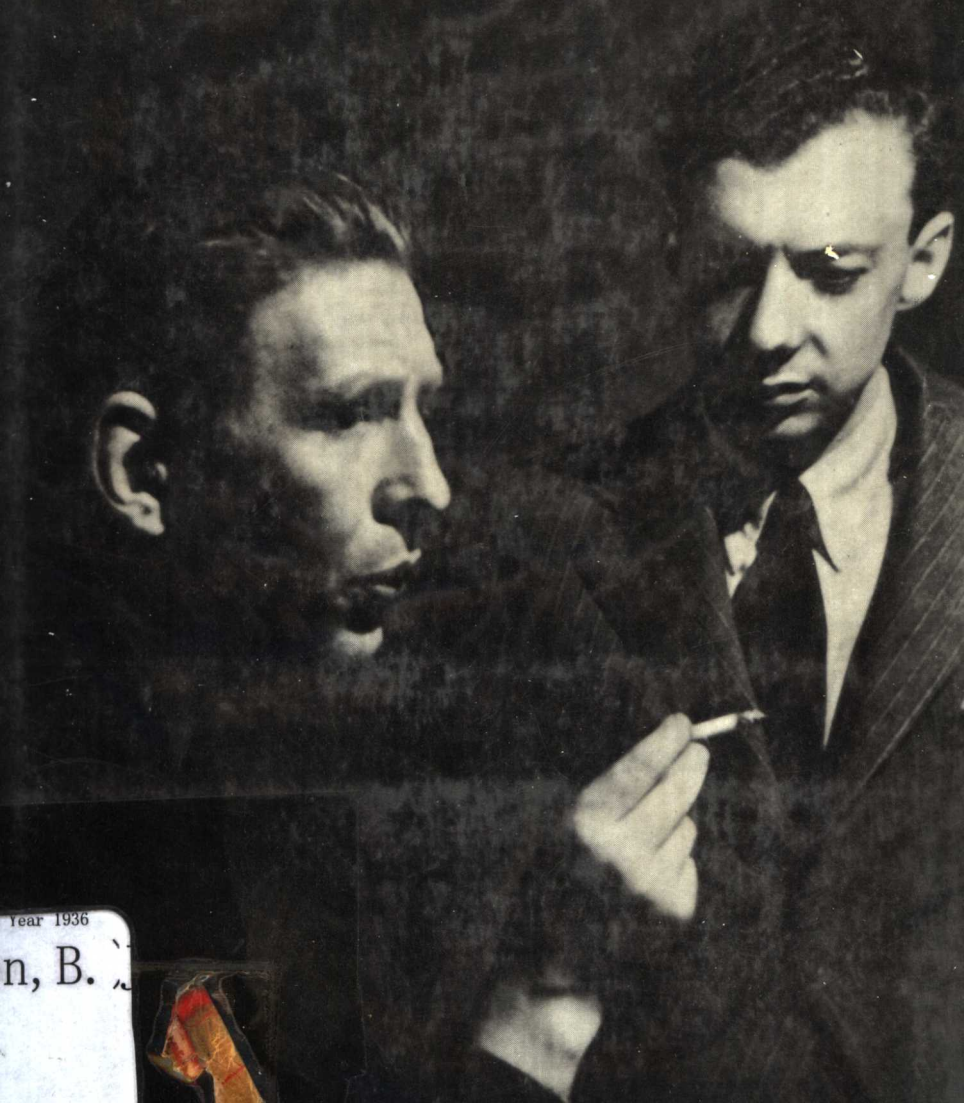


DONALD MITCHELL

*Britten & Auden  
in the Thirties*



Year 1936  
n, B. 2



**BRITTEN AND AUDEN IN THE  
THIRTIES: The Year 1936**

*Published by Faber & Faber*

**THE T. S. ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURES**

*Delivered at the University of Kent at Canterbury*

SECONDARY WORLDS by W. H. Auden: 1967

RELIGION AND LITERATURE by Helen Gardner: 1968

THE SUSPECTING GLANCE by Conor Cruise O'Brien: 1969

IN BLUEBEARD'S CASTLE by George Steiner: 1970

ULYSSES ON THE LIFFEY by Richard Ellmann: 1971

THIEVES OF FIRE by Denis Donoghue: 1972

THE CLASSIC by Frank Kermode: 1973

JOYCE'S VOICES by Hugh Kenner: 1975

THE POLITICS OF IMPERFECTION by Anthony Quinton: 1976

BRITTEN AND AUDEN IN THE THIRTIES: THE YEAR 1936

by Donald Mitchell: 1979

*by the same author*

THE LANGUAGE OF MODERN MUSIC

THE MOZART COMPANION

with H. C. Robbins Landon

GUSTAV MAHLER: MEMORIES AND LETTERS

by Alma Mahler

Edited by Donald Mitchell

Translated by Basil Creighton

Third Edition further enlarged

with a new Appendix and Chronology

by Knud Martner and Donald Mitchell

GUSTAV MAHLER: THE EARLY YEARS

Second Edition revised and edited with a new Appendix

by Paul Banks and David Matthews

GUSTAV MAHLER: THE WUNDERHORN YEARS

BENJAMIN BRITTEN: A COMMENTARY ON HIS WORKS

with Hans Keller

BENJAMIN BRITTEN 1913-1976: PICTURES FROM A LIFE

with John Evans

# BRITTEN AND AUDEN IN THE THIRTIES: The Year 1936

*The T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures delivered at the  
University of Kent at Canterbury in November 1979*

*by*

DONALD MITCHELL

FABER AND FABER      London and Boston

*First published in 1981  
by Faber and Faber Limited  
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU  
Printed in Great Britain by  
Lowe & Brydone Printers Limited, Thetford, Norfolk  
All rights reserved*

© Donald Mitchell 1981

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Mitchell, Donald

Britten and Auden in the thirties. – (The T. S. Eliot memorial lectures).

1. Britten, Benjamin, *Baron Britten*
  2. Composers – England – Biography
  3. Auden, Wystan Hugh
  4. Poets, English – 20th century – Biography
  5. Great Britain – Civilization – 20th century
- I. Title II. Series

780'.92'4      ML410.B853

ISBN 0-571-11715-5

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>page</i> 11
<i>Preface</i>	13
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	17
I. Our Hunting Fathers: Abroad and at Home	19
<i>Notes</i>	50
II. Sound-tracks	57
<i>Notes</i>	94
III. Schoolroom and Cabaret	103
<i>Notes</i>	125
IV. On this Island	133
<i>Notes</i>	160
<i>Index</i>	171





*For Isador, Joan and Jane Caplan*



# Illustrations

## *Within the text*

1 Britten's diary: 1 January 1936	page 18
2 Manuscript sketch: 'Rats Away!' ( <i>Our Hunting Fathers</i> )	40
3 Britten's diary: 15 January 1936	56
4 Song sheet: <i>Pacifist March</i>	68-9
5 Manuscript: <i>Russian Funeral</i>	74-5
6 Manuscript: <i>Night Mail</i>	82
7 Britten's diary: 26 February 1937	102
8 Programme: <i>Up the garden path</i>	106
9 Manuscript: <i>F6 Blues</i>	123
10 Britten's diary: 8 January 1937	132

## *Between pages 96 and 97*

Benjamin Britten in the late thirties

W. H. Auden in the late thirties

Harry Watt

Stuart Legg

Alberto Cavalcanti

Basil Wright

Paul Rotha

John Grierson

*Night Mail*

*The Way to the Sea*

*Peace of Britain*

Britten with Sophie Wyss

Louis MacNeice, Hedli Anderson and Robert Speaight

*The Ascent of F6: The Climbers*

*The Ascent of F6: Mr and Mrs A*

Rupert Doone (in *Timon of Athens*)

W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood

W. H. Auden in 1968

Benjamin Britten in 1976



## Preface

Without the diaries Britten kept from 1928 to 1938, the Eliot Lectures for 1979 would have taken a very different shape. Because of the diaries, the composer is able to speak for himself, and I have not been sparing in my use of so basic a documentary source. I am grateful to my co-Executors of the Britten Estate for allowing me freedom to quote extensively from the diaries and for permission to use other source materials, both musical and literary. I have only minimally edited the quotations. Britten's spelling has been silently corrected except where a mis-spelling seems to make a point in its own right. His personal idiosyncrasies, e.g. the regular use of the ampersand, have been preserved.

I was happy, when scrutinizing the diaries, to come across this fragmentary entry for 5 January 1936 (a portion of the page, alas, has been torn out):

Listen to a fine broadcast of T. S. Eliot's [*Murder in the Cathedral*] in which Robert Speaight . . . chorus of women are most . . . this is a fine play . . . & moving poetry. . . .

That Britten turned to the setting of poems by T. S. Eliot in his later and last years is common knowledge; but here was evidence of an immediate and admiring response from Britten's early years. Perhaps less well-known is the fact that after Britten's heart surgery in 1973, one of the few poets he was able to read was Eliot, in whose work he found certainty, strength and fortitude. Thus Britten's positive feeling for Eliot's poetry was of long standing. It was entirely typical of him that so many years passed before he actually set any of Eliot's verse: not until 1971, when in January he completed his *Canticle IV: Journey of the Magi*. It was a poem he had long had in mind but he did not attempt the setting until he felt

himself ready to take on the challenge that Eliot's language represented.

I have no doubt at all that it would have given Britten particular pleasure to know that these lectures on his music in the thirties and his collaboration with W. H. Auden were to form part of a series dedicated to the annual honouring of a great poet's name. I was naturally conscious of the honour done me by asking me to deliver them, and I am glad to take this opportunity of expressing my warm thanks to the Master of Eliot College and the members of the Eliot Memorial Lectures Committee, not only for the invitation but for the generous welcome and hospitality offered me during the few days I spent on campus at the University of Kent at Canterbury in November 1979.

I must confess that I was somewhat daunted by recalling that it was Auden himself who was the first Eliot Lecturer; and I was further conscious of the fact that perhaps the topic itself — the thirties — would not have been much to his liking. However, as I remarked at the opening session, I had to hope for Auden's indulgence—or that he was engaged elsewhere on the evening in question: perhaps giving a lecture himself?

It is clear from my text, I think — though I would never have wished to conceal it in any way — that my account of the Britten–Auden relationship is necessarily seen through Britten's eyes and, more importantly, heard through the filter of his music. In the first stage of my investigation into 1936 I immersed myself in the music and was glad to find later that the intuitive deductions and interpretations I arrived at through my experience of it were confirmed by other forms of documentation and evidence.

However, although a certain element of one-sidedness undoubtedly remains, I — and my text — have greatly benefited from access to the typescript of Edward Mendelson's brilliant study, *Early Auden*, which will be published only shortly after this book appears. Professor Mendelson has most kindly not only allowed me to read his typescript but allowed me to quote from it in advance of its publication. I am much indebted to him and his publishers (in the UK, Faber & Faber; in the USA, The Viking Press) for this

unusual gesture of friendly scholarship which, I believe, supplies a fresh dimension to my text. It does something to redress the balance as well as proving a source of further illumination and clarification.

Two final points. First, although it was never my fortune to meet Auden, I felt on finishing this particular piece of work that I had come to know him; and what I had come to know gained not just my admiration (Auden's work had had that from me already, for many years) but a whole-hearted affection and respect. He must have been a marvellous presence, though on occasion he could also appear to his friends in the role of a self-appointed (albeit affectionate) prosecutor: witness the remarkable letter he addressed to Britten in 1942 and here published for the first time (see pp. 161–2).

Second, although in Peter Pears's wise words, 'the later meetings [between Britten and Auden] were uneasy. The relationship had changed. . . .', he does not fail to remind us that Britten remained 'full of admiration and gratitude for the earlier years'. It was those feelings that were uppermost, conspicuously so, when Britten—then striving to recover from his operation—heard of the memorial service for his old friend on 27 October 1973 in Christ Church, Oxford, at which the *Hymn to St Cecilia* had been performed. It was only then, I believe, that Auden's death suddenly became real to him. It seemed to me that the years of unease were erased, at least momentarily; that gratitude and affection surged back and accompanying them a very sharp sense that the loss was 'major / And final, final'.

My formal acknowledgements I make elsewhere. Here I have to thank those without whose skills and help the lectures would never have been given. My thanks must go first to Jill Burrows, who did so much to quarry the lectures out of a vast mass of material and also prepared them for publication in book form. Next I must thank Kathleen, my wife, who produced many useful suggestions for shaping the lectures and was a constant source of encouragement and good advice. John Evans was my invaluable assistant at the lectures themselves, which involved no small amount of technology. That everything ran so smoothly was due largely to him.

Rosamund Strode, of the Britten-Pears Library, has been patient in answering my endless queries far beyond the call of duty or indeed friendship. The present text owes much to her unrivalled knowledge of the archive at Aldeburgh. Finally a special word of thanks to Paul Rotha, who helped to make possible the use of excerpts from two of his films, *Peace of Britain* and *The Way to the Sea*, thus completing the trinity of media—sound, word and sight — through which my collaborators and I attempted to explore the year 1936, and to all of which spheres our composer and poet might be thought to have made pioneering and influential contributions to the making of the thirties.

London, April 1980

D. M.



# Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgements are due to Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd. for the music examples from the following works by Benjamin Britten: *Ballad of Heroes*, Op. 14; *On this Island*, Op. 11; *Our Hunting Fathers*, Op. 8; and 'Underneath the abject willow'; to Faber Music Ltd. for the music examples from *Death in Venice*, Op. 88; *Russian Funeral*; and 'Tell me the truth about love'; to the Peace Pledge Union for *Pacifist March*; and to the Britten Estate for music examples from the incidental music to *King Arthur* and *Pageant of Empire*. The illustrations from Britten's MS scores of *F6 Blues*, *Night Mail*, *Our Hunting Fathers* and *Russian Funeral* are © The Britten Estate and not to be reproduced without written permission.

The unpublished passages from W. H. Auden's libretto for the 1941 version of *Paul Bunyan* (pp. 136–8) and the end commentary from the Strand film *The Way to the Sea* (pp. 90–3) are reproduced by kind permission of Edward Mendelson, William Meredith and Monroe K. Spears, executors of the Estate of W. H. Auden, and the letter from W. H. Auden to Benjamin Britten (pp. 161–2) is reproduced by permission of the Auden Estate and the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tildon Foundations. Quotations from the published works of W. H. Auden are reproduced by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd. All other quotations and references are fully acknowledged in the text.

I am grateful to the following individuals and organizations who have kindly provided photographs: Mrs A. Gyde, Robert Medley, Sir Peter Pears CBE, Mrs C. E. Welford, the BBC, the Britten Estate, Faber & Faber Ltd., the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, the National Film Archive.

These Lectures first appeared in part in the *Times Literary Supplement* (15 February 1980).