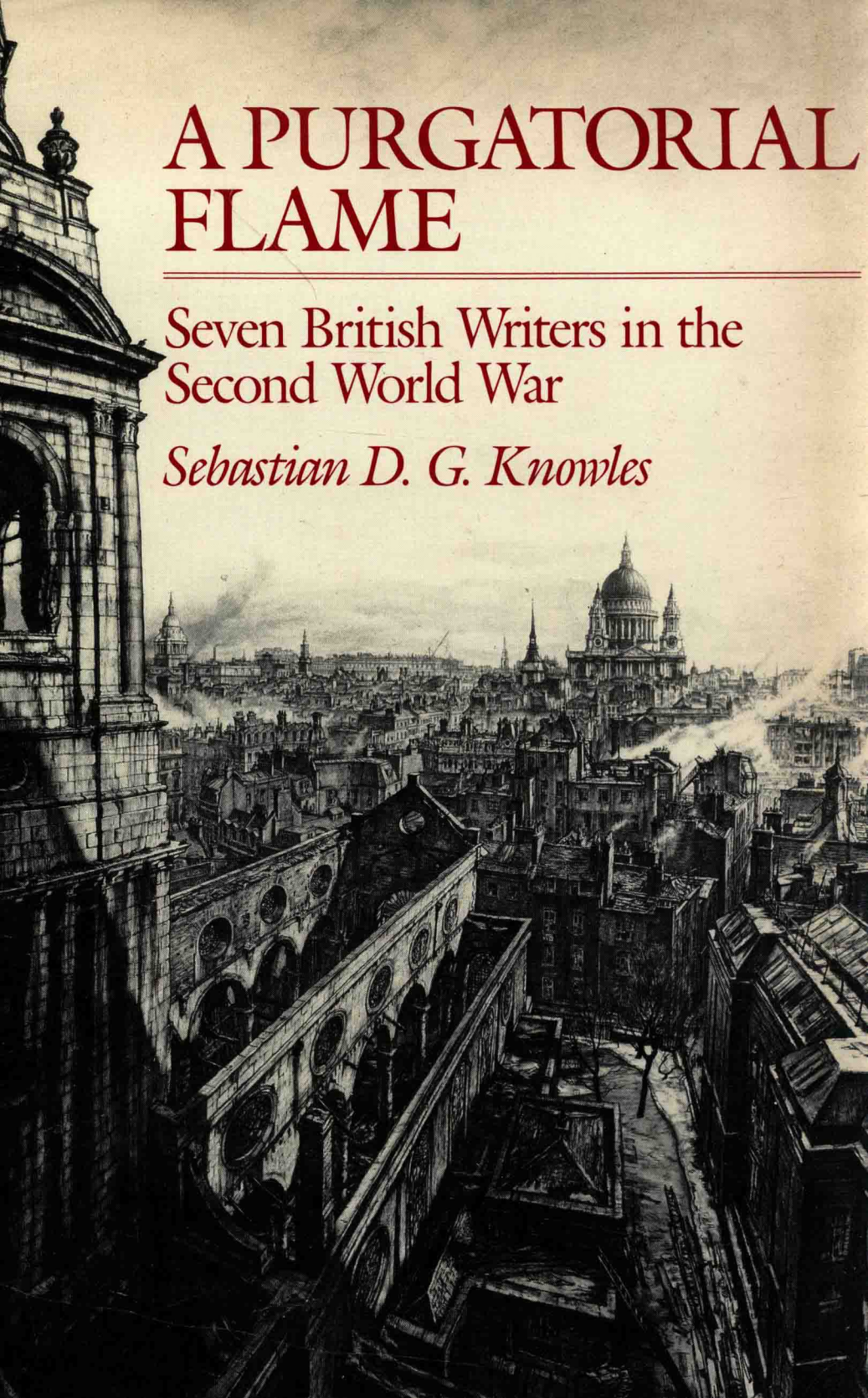
A PURGATORIAL FLAME

Seven British Writers in the Second World War

Sebastian D. G. Knowles



A Purgatorial Flame

Seven British Writers in the Second World War

Sebastian D. G. Knowles

University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia

Jacket illustration: black-and-white copy of Sir Muirhead Bone's "St Bride's and the City after the Fire, 29 December, 1940." The original, in ink and chalk (LD 1076), hangs in the 2nd floor galleries of the Imperial War Museum. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum.

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to quote from published works. These are listed at the end of this volume, after the Index.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Knowles, Sebastian David Guy.
A purgatorial flame : seven British writers in the Second World War / Sebastian D.G. Knowles.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-8122-8213-2
1. English literature—20th century—History and criticism. 2. World War, 1939-1945—Literature and the war. 3. War in literature. I. Title.
PR478.W67K56 1990
820.9'358'09044—dc20 -89-25114
CIP

Acknowledgments

Never has so little owed so much to so many. This book would have been impossible without the assistance of the following people. Thanks to John Campbell, for a good word at the right time, to Mike Davis, for information on certain theological matters, to Maria DiBattista, for all her help, especially on Woolf, to Margaret Doody, for all the detective fiction, to Lady Eccles-Hyde, for a summer's research in Italy, to Paul Fussell, for comments on the first chapter, to John Gross, for pointers on a train, to Samuel Hynes, for reading the manuscript in partial form and for a conversation in a pub near the British Museum, to Ned Jackson, for analogies to everything, to Bart Kahr, for *The War Artists*, and to Walt Litz, who has done so much for me and for this book that I shall bring this sentence to a close. To Leigh Barrows, for not running out of gas, to Scott Leonard, for proofreading the final text, to Mary and Anne Manson, for help with chapters II and VII respectively, to Margarita, for the daily crossword, to Neil, because I said I would, to Floyd Romesberg, for train spotting, to Dave Weber, computer guru, and to my parents, *sine quibus non* as always.

Though none of what follows has been published before, various parts of this manuscript have been aired at the European Seminars at Syracuse, the Siena College Conferences on World War II, the T. S. Eliot Centennial Conference at Orono, Princeton's Dunwalke, and conferences in Boone, Denver, East Lansing, Oneonta, and Philadelphia. Thanks to all those met along these ways, especially to Gordon Beadle, Vincent Sherry, Carroll Terrell, and Walter Ullmann, whose advice and encouragement have made this a much better book than I could have written myself.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the College of Humanities and the Office of Research and Graduate Studies at the Ohio State University, and the professional assistance of the staff of the University of Pennsylvania Press, especially Alison Anderson and Amanda Boyask.

For millions now life is steeped in flame--often indeed a literal flame. Most of the peoples of Europe have passed, or are passing, through a very furnace of adversity. We pray that the flames kindled by the fury of the oppressor may be transmuted into a fire like that which guarded the secret of happiness on Dante's mountain.

Lucy Redpath, *Dante and the Present War*

Preface: Where the War Poets Were

> I wished the effect of the whole to be Purgatorial which is much more appropriate.
>
> Eliot.

In 1941, Tom Harrisson, one of the founders of Mass Observation, made an early assessment of British Second World War literature. He dismissed it all as completely unreadable:

> For two years, urged on by the editor of *Horizon*, I have read literally every book which has anything to do with the war, reportage, fiction or fantasy. Every month I have tried to sum up my curious learning into a report for *Horizon*. Month after month I have let the editor down. For I have become totally, immeasurably bogged, engrossed in bad reading.[1]

To reach this conclusion, Harrisson ploughed through Basil Woon's *Hell Came to London* (1941),* with its text "liberally bespattered with bomb noises: 'Whee-ee-eesh . . . bloo-oomp!' "[2] He learned to distinguish Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchison's enormously popular *The W Plan* (1939) from its sequel, *The V Plan* (1941), in which the Germans are defeated through the construction of a Channel tunnel. He suffered *The Death of Lord Haw-Haw* (1940) and *Poindexter Crashes the Fifth Column* (1941). Harrisson divided his reading into seven categories: evacuation novels, diaries, Dunkirk books, R.A.F. books, Blitz books, espionage books, and peace books. Taken together, the library of the literature of World War Two amounted to "a cataract of tripe."[3] Harrisson found only one book to recommend highly: Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941).

Not one of the works studied here could be said to rest on any of Harrisson's seven shelves. *Put Out More Flags* (1941) is no more an evacuation novel than *All Hallows' Eve* (1945) is a Blitz book. *Little Gidding*

*The first reference to every primary text cited is followed by the work's year of publication in parentheses. When the initial date of publication is misleading, the year of writing is substituted.

(1942) will be found to treat the air raids very differently from John Strachey's *Digging for Mrs Miller* (1941) or John Carstairs' *Whatho She Bumps!* (1941). Harrisson read novels, generally first efforts, that were prompted by the war. The modernists were writers before 1939; their writing responds to the war more by necessity than by design. In his introduction to *In Parenthesis* (1937), David Jones writes of the difference: "I did not intend this as a 'War Book'—it happens to be concerned with war."[4] Elizabeth Bowen makes the same distinction in her preface to *Ivy Gripped the Steps* (1946): "These are all wartime, none of them *war*, stories. There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it—for instance, air raids."[5] All wartime writing is "concerned with war." But for Waugh and Williams, for Woolf and Eliot, the subject is more than war: the second war is incorporated into the modernist field of vision as was the first.

Modernism did not end conveniently in 1939, to resume as Contemporary Literature in 1945. The editors of the otherwise very useful *Spatial Form in Narrative* betray this common perception:

> "Modernist" refers to works written between the end of the nineteenth century and World War II—works that are experimental and often involve spatial form. "Contemporary" designates a similar class of works written since World War II.[6]

The Second World War did not mark a hiatus in British literature; the progress of literary thought continued through into the forties. This study will center on the war work of seven British modernists: Woolf, MacNeice, Eliot, Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, and Waugh. None of the seven is generally considered a war writer, but all wrote their finest or most mature work under the shadow of the Second World War.*

Virginia Woolf was acutely aware of the coming war when she began *Between the Acts* in 1938, and the book was rewritten in wartime. MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*, written in the last months of 1938, is a warning of a future war as well as a valedictory to a dying present. In

*Only a handful of them are generally considered modernists. The argument that the modernist label is earned, and should not be so easily affixed to less celebrated writers like Louis MacNeice and Charles Williams, dies hard, and this book is trying to put it to rest. "Modernist" need not be a medal pinned to the chests of a changing pantheon of canonical illuminaries; the term may be allowed to embrace any author who falls into step with the march of twentieth-century literary ideas. If this book fails to bring modernism into the Second World War, it will not be because it restricts itself to the officers' mess.

Little Gidding, Eliot tries to make sense of the nonsense of the Blitz; the fantasies of the Inklings also transform the direct experience of war. Evelyn Waugh traces the progress of the war from the Munich conference to war's end in *Work Suspended* (1939), *Put Out More Flags* (1941), *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), and *Sword of Honour* (1952–1961). The following examination of these representative writers attempts to extend the compass of British modernism into World War Two.

Cyril Connolly, with Harrisson, would have found such a project patently absurd: for him the forties were "five years of total war and five more of recrimination and exhaustion during which the Modern Movement unobtrusively expired." W. W. Robson judged that "The 1940s were one of the worst periods of English literature." Randall Stevenson, in his very comprehensive study *The British Novel Since the Thirties*, quotes these disparagements as straw targets, in order to establish the presence of a literature of the Second World War.[7] Orwell consciously sets himself up as such a target in a 1941 letter to the *Partisan Review*:

> So far as I know, nothing of consequence is being written, except in fragmentary form, diaries and short sketches for instance. The best novels I have read during the past year were either American or translations of foreign books written several years earlier. There is much production of anti-war literature, but of a one-eyed irresponsible kind. There is nothing corresponding to the characteristic war books of 1914-18.[8]

Orwell exaggerates on three counts. First, his judgment in April 1941 is premature, cast before the publication of either Henry Green's *Caught* (1943) or Eliot's *Little Gidding*. Second, by April 1916 very little of consequence had been written either. And third, though Green and Eliot respond very differently to the war, they both respond as civilians. Orwell is quite deliberately looking in the wrong direction.

So, less deliberately but no less provocatively, was Fleet Street. Not long after the start of the war, the popular press began to drum up the notorious cry, "Where are the war poets?" Rarely has such a tiresome question encouraged such an illuminating response. Nothing was better calculated to goad the literary world into a spirited defense of its war work. As a *Horizon* manifesto put it: "*The Times* and other papers asked why this war produced no poets. The poets wrote essays on why they couldn't write poetry."[9] The hectoring reached a climax with an editorial in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 30 December 1939. "To the Poets of 1940" was a summons to literary arms: "It is for the poets to sound the trumpet

call."[10] The pages of London literary journals were soon covered with attempts to unfixe this *idée*. Spender and Graves discussed the subject in *The Listener*, Connolly and Waugh in *Horizon*, and Eliot in *Common Sense*. Keith Douglas wrote on the subject while stationed in Tunisia in 1943.* All provided separate explanations for the perceived decline in poetry during the war.

It is difficult to see why these arguments were necessary: the charge is easily denied. The Second World War was no less a literary war than its predecessor. The conventional depreciation of its poetry has never been justified; Linda Shires' *British Poetry of the Second World War* has laid that commonplace to rest. Not all of the poetry is as bad as A. A. Milne's war verse:

> I march along and march along and ask myself each day:
> If I should go and lose the war, then what will Mother say?
> The Sergeant will be cross and red, the Captain cross and pink,
> But all I ever ask myself is, What will Mother think?"

Catherine Reilly's indispensable "biobibliography," *English Poetry of the Second World War*, lists 2,679 poets, 831 from the armed forces.[12] Reilly concludes her introduction with a persuasive compromise:

> The poetry of the Second World War has not yet attracted as much literary and critical attention as that of the First World War but it is a popular misconception that the poetry of the second war is inferior to that of the first. A more accurate assessment would be that the First World War produced some outstanding poetry by a relatively small number of poets, while the Second World War produced a great deal more good poetry.[13]

Orwell's sweeping dismissal and Reilly's reappraisal of the literary output of the fighting forces share a common yardstick: both compare the present war to the past one. Throughout the Second World War, Douglas, Alun

*These six responses are as follows: Stephen Spender, "War Poetry in this War," *The Listener*, 26, 16 October 1941, 539; Robert Graves, "War Poetry in this War," *The Listener*, 26, 23 October 1941, 566; Cyril Connolly, "Comment," *Horizon*, III, #13 (January 1941), 5–7; [Evelyn Waugh], "Letter - Why Not War Writers?," *Horizon*, IV, #24 (December 1941), 437–38; T. S. Eliot, "Poetry in Wartime," *Common Sense*, XI, #10 (October 1942), 351; Keith Douglas, "Poets in This War," [May 1943], rpr. in *A Prose Miscellany*, comp. and ed., Desmond Graham, 117–20.

Lewis, Keyes, and others cannot escape the poetry of the First War. At the front, the poet struggles under the burden of World War One.

The Greater War shadowed an entire nation. Malcolm Muggeridge writes of the preparation for war at the end of *The Thirties*:

> Now old uniforms were brought out, put away long ago; old songs were remembered, thought to have been forgotten; old ways were resumed, old emotions experienced, old hopes revived. No new war was possible, so an old one would have to suffice. Out of the past, a ghost was summoned up, intervening years cancelled; out of the past, a corpse was disinterred.[14]

The diaries of 1938–39 are riddled with comparisons to August 1914. On the first of September 1938, Harold Nicolson fears that "we may get into the same mess as in 1914—namely, give the Czechs the impression that we shall fight for them, and the Germans the impression that we shall not."[15] A year later, his sense of *déjà vu* is more oppressive:

> It looks as if war will burst upon us tomorrow. Again that curious contrast with 3rd August 1914! Then we were excited by all these events and there was a sense of exhilaration. Today we are merely glum.[16]

Virginia Woolf's haunting entry for 28 August 1938 reads: "A single step—in Cheko Slovakia—like the Austrian Archduke in 1914 & again its 1914. Ding dong ding dong."[17] She reminds herself a month later to "Give the pre-war atmosphere" in her biography of Roger Fry: an atmosphere she experiences as well as recreates.[18]

Faced with a second war, the war poets do not dry up, they simply draw from old and half-empty wells. There were two separate wells of First World War poetry. Stephen Spender writes, in response to the admonition from the *Times Literary Supplement*, of the shallower well:

> At the beginning of the last war Rupert Brooke and others were 'trumpets singing to battle'. Why did not Rupert Brooke step forward 'young and golden-haired' this time? No doubt, in part, precisely because one had done so last time.[19]

Rupert Brooke is dead; there is little room for him in the Second World War. Neither is there much water in the deeper well. For many World War Two poets, the horror and the pity of war had already been expressed at its highest intensity, distilled to its most refined pitch. The First World War became an entirely original literary response to war. From the Bible

and Homer to Tennyson and Kipling, the poet had been on the side of the victors: war poetry was patriotic until the moment a literary country, such as Napoleonic France or Edwardian England, began to lose. On or about 1 July 1916, war poetry changed. Douglas writes of the change in "Poets in This War":

> Rupert Brooke, who might have seemed our ready made herald and bard, appeared superannuated in a moment and wandered away fittingly, from a literary point of view, to die in a region of dead heroes. Instead, arose Owen, to the sound of wheels crunching the bones of a man scarcely dead; Sassoon's tank lumbered into the music hall.[20]

"Poets in This War" continues to address the silencing influence of Owen and Sassoon on the Second World War poet:

> The poets who wrote so much and so well before the war, all over the world, found themselves silenced, or able to write on almost any subject but war. Why did all this happen? Why are there no poets like Owen and Sassoon who lived with the fighting troops and wrote of their experiences while they were enduring them?
>
> The reasons are psychological, literary, military and strategic, diverse. There are such poets, but they do not write. They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character. There are two reasons: hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great War that everyday in the battlefields of the western desert—and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well—their poems are illustrated. Almost all that a modern poet on active service would be inspired to write, would be tautological.[21]

Douglas' own debt is clearest in "Desert Flowers": "Living in a wide landscape are the flowers - / Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying."[22] Roy Fuller speaks of the First World War poets as begetters of the poets of the Second in "Another War": "Our fathers felt these things before / In another half-forgotten war."[23] Alun Lewis remembers Edward Thomas in an elegy to him, and in the closing lines of "All Day it has Rained . . . ": "Edward Thomas brooded long / On death and beauty—till a bullet stopped his song."[24] "Hell cannot be let loose twice": the poets actually fighting the war are keenly aware of this tautology.

The Auden circle draws from wells dug in a more recent war. For the poets of the Left, the old war is not World War One, but the war with

Spain. C. Day Lewis suggests this in the "Dedicatory Stanzas" to his 1940 translation of Virgil's *Georgics*. Day Lewis is especially irritated by Fleet Street's *ubi sunt*. He defends himself against the stale and weary cry in two separate poems, "Where are the War Poets?" and "Dedicatory Stanzas." "Where are the War Poets?" explains that his silence is a result of his distaste for propaganda:

> They who in folly or mere greed
> Enslaved religion, markets, laws,
> Borrow our language now and bid
> Us to speak up in freedom's cause.[25]

His earlier justification, in the stanzas dedicated to Spender, is more compelling:

> Where are the war poets? the fools inquire.
> We were the prophets of a changeable morning
> Who hoped for much but saw the clouds forewarning:
> We were at war, while they still played with fire
> And rigged the market for the ruin of man:
> Spain was a death to us, Munich a mourning.
> No wonder then if, like the pelican,
> We have turned inward for our iron ration,
> Tapping the vein and sole reserve of passion,
> Drawing from poetry's capital what we can.[26]

Here, the literary drought of the poets of the Left becomes attributable to the Spanish Civil War. Once again, the Second World War is too much like an earlier war.

Spender's response to the *Times Literary Supplement* presents this argument: "the poetry of the war of democracy versus fascism had already been written by English, French, Spanish, German and Italian émigré poets during the past five years, and particularly during the Spanish war."[27] Samuel Hynes comments:

> For the 'thirties generation, the battle had already been fought and lost; the final curtain had fallen on the tragedy of the decade, and what followed was not essentially a part of the drama. For the writers *as writers*, the appropriate response to the end of the 'thirties was silence, or a retrospective brooding over what had happened.[28]

The Spanish Civil War was the Auden circle's World War One; it was also their World War Two. The Spanish Civil War led to some of the group's best work, to "Spain, 1937" and to *Autumn Journal*. The poems of the Spanish war often eerily anticipate the coming world war. And after 1939, with the flight of Auden and the beginning of war, the circle broke.

As Douglas suggests, there were practical as well as psychological reasons for the apparent shortfall: "The reasons are psychological, literary, military and strategic, diverse." Trench warfare had been ideally suited for war poetry, with its long bouts of waiting, waiting to go over the top. With the collapse of the Maginot Line in 1940 came the collapse of trench warfare in the Western European theatre. France fell, as Churchill said, before a few thousand motor vehicles. Even if either side had ever wanted to see trenches again, tanks rendered them obsolete. Keith Douglas, himself a tank commander, underscores this new mobility as the chief difference between the wars: "there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, except its mobile character." The Second World War, with its quickly shifting regiments, its twenty-four-hour surveillance, and its virtually global scope, made quick heroes and destroyed poetry. The long transfixed stretches of time that the Great War had offered its poets all but disappeared.

Censorship also played a significant part. The second war was much more of a propaganda war: M.I.5 took to distinguishing between black, gray, and white propaganda according to the shades of truth in any public statement. One reason may have been that the Axis Powers weren't as good at propaganda. Another more searching reason lay in Chamberlain's sincere belief that pieces of paper could convince the Germans not to fight. He is reported to have said on one occasion during the Twilight War that "as soon as the Germans realize they cannot win, they will fold."[29] The Twilight War was Chamberlain's kind of war, fought with leaflets instead of bombs. Propaganda led to paranoia: the maintaining of a diary during military service was forbidden lest it should fall into enemy hands. The hundreds of letters Owen wrote to his mother before his death in 1918 simply would not have passed through the censors. The Imperial War Museum is full of small diaries written in microscopic hands by soldiers at the front and found upon them. To write anything at all was subversive; to write poetry in the sardonic, lacerative spirit of the first war was next to impossible.

There may be a sociological explanation for the relative absence of poetry from the lines. From Sir Walter Raleigh to Lord Tennyson, nine

out of every ten writers of poetry in Britain had been from the upper classes.* Fully a third of the poets writing from the front in the Second World War were from Oxbridge. But it is a comparatively small third.† In the second war poets simply did not sign up in such numbers. In 1914 the elite went eagerly to war, expecting a big show and a quick Waterloo. The aristocracy flocked in, full of dreams of Empire, under the spell of Rupert Brooke. A generation died. The Second World War found them more wary. Parents who had seen their families fall before the myth procured soft jobs in the Intelligence for their sons rather than sending them off into the Infantry. Many joined "the few," the R.A.F., where opportunities for individual heroism soon became much greater. Evelyn Waugh is, not unexpectedly, the most elegant expounder of this elitist argument. Ian Kilbannock rehearses it before Crouchback in *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955):

> 'Delightful fellows, heroes too, I dare say, but the Wrong Period. Last-war stuff, Guy. Went out with Rupert Brooke.'
>
> 'You find us poetic?'
>
> 'No,' said Ian, stopping in his path and turning to face Guy in the darkness. 'Perhaps not poetic, exactly, but Upper Class. Hopelessly upper class. You're the "Fine Flower of the Nation". You can't deny it and *it won't do*.'
>
> In the various stages of inebriation, facetiously itemized for centuries, the category, 'prophetically drunk', deserves a place.
>
> 'This is a People's War,' said Ian prophetically, 'and the People won't have poetry and they won't have flowers. Flowers stink. The upper classes are on the secret list. We want heroes of the people, to or for the people, by, with and from the people.'[30]

If British non-contemporary literature is written by an upper middle-class—and most of the writers studied here fall into this category, whether from Bloomsbury or Mayfair—then British literature stayed at home.

Eliot's response to the media's search for war poets raises a further practical point. His "Poetry in Wartime" is perhaps the most considered of all the poets' apologetics. Eliot separates war poetry into two familiar

*See Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's argument in *The Art of Writing*, quoted in the final chapter of *A Room of One's Own*: "It may seem a brutal thing to say, and it is a sad thing to say: but, as a matter of hard fact, the theory that poetical genius bloweth where it listeth, and equally in poor and rich, holds little truth" (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, III).

†Of the 831 poets writing from the lines, 513 were university educated, 355 at Oxbridge. Cf. Catherine Reilly, *English Poetry of the Second World War*, vii–ix.

wells: "We may mean patriotic poetry, that is to say poetry which expresses and stimulates pride in the military virtues of a people. Or we may be asking for poets to write poetry arising out of their experience of war."[31] Eliot contends that patriotic poetry is never especially good, that "There is no first-rate poem about the victory over the Armada, or the Battle of Trafalgar."[32] Regarding the poetry of experience, Eliot argues that the experience of modern war is primarily on a trivial level: "When these poets write about the war, it is mostly about some limited experience, even trivial experience."[33] Patric Dickinson, in his introduction to the quixotic anthology *Soldiers' Verse* (1945), agrees: "The Total War of 1939–45 has naturally produced very little war-poetry. For as the scope of war has enlarged the scope of poetry has diminished. The small incident engrosses the poet."[34] For Eliot, these trivial incidents include "cold, discomfort, or the boredom of waiting at an isolated post."[35] Waiting will be seen to occupy a central place in war literature on all fronts of the Second World War.

Eliot concludes, in a typically perverse application of Wordsworth's "recollected in tranquillity," that soldiers will be unable to assess the impact of the war until the war is over:

> [...] the bigger experiences need time, perhaps a long time, before we can make poetry of them. You cannot understand war—with the kind of understanding needed for writing poetry—or any other great experience while you are in the midst of it; you can only record small immediate observations. And when, after the war, the experience has become a part of a man's whole past, it is likely to bear fruit in something very different from what, during time of war, people call "war poetry."[36]

Keith Douglas argues almost precisely the same thing in Tunisia six months later. For Douglas, boredom and waiting are also the two great subjects of war poetry:

> The long inaction on all fronts was not inspiring; everyone was too used to inaction. Dunkirk was over almost before most people had rubbed the sleep out of their eyes; inaction, as far as most soldiers were concerned, began again. This produced, as it was bound to, an amount of loitering, fed-up poetry, vaguely relatable to some of Turner's poems 1914-1918.[37]

Again, the comparison with the poetry of the Great War. Douglas closes his argument, as Eliot does, with the same stress on reimagined experience: "Meanwhile the soldiers have not found anything new to say. Their ex-

periences they will not forget easily, and it seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after war is over."[38]

This delayed solution was unacceptable to the writers of *Horizon*'s manifesto: "At the beginning of the war, it was assumed that the function of the creative writer was to write a good book about the war . . . after the war. Experience of two years of war has shown to writers that their function is to write a good book about the war *now*."[39] *Horizon*'s call to immediate action was sounded by a host of luminous figures, including George Orwell, Stephen Spender, Alun Lewis, and Cyril Connolly. The group's solution was to establish an Official Group of War Writers. In the next issue of *Horizon*, an anonymous "Combatant" replied to the suggestion with strangely familiar derision:

> But what do your chums propose doing? They will like to form an Official Group; they would go on jaunts to the Americas and Dominions; they would have 'the facilities of journalists' which, as far as I have seen, merely means the privileges of commissioned rank without its obligations—cheap railway tickets, entrance to ward-rooms and officers' messes and investitures; they would 'co-ordinate war-effort emotionally'. Cor, chase my Aunt Nancy round the prickly pear! The General Staff love initials; they would, I am sure, rejoice to put an armlet, D.A.E.C.W.E. on someone's arm and call him Deputy Assistant Emotional Co-ordinator of War Effort.[40]

The diction is unmistakable, especially when compared with *Put Out More Flags*. Ambrose Silk reacts to Fitzrovia's preparations for war in the same way: "Cor chase my Aunt Fanny round a mulberry bush, thought Ambrose, what a herd."[41] The two relatives circumambulate in the same orchard: the "Combatant" is clearly Evelyn Waugh.*

Cyril Connolly had a second solution of his own to the fools' inquiry, which he published as the leader of the January 1941 issue of *Horizon*. Of all the responses, it is the most epigrammatic, and the most convincing:

> About this time of year articles appear called 'Where are our war poets?' The answer (not usually given) is 'under your nose'. For war poets are not a new kind of being, they are only peace poets who have assimilated the material of war. As the war lasts, the poetry which is written becomes war poetry, just as inevitably as the lungs of Londoners grow black with soot.[42]

*The appearance of this letter in the Waugh Collection at the University of Texas supplies external evidence for this claim.

This simplest answer provides the definition of war literature assumed here. The Second World War was, in literary as in military terms, a civilian's war. Its literature comes from those fighting at home. The literature of the home front is directly engaged in war in a way it could never be in the First World War. The search for an original literary response to the Second World War must turn to the works of its civilians. The German conscript in Owen's "Strange Meeting" knows of wells sunk too deep for war:

> Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
> I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
> Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.[43]

These are the wells, healing wells brimming with pure water, from which the seven writers draw. The literature of the Second World War can be found, as Connolly put it, "under your nose."