W. H. Auden is a giant of twentieth-century English poetry whose writings demonstrate a sustained engagement with the times in which he lived. But how did the century’s shifting cultural terrain affect him and his work? Written by distinguished poets and scholars, these brief but authoritative essays offer a varied set of coordinates by which to chart Auden’s continuously evolving career, examining key aspects of his environmental, cultural, political, and creative contexts. Reaching beyond mere biography, these essays present Auden as the product of ongoing negotiations between himself, his time, and posterity, exploring the enduring power of his poetry to unsettle and provoke. The collection will prove valuable for scholars, researchers, and students of English literature, cultural studies, and creative writing.

Tony Sharpe is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University. He is the author of critically acclaimed books on W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Vladimir Nabokov, and Wallace Stevens. His essays on modernist writing and poetry have appeared in journals such as Critical Survey and Literature and Theology, as well as in various edited collections.
W. H. AUDEN IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY

TONY SHARPE

Lancaster University
In Memory of My Father
L. W. Sharpe (1920–2010)
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I am grateful, first of all, to contributors who believed in this project and whose work is represented here; some offered helpful behind-the-scenes advice, as did some Auden scholars who couldn’t personally participate. Lancaster University assisted with a period of leave. Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press suggested the volume and has had to draw on reserves of patience he may not have realized he possessed in awaiting its completion; my wife, Jane, has philosophically endured the travails of one whose partner has been long immersed in typescript. The dedication gratefully remembers another who merited Auden’s tribute to his own, ‘No gentler father ever lived’.
Auden’s revisions and expurgations of his own work have practical consequences for a book like this, as do other aspects of his complicated publication history. Although when completed the *Collected Works* will solve most problems of reference, having already covered dramatic and operatic work and the majority of his prose, the poetry still poses problems, with different editions sometimes offering different versions of the ‘same’ poem. Nor can the problems be simply solved by citing individual volumes of poetry as first published, because of variations between English and American versions: occasionally different pagination and in two cases different titles for the same volume (*Look, Stranger!* and *On This Island; The Double Man* and *New Year Letter*). These differences persisted into the collected volumes Auden oversaw in his lifetime, when the Random House and Faber versions were similar but not identical. Under Edward Mendelson’s editorship, the *Collected Poems* issued in 1976 was revised and reset in 1991 and, further revised, was reissued to coincide with Auden’s centenary in 2007. In addition to the poems, this handsome volume contains a good deal of important material, including Auden’s earlier forewords to collected volumes and a description of the different titles he used for poems at different periods. While valuable as a record of Auden’s judgment on what he wanted his canon to include, it is the end product of processes of authorial revision not universally applauded; poems included he sometimes radically altered (usually by shortening), and poems excluded are some that readers deem indispensable: notably, ‘September 1, 1939’. If it is truthful as a historical reflection of Auden’s literary taste applied to his own poetry late in his life, in another way it falsifies the historical record by occluding the sequence and nature of his poetic output and its interactions with current events: the omission of ‘Spain’ and its modified successor ‘Spain, 1937’ suppresses an important aspect of his literary career. Although Auden’s savagest editorialism predominantly affected the poetry written before or soon after his move to

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America, what many consider to be his finest post-war poem, ‘In Praise of Limestone’, has some significant differences in its Collected Poems version from what had appeared in Nones.

The debate whether Auden’s alterations improved or damaged his poems can be noted here, but not resolved. My own preference is for the earlier versions, but the highest priority of a volume such as this must be to assist its readers, not all of whom will have easy access to a research-standard university library with complete first editions of his work. For pre-1940 poetry, references are given to The English Auden, which contains reliable versions of the earliest book publication of that period’s poems – excepting ‘Spain’, which was printed as a pamphlet and never collected: ‘Spain’ is most easily available in Mendelson’s editions of the Selected Poems. For subsequent poetry I have not wished to impose an editorial preference on contributors who might disagree with it; whether they have chosen to use the Collected Poems (CP) or cite individual volumes I have left to them; but to help readers find quotations where individual volumes have been cited I have added page references to Collected Poems (2007). The warning must be given, however, that the CP version may not be identical: in instances where two such references are given, the first is always definitive of source. A less urgent duality occurs in relation to the prose, where Auden’s own books of criticism, The Enchafèd Flood and The Dyer’s Hand, have now appeared in the collected edition; here I have not followed a parallel procedure of doubled reference, as this seems unnecessary.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

*AN*  
The W. H. Auden Society Newsletter (earlier issues available in archive, accessible via the W. H. Auden Society Web site; current issues available by subscription)

*Ansen*  

*AS I, AS II, AS III*  

*AT*  
W. H. Auden, *Another Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940)

*AtH*  
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Carpenter

CCWHA

CP 2007

Cunningham 1988
Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford University Press, 1988)

CW

DH

DM

EA

Early Auden

F&A

Fuller 1998

Haffenden

HtC

JtW
W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939)

Juv
A Note on Editions and Abbreviations

LA Edward Mendelson, Later Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1999)

Lfl W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, Letters from Iceland (London: Faber and Faber, 1937)


N W. H. Auden, Nones (London: Faber and Faber, 1952)

NYL W. H. Auden, New Year Letter (London: Faber and Faber, 1941)


SW W. H. Auden, Secondary Worlds (London: Faber and Faber, 1968)