Introduction
The Great Strike and Modern Memory

The only national general strike in British history thus far began on 3 May 1926. It lasted just nine days but is usually regarded as the most important event between the end of the First World War and the Great Depression. Looking back in 1939, T. S. Eliot remembered that:

> The period immediately following the war of 1914 is often spoken of as a time of disillusionment: in some ways and for some people it was rather a period of illusions. Only from about the year 1926 did the features of the post-war world begin clearly to emerge – and not only in the sphere of politics. From about that date one began slowly to realize that the intellectual and artistic output of the previous seven years had been rather the last efforts of an old world, than the struggles of a new.[1]

Although he does not mention the Strike, his qualification 'not only in the sphere of politics' assumes that his readers will automatically identify 1926 with that event. Two years earlier, Wyndham Lewis had made a remarkably similar periodisation:

> I find a good way of dating after the War is to take the General Strike, 1926, as the next milestone. I call 'post-war' between the War and the General Strike. Then began a period of a new complexion. It was no longer 'post-war.' We needn't *call* it anything. It's just the period we're living in to-day.[2]

Unlike most of their class, Eliot and Lewis took no part in the conflict. Leonard Woolf, in contrast, campaigned for a compromise position between the strikers and the state and could therefore feel justified to ask:

> When one comes to the practice of politics, anyone writing about his life in the years 1924–1939 must answer the crucial question: 'What did you do in the General Strike?' Of all public events in home politics during my lifetime, the General Strike was the most painful, the most horrifying.[3]

Woolf could ask this Kitcheneresque question because so many in the middle and upper classes took an active role in the Strike and overwhelmingly

against the unionists: between 300,000 to 500,000 volunteered for anti-Strike activities, though this was far more than was actually needed and was dwarfed by the numbers of strikers.[4]

But even those not compelled to take sides experienced the Strike in some way or another. It was that rare phenomenon, a truly public or universally experienced event. No one living in London could have been unaffected by the almost complete shutdown of public transportation and the sight of streets full of people walking to work and roads jammed with private cars. Outside the capital people lived in a state of uncertainty, the Trades Union Council having made the strategically dubious decision to shut down the newspapers. Just as a decade or so later the Mass Observation group would collect the perceptions of an almost random and therefore representative cross section of people on the day of George VI's Coronation, so the answers to Woolf's question 'What did you do in the General Strike?' would provide a comprehensive account of all the many political interests, divisions and conflicts within Britain.

Unlike the Coronation, the Strike was more than mere spectacle. As a strike became increasingly likely, Evelyn Waugh noted in his diary:

> I have begun to think whether perhaps April 1926 may not in time rank with July 1914 for the staging of house parties in sociological novels. I suppose the desire to merge one's individual destiny in forces outside ones, which seems to me deeply rooted in most people and shows itself in social service and mysticism and in some manner in debauchery, is really only a consciousness that this is already the real mechanism of life which requires so much concentration to perceive that one wishes to objectify it in more immediate (and themselves subordinate) forces. How badly I write when there is no audience to arrange my thoughts for.[5]

On the spectrum of political engagement, Waugh was at the least engaged end, as the shift from his somewhat dismissive reference to 'sociological novels' to his syntactically confused reference to 'mysticism' and 'debauchery' indicates. Even so he volunteered as a strike breaker with his brother, Alec, albeit 'to escape boredom under a colour of duty.'[6] For many writers the Strike was the main event between the wars in which the personal and historical intersected.

The Nine Days

'The General Strike and the epic struggle of the miners which followed,' Sue Bruley writes, 'have long been regarded as seminal events in the history of the twentieth-century labour movement. It is remembered as

perhaps the greatest episode in working-class solidarity in British history.'[7] The climax of a decade or more of radicalism and rebellion across Britain, memories of the General Strike point forward to the miseries of the thirties and back to the insurgency of the Great Unrest. Forwards, as for many parts of the country, the 1930s and the Depression began, in very real senses, in 1926. Social desperation in many mining villages following the union's defeat did not lift until the start of World War II and, indeed, some families were settling debts from the Lockout as late as 1972, the year of the next national stoppage. Backwards, as the General Strike drew on rich currents of syndicalist and revolutionary socialist agitation amongst the working class and could be seen as the culmination of earlier workers' campaigns.

The struggle was essentially defensive. The mining industry, already in decline and further hemmed in globally by the return to the gold standard on 30 April 1925, needed to lift productivity if it were to be able to restore profitability. Mine organisation – private, localised, chaotic, archaic – was not to be touched; the only solution the mine owners could agree on was to work the miners harder and for longer. The miners, already on low wages and working in dangerous conditions, refused, their slogan being 'not a second on the day, not a penny off the pay.' Confrontation was inevitable and had been in preparation through 1924–5; the intransigence of the mine owners and the election of prominent leftists, including miners' leader A. J. Cook, to leadership positions in the unions indicated a hardening of views on both sides. Unresolved conflict had been a feature of the mines since the end of the war. The Sankey Commission, earlier in the decade, had recommended nationalisation to solve the industry's chronic problems. Lloyd George had used the commission's findings to position himself between mine owners and the miners' federation and then had rejected its recommendations. Two previous confrontations, in 1919 and 1921, had ended in embittering defeats for the miners. On 15 April 1921 – 'Black Friday' – the leaderships of the transport and rail unions called off solidarity action in support of the miners, leaving them to fight on to defeat themselves. This was all present in both sides' consciousness and outlook, with the left in particular feeling these dates as humiliations that needed to be avenged. Immediate economic decisions hastened the conflict. Coal prices had been falling since 1924, when Germany was able to re-enter the world coal market; Churchill's decision to return to the gold standard, the focus of Maynard Keynes's frustration, inflated the value of the pound and made coal exports uncompetitive as wages were driven down. A government subsidy to prevent an inevitable

strike or lockout – on 'Red Friday' in 1925 – was seen at the time as a victory for the workers' movement but in fact did little more than buy the owners and state time to prepare for a more decisive battle. In April 1926, with the subsidy at an end, the owners again demanded the miners accept longer hours and cuts to their pay. Lockout notices were posted in pits. A commission, headed by Sir Herbert Samuel, had reported on 10 March, with suggestions for *both* reorganisation of industry *and* wage cuts. Although acceptance of the Samuel Report was a point for debate and positioning between the sides, and a source of increasingly delusional hopes amongst middle-class figures sympathetic to the unions, it seemed, as Keith Laybourn suggests, 'increasingly irrelevant as the forces of capital and labour came into conflict.'[8] Both sides needed a decisive victory; both sides were determined to defeat their opponents.

In this stand-off the weight of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) might have been a decisive force in the miners' favour. Calling its members out in support of the miners, 'it was a magnificent generation,' Ernest Bevin told a mass meeting of delegates, 'that was prepared to do it [strike] rather than see the miners driven down like slaves.'[9] Workers' response to the call for solidarity was, by all accounts, astonishing. A TUC communiqué from the first day of the Strike gives some sense of the occasion:

> We have from all over the country, from Land's End to John o' Groats, reports that have surpassed all our expectations. Not only the railwaymen and transport men, but all other trades came out in a manner we did not expect immediately. The difficulty of the General Council has been to keep men in what we might call the second line of defence rather than call them off. There are also no reports other than those of a quiet, orderly, and good-tempered desire to keep the peace of all sections of the community.[10]

Much was made, at the time and since, of the Strike's 'quiet, orderly, and good-tempered' aspects, but these should not obscure the class violence the Strike's suppression involved. Thousands were arrested; troops were deployed in Liverpool; dissenting leaflets and publications confiscated; riots and brawls in Edinburgh and Glasgow erupted. There was widespread support for the miners as the Strike gathered intensity through the Nine Days and, indeed, more workers came out the day after the Strike was terminated than had been striking the day before.

Accounts of rank and file determination show up, however, the unions' weakness. Whatever the real enthusiasms of the membership, the TUC leadership went into this struggle in no mood to win. The mine owners and Baldwin's government wanted to defeat the miners' union; the TUC wanted the General Strike over. They had done nothing, in the months

leading up to the Strike, to prepare for conflict, the government all the while recruiting strike-breakers; they did less to sustain it once the battle had commenced. 'Reluctance to prepare,' Paul Davies argues,

> was based on a complex mixture of moderation, defeatism and realism, but above all *fear*: fear of losing, fear of winning, fear of bloodshed, fear of unleashing forces that union leaders could not control. Most of these men were not consciously traitorous, but they lacked moral fibre [and] dragged the TUC into a battle they had no appetite for and no hope of winning.[11]

Talk of betrayal is, in some circles now, disdained as leftist sentimentality. We know no other way to describe the TUC leadership's actions: having called the Strike out in solidarity with the miners they settled, with no commitments and against the wishes of the miners, ending the Strike as tens of thousands of trade unionists across the country faced victimisation. The miners, alone, fought on until their resistance to the Lockout collapsed in November. Deprivation, unemployment and despair were the consequences for years to come. For those miners still in work, the owners' newly asserted power expressed itself as speed-ups. Union organisation across the country was demoralised, and top-down, centralised models of politics in both the Labour Party and trade unions came to dominate over membership-led initiatives. The Strike's defeat had significant, and lasting, social consequences.

The General Strike was not a revolutionary situation. The miners' leader Cook, much maligned at the time and subsequently as an unrealistic and wild-eyed Bolshevist, conceived of the struggle in largely defensive terms; his members wanted their existing conditions maintained. To ask whether this was the prelude to a revolution is, however, to forestall and obstruct more productive lines of questioning. Could the miners have won? Did the industry need reorganisation? Were the proposed pay cuts socially sustainable? Scoffing at the impossibility of revolution, or stressing the continuities and essential Britishness of the Nine Days, may be comforting, but it avoids the real questions – and real, strategic dilemmas, still unsolved – the General Strike posed. A victory by the miners would not have meant revolution, but what would it, and the social upheaval it would have brought, have meant for the balance of class forces going into the Great Depression, the power of organised labour in the British social formation? These questions, as unavoidable as unanswerable for historians, give some sense of the Strike's ongoing relevance and position.[12]

Complex modes of forgetting stuck to the Strike from the very beginning. For some, such as Aneurin Bevan, it needed to be 'an anti-climax,' its answers found in his subsequent political trajectory.[13] For thinkers around

the Communist Party the Strike's meaning shifted so often – according to the rhetorical needs, as the party Stalinised, of Russian foreign policy and local shifts in emphasis – that no stable narrative or memory could be sustained. The Strike was victory, defeat, betrayal, advance, illustration of Labour's cowardice and example of Labour taking lessons all at once.

More serious attempts at assessing the Strike's historical legacy have come in two waves. The first, associated with the Strike's anniversary during a new wave of union militancy, saw a batch of academic histories in the 1970s. More recently, after years of labour history's relatively unfashionable status, sensitive and nuanced local studies of class, gender and organisation from Sue Bruley, Hester Barron and John McIlroy give us new insights about the Strike and indicate a welcome return, in the twenty-first century, to sophisticated accounts of class and class conflict.[14]

Writing in the Strike

The significance of the Strike to writers has been recognised by John Lucas who, in *The Radical Twenties*, argues that:

> The definitive moment for the 1920s is not the Wall Street Crash but the General Strike … the calling of the strike in May, 1926, and its ignominious collapse after 10 days made for a wholesale change in the way an increased number of people, including writers and intellectuals, thought about the society they lived in and of its, and therefore inevitably their, social and political values … [Some] looking back, realised that 1926 marked an occasion when something momentous had occurred. The strike itself might not have been the moment but it was undoubtedly the catalyst.[15]

Because Lucas's subject is the 1920s, he is not able fully to explore the literary response to the Strike, most of which, as he points out, came during the 1930s.

Biographies of the main writers of the time usually devote between a few sentences and a page to the Strike, as do most critical studies. But there have been only a handful of articles directly about its effect on individual authors and even fewer that survey literary responses. Until now, no book on the General Strike and literature has ever been written.

There are three possible reasons for this relative absence of commentary and analysis by literary historians. First, the Strike occurred between convenient periodising markers; it falls between the stools of the First World War and the Great Depression, between narratives of modernist autonomy and accounts of realist commitment. Relations among politics, literature and aesthetic autonomy were passionately contested at the time

and have remained, from Adorno to Žižek, a site of lively critical disputation. The writing of the General Strike is produced within and around what came to be called 'modernism' and so is drawn into that 'highly troublesome signifier's' zone of controversy. Modernism, for Astradur Eysteinsson, comes 'laden with issues of tradition, modernity and canonization' and 'acquires its full significance' by naming 'the complex relation between non-traditional or postrealist literature and history in the broader sense.'[16] Narratives of the General Strike both form a part of that complex relation and have, because of their directly political subject matter, been obscured by its later codification in modernist studies. They thus sit uncomfortably both in older periodising schemes and within more recent challenges to these accounts. The Strike was, in a literary sense, always belated; too soon for one generation, it came too late for another. An older generation, which included Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton, tried, as we discuss in Chapter 2, to write about the Strike as part of a rearguard reclamation of Liberalism, but this was not to be the project of the 1920s later criticism valorised. By the time younger writers in the 1930s composed accounts of their own politicisation – the subject of Chapter 5 – other periodising markers, the Spanish Revolution most obviously, exerted a stronger political and imaginative pull.

Second, some of the best writing about the Strike – including Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Cloud Howe* and Hugh MacDiarmid's 'Ballad of the General Strike', the central section of *A Drunk Man Looks at a Thistle* – comes from outside England and thus outside of what was, until recently and the burgeoning process of 'devolving' English literature, the assumed centre of literary production in the Isles.

Third, while many proletarian writers represented the Strike, their writing has not been included in most canons. A complex process of exclusion followed the working class's entry into writing from its beginning. Virginia Woolf, for her part, in a talk to the Workers' Educational Association in 1940 said: 'take away all that the working class has given to English literature and that literature would scarcely suffer; take away all that the educated class has given, and English literature would scarcely exist.'[17] For the left these relationships were more difficult, with an otherwise sympathetic George Orwell declaring in a radio broadcast in the same year that proletarian literature 'is and must be bourgeois literature with a slightly different slant.'[18] Orwell's concern is with the possibility of an independently proletarian *culture* more than it is with the existence of a body of proletarian writing. Trotsky, in *Literature and Revolution*, polemicised against the idea of 'proletarian literature' while simultaneously encouraging workers'

writing.[19] These interactions among class identity, literary production and theoretical and strategic affiliation developed as part of a wider political culture and have been obscured with that culture's eclipse. Since the 1980s there has been a revival of interest in working-class literature, but this literature nevertheless remains outside of the main literary canons.[20] Connections among literature, class and ambitions for a 'class literature' are never simple and always involve negotiation and disputes between classes and writing groups. That process works itself out in the writing of the General Strike.

Representations of the Strike follow an extended trajectory as its implications are slowly absorbed across the culture as a whole. Tracking this, and attending to its local manifestations, problematises periodising schemes; decentres London and follows devolution to literary history; and proposes a 'blurring' of canonical and counter-canonical approaches to twentieth-century literature. The General Strike's literature is neither solely populist nor simply elitist. It is engaged *and* autonomous, committed and discontinuous, British literature in a divided Britain.

There is so much writing on the Strike that tracking its representations across periods, regions and classes allows us to reconstruct the ideological, aesthetic and political contest over narratives of British history as they happened. Our archive contains more than seventy novels, poems, plays and memoirs writing the General Strike, and this cutting from across the fabric of twentieth-century writing in Britain offers, in the traditions of Mass Observation, an implied image of a society in formation. Taking the Strike's representations as our object of study shuffles periodising expectations in other ways too, offering a way of viewing literature in its moment of formation and reception. At our moment Galsworthy was at the height of his popularity and Woolf yet to publish her most important books. Wells, fifty-nine on the fourth of May 1926, and Woolf, forty-four on the same day, seem closer generationally than later histories will place them.

Writers in the Strike

One early survey of Strike writing noted that:

> There is often a considerable time-lag between the occurrence of a particular event and its incorporation into literary and artistic products. In this instance the phenomenon of lag is particularly vexing because it often means that apparently straightforward reactions to the General Strike are in fact mediated by the economic and political experience of the thirties.[21]

This is true for most of the writing about the Strike. There were, however, as we will show in Chapters 3 and 4, immediate literary consequences. The Strike's development affected work in progress, including *To the Lighthouse* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and G. K. Chesterton's *The Return of Don Quixote*. It was the immediate impetus for other writing, including H. G. Wells's *Meanwhile*.

Moreover many writers responded very quickly to the Strike in letters and diaries and as participants. This complicates views of the 1930s as the period in which, according to Stephen Spender, 'young writers became involved in politics.'[22] The *Left Review*'s petition of writers in 1937 on the Spanish Civil War is well known, but less well known is an earlier petition that had been circulated amongst writers and artists. Written by Leonard Woolf during the General Strike after a phone call and visit from R. H. Tawney, it called on the government to 'restart negotiations immediately on the lines suggested by the Archbishop of Canterbury.'[23] Conceived as a compromise, the Archbishop's proposal involved both a return to negotiations and the miners accepting wage reductions. Only Sir John Galsworthy and the editor of the *Observer*, J. L. Garvin, refused to sign.

Leonard Woolf was involved in other activities. On 10 May 1926 Virginia delivered an article written by him arguing that 'the Strike is not illegal or unconstitutional' as 'stuffing' to the House of Commons for the Labour MP Hugh Dalton, though he seems to have made no use of it in his address made that day. Keynes had asked the Woolfs to print *The Nation and Athenaeum* since its printers were on strike, but while Virginia agreed Leonard refused, presumably in solidarity with the striking printers.[24] Above all the Woolfs received a steady stream of visitors who not only reported on what was happening but also in many cases were actively involved in the conflict. These included, according to Virginia's diary, Desmond McCarthy 'fresh from Asquith' who had just lost the leadership of the Liberal Party after opposing Lloyd George's qualified support for the Strike; Roger Fry, who found the Strike 'unutterably boring and quite unimportant and yet very upsetting'; Clive Bell, who Woolf notes 'is offering himself to the Government';[25] Herbert Henderson, the editor of *The Nation and Athenaeum*, who proposed liberal conciliation and negotiation while nevertheless favouring those opposed to the Strike;[26] and Lord Haldane, Lord Chancellor in the first Labour Government, who in Parliament rebutted Simon's verdict that the Strike was illegal and unconstitutional. The Bloomsbury class fraction were some of the most active advocates of aesthetic autonomy but not of political disinterestedness.

In what Cyril Connolly dubbed an 'alternative Bloomsbury', the Sitwells, or at least Osbert, were even more directly involved. Having barely left his house during the first days of the Strike because of his 'distress', he organised a luncheon with his friend Lady Wimborne, her husband and Lord Reading; two mine-owners, the Conservative Lord Londonderry and Liberal Lord Gainford; railways union leader J. H. Thomas; J. A. Spender, editor of the Liberal *Westminster Gazette*; and the Labour MP Philip Snowden. After a series of luncheons it was decided that Lord Reading contact Sir Herbert Samuel with a view to him helping unofficially in negotiations, and Sitwell would later claim that they had been 'most useful in helping to achieve peace.'[27] A. Beverley Baxter, the Managing Editor of Beaverbrook's *Sunday Express*, claimed that Sitwell, accompanied by a tempestuous Sigfried Sassoon, made a late-night call to him demanding an end to the Strike and would not leave until the 'first grisly grey of dawn' was breaking over the Thames.[28]

Sassoon wrote during and just after the Strike 'The New "Black & Tans" (from White's)', a dramatic monologue of a member of White's Club whose desire to 'crack the craniums' of strikers he conceals with appeals to patriotism; 'Perch and State', about Lords Balfour's, Oxford's and Grey's 'frigid phrases' in the House about 'revolution'; and 'Strike Me Pink', about strike-breakers' enthusiasm for the National Emergency. Though typeset for the *New Statesman* these poems were not published in his lifetime.

The vast majority of the upper class knew what side they were on. Radclyffe Hall and her partner, Una Troubridge, began putting their jewellery and furs in storage and had a radio installed on the second day of the Strike.[29] Jessica Mitford remembered her older sisters working in canteens, going to bed with her pet lamb to protect her from 'Bolshies', and Nancy dressing as a 'filthy tramp' and demanding a kiss from Pam who fled with a shriek and sprained her ankle.[30]

A national institution for some decades, Rudyard Kipling held views on the Strike that would have largely articulated the outlook of most of those from Hall and Mitford's class. These were largely voiced in letters to his friend H. A. Gwynne, the editor of the *Morning Post*, although the *British Gazette* published part of 'For All We Hope and Are', an anti-'Hun' poem of 1914, as well as stanzas from 'Hymn Before Action' and 'Song of the English' in the anti-Strike cause. Kipling was in Italy in April where 'Mussolini rides the storm quite serenely', but he wrote to Gwynne asking for his 'forecast about the Coal mess.'[31] After the Strike he was concerned that the defeat of the unions would mean the end of the 'War' against