

Introduction

Futility and Anarchy? British Literature in Transition

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Reflecting on the period ‘Between the Wars’ in September 1943, the then-prominent novelist and literary activist Storm Jameson noted how her first experience of the sound of German planes ‘stammering’ over London in bombing raids merged, in her memory, with ‘the spluttering of the gas-jet in a Victorian nursery’. The two were, Jameson considered

almost the same sound. The same – and separated by a torrent of change, inconceivably more rapid than the upper reaches of the stream. It would be surprising if we whose lives span it had no feeling of vertigo, and if an effort of our moral energy were not needed to keep from losing balance [...]. The generation which can hold in its ear in the same moment the sound of a gas-jet and of a German bomber is the one which began to write during or just after the First World War, at the beginning of a period of accelerated change and uncertainty.¹

Uncertainty, familiarity joined to a disorienting sense of time passing and looping back in on itself, characterises Jameson’s response to the War. The interwar period was for her ‘our age of transition [...] increasingly tyrannised over by Things’, captured properly only by writers – her examples were T. S. Eliot and James Joyce – who ‘forcing their imagination to accept the fact of disintegration, wrote about it as natives’.²

Jameson’s periodising urge, and her ability to detect signs of both social continuity and giddy breaks in the same sounds and experiences, marks this passage as typical of much writing from the interwar period. Negotiating the aftermath of the Great War, the most horrendous devastation – to the local population, at least – to date in British history, and anticipating, from Mussolini’s fascist victory in Italy in 1922 at the earliest to Hitler’s ascension in Germany in the mid-1930s at the very latest, a coming war of still-worse proportions, writers in this period wrote to

¹ Storm Jameson, ‘Between the Wars’ (1943), in *The Writer’s Situation* (London: Macmillan, 1943), 126.

² *Ibid.*, 129, 127.

an age of transition. ‘Midnight in the century’ and a collection of ‘unforgiving years’, Victor Serge called them in Europe; Auden, looking back from the United States, would dismiss the thirties as a ‘low, dishonest decade’.³ Jameson’s ‘age of transition’ pivoted between the Victorian world evoked by a sputtering gas-lamp and the dystopian future promised by a fascist bombing raid, and her identification of ‘the fact of disintegration’ as the signal theme for serious literature of her time traces the destructive connection between the two. It seemed that nothing that came before the first war could remain contemporary and comprehensible to those who came after; nothing that came after the conclusion of the second war, at that stage still uncertain, could share in the world that went before. Those writers, like Jameson, whose lives carried over these eras, were losing balance, bewildered, afflicted by vertigo. Like Virginia Woolf’s experience of a gap between herself and the ‘foreign people’ of the past when she was reading classical literature in translation, for the contemporary writer of 1920–1940 there was, between them and the pre-War culture, ‘not only the difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition’.⁴ Between the past of the pre-War and the threatened future of the postwar there can be little communication, and modern dilemmas make historical knowledge uncertain and perhaps useless. ‘Yesterday all the past’, one of Auden’s most famous poems begins, and language itself may be, Woolf went on, ‘too weak to express’ the ‘blast of meaning’ so that the serious reader could be ‘blown astray’ in any attempted connection with the past.⁵

It is unsurprising, then, that this period has attracted, for over a half-century now, critics eager to discover the foundational moments of modernism and modernity, and to develop narratives of British literature’s breaks and refoundations. These accounts, of the ‘Pound era’, the modernist ‘period’, the ‘Jazz age’ or the ‘political Thirties’ are powerful, compelling, at times sophisticated and rich in the reading programmes and approaches they encourage.⁶ But they also, as a new generation of critics

³ Victor Serge, *Midnight in the Century*, trans. Richard Greeman (New York: NYRB Classics, 2014), Victor Serge, *Turbulent Years*, trans. Richard Greeman (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008), W. H. Auden, ‘September 1, 1939’, in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 1989), 86.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, in *Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNellie, 6 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1986–2011), vol. 4 (1994) 38.

⁵ W. H. Auden, ‘Spain’, in *Selected Poems*, 51; Woolf, ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, 44.

⁶ The classic accounts remain Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (London: Pimlico, 1971) and Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, *Modernism 1890–1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). Classic accounts of the Thirties include Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976) and now Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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in the first decade of this century have argued, distort, by selection, our sense of the world in which this literature of announced breaks occurred. Because, for every announcement that the task of literature is to, in Ezra Pound's phrase, 'make it new', one can find in the period competing claims stressing continuity, tradition, renovation instead of innovation.⁷ George Dangerfield, in his *Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935), implicitly located the pre-War 'Unrest' as the period in which much of the postwar order was settled. The record, to us, instead reveals unfinished business. The period from 1920 to 1940 was, indeed, experienced by many as a *resumption* of the past after the interruption of the Great War. In politics, a host of issues and confrontations played out across the interwar years that had been at a pitch of intensity before 4 August 1914 and then kept 'frozen' during the War itself. Ross McKibbin suggests that Britain 'experienced more severe class conflict' during the 1920s 'than at any other time in modern British history; and this produced powerful ideological antagonisms and stereotypes that survived the decade'.⁸ These conflicts picked up and intensified battles between capital and labour that had been staged during the 'Great Unrest' of 1910–1914, when there had been riots in Wales and Liverpool, mass strikes in key industries and rent battles in Glasgow.⁹ Leading figures from all sides of these disputes reprised their roles in 1920–1940: on the far left, syndicalist and socialist figures Tom Mann and Willie Gallacher would be leaders in interwar Communism, while in 1910 Winston Churchill made his reputation as scourge of the miners in the Rhondda Valley, a role he would revisit in the 1926 General Strike.¹⁰ Suffrage battles followed a similar pattern: if the movement for women's suffrage was at its peak in the years 1900–1914, support for the War caused the leaders of the Women's Social and Political Union to cease their activity, and suffrage debates would resume only after the Representation of the People Act in 1918. So too with Home Rule in Ireland. Constitutional crisis, and the threat of civil war and mutiny, led by Edward Carson's intrigues in Ulster, accompanied the passage of the Government of Ireland Act in 1914, but if the War, briefly, froze this confrontation, it also led to the 'thaw' of 1916, the Easter Rising and the

⁷ See Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), chapters 6 and 7.

⁸ Ross McKibbin, *Class and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 54.

⁹ See Ralph Darlington, *Revolutionary Unionism: The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism* (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2013).

¹⁰ Churchill's two terms as Prime Minister, from 1940 to 1945 and 1951 to 1955, underline from another angle the mess and uncertainty involved in periodising divisions.

Irish Revolution that intensified from 1918 to 1922. It takes only a shake of the kaleidoscope, then, to make Jameson's 'torrent of change' look much more like an obsessive re-working and re-staging of old and unresolved fights across British society. The urgencies of 1920–1940 – class conflict, the position of women, the status of Britain and the Empire – are those of 1914 taken up again and fought anew.

Even in a more limited and specifically literary field, a different optic reveals overlapping worlds in this 'age of transition'. The 'men of 1914' – Wyndham Lewis's self-aggrandising label for T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and himself – may have positioned themselves as the central figures of the interwar period, but they were publishing alongside Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), Arnold Bennett (1867–1931), H. G. Wells (1866–1946) and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), all of whom had achieved literary reputations and success before the turn of the century. Many of *their* pre-War concerns – with science and science fiction, in Wells's and Shaw's cases, or with Empire in Kipling's – would remain the focus of their postwar works. Individual biography, literary history and the editorial and readerly desire for neat marks of division between eras and authors all work against one another. And, in ways that seem discordant and curious to us now, some of these established writers were read in their own time as examples of the 'modern' movement. Reflecting on the critic Cyril Connolly, author of *Enemies of Promise* (1938) and an influential source of instant periodising schemes in his day, Chris Baldick observes that

Whereas almost all literary historians since the 1970s would describe the period in terms of the vindication of 'modernism' and the discrediting of its various antagonists [...] Connolly had the advantage of surveying the literary scene of the recent past before those academic blinkers could narrow his scope. His more catholic conception of the 'modern movement' in letters, as he calls it, is broad enough to include Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy, Arnold Bennett, W. Somerset Maugham, Rupert Brooke and several others who are now beyond the modernist pale.¹¹

Hence, in this series, the emphasis on *transition*. This collection, drawing on the best recent work expanding and making more capacious our sense of the modernisms and intermodernisms at work through the always political interwar period, suggests a different way of reading British literature in transition, as the strains of national break-up, class dissension and political

¹¹ Chris Baldick, '1928, London: A Strange Interlude', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English*, ed. Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 75.

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instability provoked a new literary order. Reading across the two decades between the wars allows scholars to trace the continuing pressure of these transitions. Instead of following the usual markers – 1922, the Crash, the Spanish Civil War – or isolating familiar themes from literary study – Modernism and difficulty, say, or Modernism and mass culture, Modernism and the New Woman, or the 1930s and political commitment – this collection takes key problems and dilemmas from literature ‘in transition’ and reads them *across* familiar and unfamiliar cultural works and productions, in their rich and contradictory context of publication. Themes such as gender, sexuality, nation and class are thus present throughout these essays, rather than being isolated for ‘survey’ treatment on their own. Our hope is that readers, taking individual chapters or reading across the collection, will get some greater sense of the *contest* at work in the period, as different British literatures and traditions shift under the pressure of, and themselves in turn respond to, the political and social dilemmas of these exceptionally dramatic years.

Never Such Innocence Again

Perhaps as many as ten million people were killed across the theatres of the First World War; nearly one in five soldiers, recent research suggests, experienced significant psychological trauma or ‘shell shock’, and a generation of women lived with both the disruption of their own war service – whether as nurses or, temporarily, in industries left with shortages of male workers – and the consequences of male trauma and masculinist insecurity in the domestic sphere.¹² Postwar enthusiasm for psychoanalysis, amongst intellectuals and writers if not always medical professionals, is caught up with its accounting for the loss and mental damage of war experience as, in another register, was the great boom in the 1920s of unorthodox and ‘alternative’ spiritual practices and traditions. Sexuality – women’s sexuality in general and ‘deviant’ practices in particular – was the site of much anxiety and scandal during the War, from Noel Pemberton-Billing’s widely-publicised claims that a cabal of lascivious lesbians were undermining the war effort to panics over sexual health in the armed forces.¹³ These would in turn play out in postwar social debates and codes. The War, in individual bodies and lives, and in wider social interests

¹² These figures, greater than past estimates, are from Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹³ For a discussion of the scandalous ‘suggestion of lesbianism’ as something ‘both inconceivable and somehow always already known’ (4) during such events as the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and the suppression in 1921 of the American literary magazine the *Little*

and worries, shaped the interwar decades, and one way of thinking about these years as in transition is to imagine them as part of a complex, and pained, leave-taking from the War. *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves called his 1928 memoirs: the goodbye, and the ‘all that’, took many years to negotiate imaginatively.

Much of the memorialising work done was, as historians remind us, conventional and in the traditional forms of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century verse.¹⁴ But the innovative and experimental literature later critics would describe as modernist often took the difficulty of writing the War – its enormity, its damage and its destructive consequences – as their representational challenge. It used to be a critical commonplace that the War could not be written about until a decade after its passing, but writers were responding with sensitive complexity to this changed world within months of the Armistice. Rebecca West’s *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) both took shell shock and its consequences as significant thematic and narrative concerns, while D. H. Lawrence’s novella *The Fox* (1922) traces, alongside his characteristic obsessions, the War’s impact on rural life in England.

The enormity and technologised efficiency of the slaughter and damage of the War – to say nothing of the technical difficulties of rendering this in narrative or lyrical work – prompted much apocalyptic thinking, the 1920s being seen by many modernists as a ‘waste land’ left after the War. ‘*We are the first men of a future that has not happened*’, Wyndham Lewis described himself and his generation in 1937, the ‘literary big noises of the war’ now ‘the “waste” it left in its wake’.¹⁵ Postwar culture in Ezra Pound’s ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’ (1920) is figured as ‘an old bitch gone in the teeth’, a ‘botched civilization’ reduced to ‘a few thousand battered books’.¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, in a now-famous and much-anthologised review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), saw in Joyce’s method ‘a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’.¹⁷ Is there an echo of

Review for publishing Ulysses, see Jodie Medd, *Lesbian Scandal and the Culture of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁴ See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), for a wide-ranging account of these traditional practices across Europe.

¹⁵ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), 258, 252. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Ezra Pound, *Diptych Rome-London* (New York: New Directions, 1994), 42.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, ‘*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth’ (1923), in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey (Oxford: Wiley, 2005), 165.

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the Western Front's horrifying trenches in Eliot's own repulsion from the 'slimy mud of words' in his *Choruses from the Rock* (1934):¹⁸ Certainly, by the mid-1930s he saw the futility and anarchy of the postwar world as contributing to catastrophic breaks in tradition and social understanding, with 'the Christian Faith' spoken of as 'an anachronism'.¹⁹ Younger writers too, with the revisionist prompt of another war encouraging them, produced variations on this theme: Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, calling their 'social history of Great Britain' between 1918 and 1939 *The Long Week-End*, suggested there had been a collective break from both reality and responsibility in the interwar years.²⁰ Like any complex wound, the acts of regeneration involved in thinking socially about the consequences of the War took up much of the following decades, and resulted in complex, often contradictory, accounts.²¹

After the War, Between the Wars

Contradictory accounts from the time point to contradictory realities, and we need to avoid literary-historical narratives that too cleanly transpose a set of concerns that find contemporary resonances for us now onto the conflicts and negotiations of the time. Some writers – Hugh MacDiarmid most famously – survived the War without taking from it much in the way of either psychological trauma or significant material; others, such as Vera Brittain, would spend years parsing their experiences in response to the changing political demands of the moment. The War itself acts, in our historical understanding, as one marker of the beginning of the end of the British Empire, and of Britain's eclipse by the United States as global hegemon in the twentieth century. If the United States' growing European political and cultural power – which involved in part the process of 'Americanizing Britain' – was a keenly-felt and much-debated social phenomenon in the interwar years, the Empire's woes registered, in some quarters, not at all, the War itself having, after all, led to an *expansion* of Britain's imperial reach and power.²² The Treaty of Versailles saw Britain

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 182.

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, 'Religion and Literature' (1934), in T. S. Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), 100.

²⁰ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (London: Faber, 1940).

²¹ We borrow here the imagery of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–95), a still unmatched (fictional) account of the 'regeneration' demanded by the First World War.

²² See Genevieve Abravanel's fine study, *Americanizing Britain: The Rise of Modernism in the Age of the Entertainment Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

and its Dominions extend their reach into Palestine, Iraq (Mesopotamia) and the South Pacific. While nascent independence movements in India and elsewhere, and the ‘loss’ of most of Ireland in 1922, would lead, amongst Anglo-Irish writers not least (as Michael G. Cronin explores in Chapter 11), to extended reflections on the status and character of Britishness as a political and cultural category, across this period those reflections were as conflicted as the struggles to which they responded.

Jagged edges mark the tears in the literary record made by our periodising urge. If the two wars frame 1920–1940 as a convenient as well as logical and obvious unit of literary history, this act of historical selection ought not obscure from us as students and readers what is discarded in this act of cutting and shaping. Bonnie Kime Scott, a generation ago now, made the telling observation that:

The year 1940 has served as a typical terminal date for studies of modernism [...] By that time, the major experimental works, such as *The Waste Land*, *Tender Buttons*, *The Waves* and *Finnegans Wake* had appeared and death had claimed Lawrence, Mansfield, and Yeats [but] Rhys, Barnes and Warner resurfaced with later, much-revised works [and] West never stopped publishing [...] interrupted careers, like interrupted influence, tell us a great deal about the politics of literary production.²³

Scott’s chosen examples – Jean Rhys, Dominican-born Englishwoman at times resident in Paris; Djuna Barnes, American resident in Paris published by Eliot in London; Rebecca West, an Anglo-Irish writer who published regularly into the 1950s – highlight the ways in which national frames and periodising restrictions obscure trans-national literary production and women’s writing, ‘interrupted’ as this so often was (and still is) by unequal burdens in domestic responsibility and childcare. But the point has a wider relevance: for all the unavoidable (and intellectually productive) demands of periodising, the very ease and power with which that work can be done when reading the literature of the interwar period ought to give us critical pause. A beginning – whether 1920, 1890, ‘on or about December 1910’ or whenever else – sets up expectations for the reading to come.

This volume, like the series of which it is part, slows down and complicates our periodising impulse by way of a simple organisational sleight-of-hand. By asking our contributors to order their material according to a twenty-year division rather than into the more common decadal arrangement, new breaks and continuities come into view. The 1930s

²³ Bonnie Kime Scott, ‘Introduction’, in *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Bonnie Kime Scott (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 6–7.

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was, Stephen Spender claimed later, ‘the decade in which young writers became interested in politics’,²⁴ and a familiar division has persisted, in summary accounts if not in engaged criticism, de-linking the ‘modernist’ or ‘autonomous’ art of the 1920s from the ‘committed’ realism and politically-engaged literature of the 1930s. Scott’s reminder of the vagaries of individual lives and publishing schedules already complicates this division – Virginia Woolf, after all, was publishing politically-engaged essays in the 1920s and ‘autonomous’, experimental work such as *Between the Acts* (1941) late in the 1930s – and recent scholarship draws our attention to the ways in which committed and autonomous works from both decades relied on the opposite term in order to make their own meaning. Benjamin Kohlmann demonstrates, in a recent bravura account, that the ‘committed styles’ of the younger Auden, Spender and the Communist novelist Edward Upward all draw on an ‘apolitical unconscious’, a commitment to something like autonomy or ‘poetic integrity’ (in both senses of that word), to drive their political writing. ‘The notion of literature’s “uses” in thirties literary discourse’, Kohlmann writes, ‘is less settled than is commonly granted.’²⁵ Realism, in all its varieties, remained energetic and dominant across the decades, as Bashir Abu-Manneh’s study of short fiction in the *New Statesman* demonstrates, while the question of what commitment was to mean drew in aesthetic as well as political considerations.²⁶ So-called ‘autonomous’ works of the 1920s, similarly, can be read as always engaged in political and social debate, with T. S. Eliot, for example, arguing that ‘literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical standpoint’.²⁷ In Scotland and Wales, moreover, the association of modernist innovation or formal experimentation with aesthetic autonomy was never, at the time or since, a lively component of debates about modern literature: Hugh MacDiarmid, Willa and Edwin Muir, and Lewis Grassic Gibbon all shared political commitments and interests with energetic experimental drives.²⁸

²⁴ Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People 1933–1975* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 13.

²⁵ Benjamin Kohlmann, *Committed Styles: Modernism, Politics, and Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

²⁶ Bashir Abu-Manneh, *Fiction of the New Statesman* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2011).

²⁷ Eliot, *Essays Ancient and Modern*, 93.

²⁸ See the chapters by Margery Palmer McCulloch and Daniel G. Williams on ‘Scottish and Welsh Modernisms’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and, on the autonomy debate, Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy:*

Interactions between literature and politics become more complex still when we consider the respective ‘background’ of each decade. It was the 1920s, after all, that saw the General Strike – the biggest mobilisation of organised labour in British history until the 1984–85 Miners’ Strike – the first Labour government, and severe social unrest and union agitation in the mines and railways. The 1930s, by contrast, were, domestically at least, politically quiescent: MacDonald, Baldwin and Chamberlain oversaw Conservative-dominated coalitions, or outright Conservative rule, throughout the decade. The Jarrow March, a procession of the unemployed from the northeast to London in 1936, seems an exception but in fact confirms the pattern. For all its publicity and later mythologisation, the Jarrow March was smaller, and less disruptive politically, than earlier unemployed workers’ gatherings, demonstrations and riots.²⁹ Whatever the urgency of fascism in Spain, Germany and Italy for the already politicised, radicalising youth or dissident intellectuals, the local political scene was one of the most stable in Europe.

These gaps between literary and social history, or between writers’ international affiliations (anti-fascism) and domestic situations, should not be seen as critical difficulties in need of resolution. Our proposal is, rather, to read autonomy and commitment, realism and modernism, avant-garde developments by the ‘men of 1914’, women’s writing composed but unpublished at the time and late works from Edwardian masters as all part of the same cultural fabric. ‘Capitalist development’, the Warwick Research Collective argue, ‘does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course. [It is] [c]ombined *and* uneven.’ It is natural, then, that interwar Britain, the centre of a mighty global Empire *and* the tired victor of a war which had exposed its economic and imperial limits, the expansive power that was also the loser in revolutionary war with Ireland, the stable, constitutional monarchy that was also stopped by a General Strike, should produce such discordant and discontinuous literary traditions within the same period. Alongside the Warwick Research Collective:

We prefer to speak then not of literary forms spreading or unfolding across empty time (and hence of history as being divided into sequential ‘periods’ – classicism, realism, modernism, postmodernism, etc), but of forms that are brought into being (and often in collision with other, pre-existing forms)

Modernism from Wilde to de Man (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). It is, naturally, possible to bring this kind of care to a decade-bound study too: see, for example, Chris Baldick’s *Literature of the 1920s: Writers Among the Ruins* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

²⁹ A contemporary account is Wal Hannington, *A Short History of the Unemployed* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1938).