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Introduction: the Long 1930s

Benjamin Kohlmann and Matthew Taunton

The 1930s are again en vogue. Over the past fifteen years political commentators have repeatedly invoked the decade as a resonant backdrop to current historical events ranging from the financial crash of 2008 and the surge of populist political movements to the apparent crisis of democratic institutions in Europe and elsewhere. 'Are We Back to the 1930s Again?', the *Guardian* asked its readers in 2013, adding rather gingerly that 'we shouldn't panic' just yet.[1] More recently, the same newspaper published an even more urgently phrased article, entitled 'The 1930s Revisited', which warned readers 'to learn the era's lessons and avoid its mistakes'.[2] This journalistic concern with the 1930s is part of a broader reawakening of interest in the decade which has included numerous bestselling publications such as Piers Brendon's *The Dark Valley: a Panorama of the 1930s* (2002), Morris Dickstein's *Dancing in the Dark* (2009), and Juliet Gardiner's *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (2010). Turning back to the 1930s seems to exert the same morbid fascination as watching a car crash unfold in slow motion, a catastrophe that seems tragically inevitable but that could have been avoided by the historical actors involved.

More so than in the case of most periods of literary history, critical assessments of the 1930s have notoriously been a matter of political perspective. While some scholars present the decade as a cautionary tale that can teach us valuable lessons about our own historical moment, others have celebrated the sense of historical upheaval that characterised the time. There have been prominent attempts (from E. P. Thompson to Michael Denning) to reclaim the decade's left-wing radical energies, but the populist far right – from the Trumpist altright to certain Brexiters – have also recently laid claim to the period.[3] For example, the former White House strategist Steve Bannon ominously declared that the Trump administration's agenda of economic and cultural isolationism would usher in a period 'as exciting as the 1930s', though Bannon characteristically left unsaid the political implications of this assessment.[4]

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Such attempts to instrumentalise the 1930s for contemporary political debates – much like the presentist insistence that our own historical moment is somehow 'like' the 1930s – produce a profoundly distorted picture of the decade. What is perhaps most remarkable about invocations of the 1930s today is how closely they mirror the deep political divisions that characterised the decade itself. Few periods of literary history have been as contested as the 1930s. Indeed, George Orwell's judgement regarding the Spanish Civil War – that its 'true history' cannot be written because any account of it will inevitably be a 'partisan history' – could just as easily be applied to the literary history of the 1930s as a whole.[5] The tendency to celebrate or (more frequently) condemn the 1930s began almost immediately after the decade ended – for example, in the spate of publications from 1940 that includes Orwell's 'Inside the Whale', Virginia Woolf's 'The Leaning Tower' and Malcolm Muggeridge's *The Thirties* – and it has continued to the present.[6] It is the aim of this volume to move discussion of the 1930s beyond such reductive and fetishised accounts.[7] Rather than offering another swing of the pendulum, the chapters in this volume show that we should reclaim the 1930s as a key transformational moment in the cultural and literary history of the twentieth century. Instead of regarding them as an anomaly, this book proposes that we reconceptualise the 1930s as a 'long' decade. Treating the 1930s as an elongated decade is intended as an experiment in reperiodisation. By turning the decade into a pivot of twentieth-century literary and cultural history, we can identify aesthetic debates and trends as well as institutional, technological and social developments that were raised with special urgency during this period while also tracing their reverberations well beyond the period's conventional temporal boundaries. The task is therefore not simply to make the decade longer, but to identify a range of literary and cultural developments that were key to the 1930s and to use these trends as reference points for a partial remapping of twentieth-century literary and cultural production.

Feminist interventions, such as Janet Montefiore's *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996), have shown the way by extending the field beyond the homosocial clique covered, for example, in Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation* (1976). Our re-evaluation of 1930s literary history pushes further still in this direction, with an expansive effort to observe many contemporaneous (and sometimes contradictory) trends at the same time. Such an approach is in accord with 1930s writing's sense of its own historicity. The decade abounded with attempts to produce a map of contemporary culture in its totality, with Mass Observation being the

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most prominent of these. A text such as *May the Twelfth* (1937) – an account of the events surrounding the coronation of George VI by more than two hundred observers – took a deep, synchronic slice through British culture on a single day. The overall effect was to shift the focus away from the political 'event' itself, revealing how deeply embedded contemporary experience was in the long life of institutions and in the deep structures and habits of the everyday. Humphrey Jennings (one of the founders of Mass Observation) presented his own historical project, *Pandaemonium 1660–1886*, as the 'imaginative history of the industrial revolution', made up of a montage of fragments arranged not chronologically but in terms of larger historical constellations (an approach that Ben Jones and Rebecca Searle have compared to Walter Benjamin's roughly contemporaneous *Arcades Project*).[8] Jennings's *Pandaemonium*, whose Benjaminian poetics could also be compared to the poetry of Mass Observation's co-founder Charles Madge, was a manifesto for a form of historiography capable of capturing '[history's] complexity – the type of pattern and so the type of inter-actions of which it consists'. Jennings went on:

> The analytical historian's business is to disentangle shred by shred like plucking the strand out of a rope. The result is the length of the rope but only one strand's thickness, and although the strand may still be twisted from its position among the other strands, it is presented nevertheless alone. The poet might be compared to a man who cuts a short section of the whole rope. The only thing is he must cut it where it will not fall to pieces.[9]

Our book is not a montage or a mass observation project, and many of our contributors do focus on events as well as structures. Nevertheless, some of the spirit of Jennings's multi-stranded historical method – his attention to long-term historical trends and to the complex composition of a single historical moment – informs the work of this volume, and it can help us to rethink some of our conventional periodisations.

The new account of the decade's literature we offer here aims to be more ambitious than simply moving around the markers that cordon the 1930s off from modernism on one side and from the mid-century on the other (to take two looming literary-historical categories with which the work of this volume is necessarily in dialogue).[10] Understanding the 1930s as a period of profound and continuous transition, rather than as the end point of modernism or as a start point of the mid-century, allows us to see it as a crucial means of co-ordinating literary-historical debates about the

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twentieth century as such. The persistence of various forms of avant-garde writing co-exist with characteristically mid-century concerns around literature's relationship to decolonisation and the emergence of the welfare state. Thus, our book speaks to literary historians working on other parts of the twentieth century, and it explains why the 1930s should matter to them. While Jennings's approach could quite easily inform literary histories of other periods, the 1930s are particularly ripe for this kind of treatment. Invoking Valentine Cunningham's seminal study *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988), David Trotter has observed that '[f]ew tranches of literary evidence have been crammed more tightly into their historiographical containers than mid-twentieth century "British writers" into "the Thirties"'. Making his own case for a 'long 1930s', Trotter notes that 'the more tightly evidence of any kind has been crammed into its container, the further and more revealingly it will be flung once the straps work loose'.[11] The unpacking operation undertaken in this book reveals the 1930s as a particularly intense phase in a long revolution that straddles 'modernism' (a term that has been extremely productive over the past twenty years in theorising twentieth-century culture) and the 'mid-century' (which is starting to gather momentum as a new literary-historical paradigm).

In trying to reclaim the 1930s as a focal point for twentieth-century literary history, then, we have needed to think beyond the myth of the 'Red Decade' by reopening the question of what the 1930s were and why they speak to us beyond the political reductions encouraged by presentist analogies with the period of Trump and Brexit. In doing this, our contributors have benefited from recent developments in the discipline. For example, the breakdown of the ideological binaries of the Cold War has enabled literary scholars to produce more nuanced accounts of the political affiliations that characterised the interwar years. Our contributors take account of the broad spectrum of political positions by analysing the ways in which sexual, religious and racial identities combine with or rub up against class politics. In a related vein, feminist literary criticism played a particularly important role in laying the groundwork for a broadening and deepening of the 1930s as a literary-historical category, partly because the popular narrative that has crystallised around writing and politics in the decade is fundamentally linked to the narrow and overwhelmingly male canon with which some previous critics worked. The resulting interest in women writers as various as Sylvia Townsend Warner, Elizabeth Bowen, Storm Jameson and Winifred Holtby – all of whom are discussed in this volume – is in itself a provocation to rethink the overdetermined periodisation of the decade in terms of a canonical all-male cast. More recently,

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something like an 'institutional turn' in literary studies has enabled a new understanding of the ways in which writers' activities were co-ordinated, and – with the increasing importance of institutions such as the BBC and International PEN – the 1930s prove to be a central decade in the long history of literature's institutionalisation. While discussions of the welfare state have tended to take the Beveridge Report (1942) as their starting point, and cast the Attlee government's reforms as the social-democratic resolution of the more radical politics characteristic of the 1930s, our book points to the early institutional consolidation of the welfare state.

The concept of the long 1930s also asks us to rethink the emergence of other large-scale historical trends, including the Cold War and the socio-cultural constellation of the postcolonial. As Patrick Wright has argued, Winston Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech at Fulton, Missouri, in 1946 has become the fetishised point of origin for the Cold War, but – as Wright's notion of the 'long Cold War' also seeks to establish – a highly polarised geopolitical mindset was already in evidence in the 1930s, which went along with the gradual emergence of a second world republic of letters with Soviet Moscow at its symbolic centre.[12] Similarly, our book attempts to shift the debate about decolonisation away from an 'episodic' or evental history (in Fernand Braudel's terms[13]) focused around fundamental turning points (such as Indian independence, achieved in 1947), in order to highlight a longer-term cultural shift, charting the gradual emergence of a postcolonial intelligentsia before the British Empire itself substantially shrank. In doing so, our contributors can build on recent attempts to theorise 'world literature' as well as on various iterations of transnationalism and globalism, which have allowed a reconsideration of both the (fascist) nationalism and (communist) internationalism that long dominated discussions of the mythical Red Decade.

Reframing the 1930s as a long decade also offers an important intervention in current scholarly debates about periodisation more generally. This book harnesses the energies of the current historicist turn, with its focus on archival depth and its attention to non-canonical writers and texts, to a larger project of reperiodisation. In doing so, it offers a much-needed alternative to a certain particularising tendency in modernist studies which uses archival resources, newspapers, and periodicals to delve deeply into specific moments of literary-historical interest while largely bracketing the theoretical concerns and periodising ambitions that used to be associated with the concept of 'modernism'. The fashion for single-year studies – such as Bonnie Kime Scott's *Refiguring Modernism: Women of 1928* (1996), Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *1926: Living on the Edge of Time* (1997), Michael North's

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Reading 1922: a Return to the Scene of the Modern (1999) and Jean-Michel Rabaté's *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (2007) – is in some ways symptomatic of this growing historicist and contextualist orientation. Offering snapshots of individual years, these books discover and synthesise vast quantities of literary, journalistic, and archival sources. While they pursue their goals with considerable theoretical sophistication, in their deliberately narrow focus the longer arc of literary history tends to become obscured.

Taking literary history in slightly larger units, but with a fundamentally similar contextualist approach, a number of publishers are now producing book series that treat the literary history of the twentieth century one decade at a time, one volume after another. Randall Stevenson's preface to the *Edinburgh History of Twentieth-Century Literature in Britain* series is symptomatic in wanting to see 'the twentieth century as *the* century of decades'. Stevenson amplifies the claim by positing that, in the twentieth century, '[i]deas, styles, and outlooks came into dominance, and were then displaced, in more and more rapid succession, characterising ever-briefer periods, sharply separated from predecessors and successors'.[14] Stevenson's argument resonates with a certain folk historiography, described by Ian Jack in the *London Review of Books* as a 'fashion . . . for slicing up history into ten-year periods, each of them crudely flavoured and differently coloured, like a tube of wine gums'.[15] The wine gum theory of literary history is reflected by increasing specialisation within the discipline, the professional structures of which (in the Anglophone world at least) create incentives to focus intensive archival work on a short time period.

The effect of piling up literary-historical detail and archival finds has never been easier to achieve, even as it has become professionally compulsory. With the increasing digital accessibility of many newspapers, periodicals, archives, and books, the process of accumulating a body of connected evidence to provide a rich thematic backdrop to the literary text is no feat, but there are severe, often unacknowledged limitations on what can be achieved in this manner. It can in fact seem that the responsibility for literary history's big picture now frequently falls to the digital humanities: as Franco Moretti complained of a critical praxis too frequently locked in 'the circumscribed domain of the event and of the individual case', Ted Underwood and Jordan Sellers have begun to explore 'The *Longue Durée* of Literary Prestige' by an attention to large corpuses of texts, spread over a long period, that no one scholar could conceivably have the time to read.[16]

A History of 1930s British Literature has undoubtedly been influenced by what Joseph North has recently labelled the 'scholarly turn' in literary

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studies since the 1980s, which has seen the mid-century critical paradigm of close formal analysis replaced with one in which 'works of literature are chiefly of interest as diagnostic instruments for determining the state of the cultures in which they were written or read'.[17] As North notes, this scholarly turn – especially in its early phase – produced ambitious accounts of established aesthetic categories (e.g. Jameson's description of modernism as an 'aesthetic reaction' to the 'new historical situation of modernity' and to 'the process of modernization').[18] However, insofar as the scholarly turn has begun to contribute to an increasingly acute particularising tendency, and to ever-sharper distinctions between one decade (or even one year) and the next, our account of the long 1930s resists it. Historicism of this kind is not an unalloyed good, and this volume hopes to reclaim a more ambitious account of how texts, styles, and institutions resonate far beyond the narrow confines of their contemporary moment.

Most relevant to the work of literary historians, the changed understanding of the 1930s which this volume proposes is intended to prompt a rethinking of the hegemonic period categories which we use to make sense of mid-century literary culture. For example, the label of the long 1930s usefully defamiliarises dominant period labels such as 'late modernism' and the more recent category of 'intermodernism'. The concept of 'late modernism' has had a profound influence on the way in which scholars think about the artistic culture of the interwar years and its legacies. Contrary to earlier accounts of modernism, which frequently focused on modernism's origins and emergence, theorisations of 'late modernism' have drawn our attention to the end points of modernism in the 1930s and 1940s.[19] Important studies ranging from Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism* (1999) to Marina MacKay's *Modernism and World War II* (2007) and Leo Mellor's *Reading the Ruins* (2011) have challenged the tendency – central to classical accounts such as George Orwell's 'Inside the Whale' (1940) and Hynes's *The Auden Generation* (1976) – to treat the decade as though it were a largely self-contained literary-historical unit. *A History of 1930s British Literature* builds on this significant research but it also aims to reopen debates about the artistic and cultural specificity of the 1930s.[20] The chapters in this volume do not deny that the aesthetic protocols of modernism occupied a key place in the artistic production of the 1930s, and several chapters demonstrate the continued usefulness of late modernism as an analytic category. However, our contributors also clearly indicate that modernism was only one of the many cultural vectors – what Jennings calls the historical rope's multiple and tightly interwoven 'strands' – which we need to understand in order to provide a fuller picture

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of this important and long decade. We hope that this volume demonstrates that subsuming the 1930s under an increasingly expansive (and increasingly meaningless) 'modernism' label fails to capture central aspects of the decade's literary and cultural field. Inasmuch as our volume invites an experimental rethinking of twentieth-century literary outside the analytic (and value-laden) category of modernism, it is in sympathy with the recent boom of scholarship on 'the mid-century'.[21] As a deliberately 'neutral' literary-historical designation, the mid-century seems intended to offer a more-decentred view of literary culture between 1920 and 1980. However, it is our belief that – as evidenced by recent appropriations of the decade on the left and right – the 1930s will continue to attract special interest from scholars and popular audiences who regard it as a focal point of the political, social and aesthetic history of the past century.

Each of the four subsections of this volume identifies a set of aesthetic debates and socio-political and institutional transformations that contributes to a more capacious understanding of the decade's place in twentieth-century literary and cultural history, and along with it a recasting of the literary and cultural history of the mid-century.

The first part, 'Mapping a New Decade: Geographies and Identities', explores the geographical contours of writing in the long 1930s – new views of the city and the countryside as well as of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom – before turning to the decade's radical investment in neglected and non-normative (queer, female, proletarian) identities. The section pays fresh attention to urban geographies of cities such as Berlin and Paris whose central place in 1930s literary culture is well established, but it also sheds light on literary and cultural discourses which turned a scrutinising gaze on the British nation itself. The female experience of the city, Emma Zimmerman argues, functions as a focal lens for broader cultural anxieties about the livability of Britain's urban environment as well as about the stability of the country's national identity. Kristin Bluemel's chapter complements this perspective by showing that Britain's national integrity was also challenged from the geographical periphery, as authors stressed the significance of regional identities in their fictional writings. The chapters in this section emphasise the internal fissures that characterised Britain in the 1930s, and they show that collective and personal identities were inextricably bound up with the tremendous changes which Britain's urban and rural environments underwent in the long 1930s. For example, Nick Hubble's chapter explores how the proletarian identities that had been formed in the welter of England's industrial metropolises came to converge with

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modes of pastoral writing and how these identities intersected with questions of gender. Related intersections between gender and the performance of class figure in the chapters by Kristin Ewins and Glyn Salton-Cox: while Ewins foregrounds the intensified pressures of professionalisation that were faced by many female writers in the 1930s, Salton-Cox rehabilitates the Leninist organisational unit of the cell as an oppositional formation that has received less attention in the context of 1930s writing than the coterie. The chapters in this part open up new ways in which we might think about the social and geographical contexts of literary production in Britain during the later interwar years. By doing so, they resist the facile reification of central 1930s categories (such a 'proletarian', 'feminist', and 'queer') into artificially homogenous categories. Instead of presenting these identities merely as the object of homosocial middle-class desire – a notion perpetuated by the die-hard myth of the 'Auden Generation' and also more subtly set out in Frank Kermode's *History and Value* – the section begins the volume's larger enterprise of opening up the literary and cultural field of the decade to newly ambitious theoretical and historical accounts.

Part II has two closely related points of focus: 'Media Histories and the Institutions of Literature'. It seeks, firstly, to reassess literature's place within an evolving media ecology, where (since the nineteenth century) the cultural centrality of the printed word is challenged by film, recorded sound, radio and telephony. While influential media histories such as Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900* (1985, trans. 1990) have tended to identify the *fin de siècle* as the decisive turning point when new media technologies erupted on to the scene, the contributors to this section position the 1930s on a longer arc of medial and intermedial transformation. Genuinely new technologies – television, the sound film, broadcast radio – emerged and became institutionalised in the decade, and meanwhile the telephones, typewriters, and gramophones that were novelties in 1900 were increasingly becoming the normal accessories of modern life. James Purdon's chapter argues that the 1930s were a key phase in a modern reconceptualisation of communications media, which started to be seen as the all-encompassing environment in which social and cultural life takes place. Laura Marcus's investigation of the coming of the 'talkie' explores the shared concern of films and novels in the period with the representation of speech, as she contrasts the category of 'talk', considered as ambient chatter, with more contrapuntal or dialogic forms of communication – above all 'conversation'. Meanwhile, as Ian Whittington shows, radio was undergoing a period

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of maturation and consolidation, and like film, it provided work and a new income stream for writers, while encouraging them to explore creatively the possibilities of the medium.

Part II also explores the institutions that helped to define readerships as well as career structures for writers and that acted as organisational hubs for political activism or debate. If communications technologies were changing the relationship between writer and audience, analogous effects were produced by the institutions which fostered (or selectively inhibited) the production, distribution and consumption of the literary text. Peter Marks, Vike Plock, and Andrew Thacker shed new light on the ways in which the production of literature interacted with the institutional contexts for its distribution and consumption. Marks explores the interconnected realms of newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets, while Plock's exploration of the paperback industry compares Penguin Books with the Hogarth Press, unsettling conventional distinctions between Bloomsbury modernism and the middlebrow. Thacker's chapter examines the important role played by libraries, bookshops and book clubs in the circulation of literature and the consolidation of different readerships, often along political lines. Schools and universities arguably played an analogous role, and Matthew Taunton's chapter investigates the politics of literature and education in the period. Rachel Potter shifts the debate about institutions and organisations onto an international level, showing how recent discussion of 'world literature' and transnationalism can be enriched by an engagement with the structures of writers' organisations, in this case International PEN.

Part III sheds new light on an established way of understanding 1930s literature in terms of an apparent antagonism between 'Commitment and Autonomy'. As the contributions to this section show, such an opposition is almost absurdly reductive and needs to be complicated along a number of related axes. Rather than pursuing binaristic dichotomies between politics and art, or between left and right, this third part explores a diverse range of commitments – religious as well as political – and their interlocking rather than oppositional relation to forms of artistic experimentation. In doing so, several chapters in this section trace the long life of the modernist (literary, musical, and artistic) avant-gardes in the changed historical environment of the 1930s, while others pay attention to new aesthetic modes which emerged over the course of the decade and which are more difficult to subsume under labels such as late modernism. Rod Mengham and Leo Mellor explore the common ground that was inhabited

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