

## Introduction

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This book offers a broad account of British poetry after 1945 – its major trends, its central figures, its key texts, and the contexts out of which it has emerged. Chapters progress both thematically and chronologically, adumbrating particular movements, styles, and topics as they unfold over decade- or decade-and-a-half-long overlapping spans. The first five chapters cover different aspects of the period between 1945 and the mid-1980s, while the final three pick up the story in the 1980s and work their way toward the present. This is not an airtight chronology, however, and there are moments throughout when I jump ahead or retrace earlier steps in order to extend a story, reframe a connection, or preview an upcoming topic.

Such an organization is meant to present a coherent picture of the field. But it also spurs the argument that buzzes beneath the book's surface of exposition, description, and analysis. By reading across British poetry at various moments, juxtaposing disparate but proximate texts, I hope to show the variety and capaciousness of the work that constitutes the field rather than to present each chapter as a thematic silo. Of course, there are many times in the following pages when I place like next to like, but I have also sought opportunities to place like beside unlike. A number of the accounts of postwar British poetry that exist, and even the most powerful ones, tend to adhere to the silo model, either pitting factions or formations against each other or remaining within a narrow band of poetic practice. Al Alvarez both identified and perpetuated this tendency in the famous introduction to his 1962 anthology, *The New Poetry*, in which he describes the “machinery” of English poetry “since about 1930” as “a series of negative feed-backs.”<sup>1</sup> The explanatory force of this analogy is quite real, but it also sets into motion two distinct but equally limiting methods of argument about that poetry.

First, it proffers a linear approach that obscures the complex and often incongruent unfurling of formal possibilities that has taken place over the past seventy years. And second, it models a species of antagonistic criticism that continues to flourish. The clearest form of this enmity is the ongoing impasse between so-called mainstream and experimental or innovative poetry, with

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well-known polemics appearing from both sides, whether Don Paterson's introduction to *New British Poetry* (2004), which repeatedly lambastes the hermetic difficulties of the "Postmoderns," or Andrew Duncan's series of volumes objecting to what he sees as the fundamental "conservatism" of British poetry in the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Postwar British poetry is certainly not unique in being a site of ardent and often scathing skirmishes among and between practitioners and critics. Furthermore, there have been many instances in which strong, polemical stands have been necessary and have revitalized the field. I will detail a number of these instances over the course of the following chapters. However, one unfortunate side effect of a persistent "negative feed-back" model has been a tendency to eschew discussions of texts' intricacies in favor of a too-heavy dependence on critical preconceptions. Keith Tuma has provided a valuable account of how twentieth-century British poetry has been underread, and so misunderstood, by American readers,<sup>3</sup> but it might also be said that postwar British poetry has been underread more generally, not only in the sense that it is read by fewer people than other forms of imaginative writing – the plight of poetry everywhere – but also that it hasn't been read closely or imaginatively enough.<sup>4</sup> My aim here is not only to introduce as fully as possible the range of British poetry written since the middle of the twentieth century, but also to look along the way at a selection of especially intriguing poems in depth and on their own terms.

By enmeshing texts, poets, and groups within a given historical span and set of contexts, this book implicitly argues that a poem, as a mode of cultural production, formally reshapes the various material pressures that nonetheless shape it. This is not, however, to say that poems merely reflect their historical circumstances or express preconceived contents or identity positions. To be sure, questions of position and identity – whether in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, or nationality – are vital when considering this body of work, and one of the major features of British poetry since the 1970s has been a significant increase in the number and prominence of women and minority writers. However, the poems that I highlight tend not to reduce to unequivocal statements of identity. Rather, by way of their formal investments and processes of unfolding, poems can register, critique, and remake identity positions. Poetic form is multifarious, and many factors come into play when considering any aspect of a text's substance. Does a poem rhyme or use traditional meters and stanza-shapes, or does it conform to a different sort of rhythmic organization, or to none at all? Does it take part in a conventional genre or mode, such as elegy, ekphrasis, or curse? Does it feature a coherent speaker, or does it seem less like a dramatic monologue and more like a crash of competing voices or textual shards? Does it focus on a natural scene or an urban site or a

domestic interior, or does it seem to have no setting at all? Is there a narrative or argument within the text, or does it utilize some other sort of discursive strategy? Does it abide by a particular kind of structural limitation, either a well-established type like the fourteen lines and internal architecture of a sonnet or a *sui generis* rule that the poet invents? Is it heavily stylized and densely allusive, or does it aim to resemble something like everyday speech? And, if so, what sort of everyday speech does it resemble? All of these questions – and there are many more – contribute to our understanding of a poem's form, and they will underlie many of my readings to come.

However, the form that a poem takes is not simply a matter of choice for an aesthetic free agent who can survey the history of poetry and select from among its myriad options while remaining untethered to that history. Cultural circumstances and historical conditions favor certain options and make others seem less workable or propitious. History doesn't determine form, but a poem is nonetheless marbled by its context. Poetic forms encode their obligations, their debts, and their attempted freedoms. As such, they serve as complex and sometimes contradictory aesthetic enactments that are incessantly marked by their moment. The most significant and innovative poems to appear in the period within this book's scope are steeped in the history of poetry even as they respond to shifting conditions within Britain, and they appear across the spectrum of poetic practice and style, although the surrounding debate among critics, reviewers, and poets themselves has tended toward the construction and perpetuation of oppositional camps. My principal aim is to elucidate the formal genealogies of the wonderfully assorted body of poetry produced in Britain since 1945.

The phrase *in Britain* necessitates some further clarification. This book is primarily concerned with the poetry of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. I will not be focusing on poetry from places that had won independence from Britain before the middle of the twentieth century, nor will I focus on Anglophone poetry written in newly independent countries after decolonization.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, it is vital to discuss poetry by colonial writers during the period of decolonization, especially in cases in which that work made an impact in the United Kingdom, and I take such matters up in Chapter 2. On the other hand, it is just as vital to differentiate between British poetry after 1945 and the much larger canon of Anglophone poetry or postcolonial poetry in English so as not to offer a totalizing narrative of global poetry in English that recolonizes distinct, emergent literary histories.<sup>6</sup>

As I begin to show in the next section of this introduction, the political ground of Britain has shifted massively in the postwar period, and the attenuation of the British Empire cannot help but be a significant factor in

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a consideration of the period's poetry. While the continued designation of that poetry as "British" invites investigation, *British poetry* remains a useful, if unstable, category, even though the larger geopolitical entity to which it refers has altered. Maintaining it as a designating term has the value of continually indicating the field's own historicity. With the empire's close and ongoing movements toward devolution and possible independence in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the primary denotation of "British" is put into question. But as a literary-historical term, it retains vital connotative layers. In this book, *Britishness* will function mainly to suggest differentially shared sets of material, cultural, and geographical factors. With the exception of work from Northern Ireland – a region whose complex contemporary history and turbulent status within late-twentieth-century Britain it seems best to address in a separate chapter – I discuss poetry from different parts of Britain relationally, and so, for example, rather than a separate chapter on Scottish poetry, there are considerations of Scottish poets at different historical moments within several of the chapters that follow. This is manifestly not to say that all of the poets discussed in this book would identify themselves primarily as British. Rather, it is to say that an interlocking set of historical and sociopolitical conditions subtends, at least partially, their work. However, this claim is accompanied by the understanding that considering this work as *British* is much more useful as an initial way into it than as a final explanation of it.

At the end of the Second World War, Britain was – to adjust the title of Stevie Smith's most famous poem – both waving and drowning. It was a complex moment, and an array of crosscurrents shaped the United Kingdom in the decade or so after the Allied victory over the Axis powers. The defeat of Nazism and totalitarianism was a triumph for freedom and democracy, and Britain's key role in that victory brought hope and an upswing in national feeling. The Labour Party's surprising election in 1945 – over Winston Churchill's Conservatives – spurred the beginnings of the welfare state, and central to the story of the last seventy years has been an overall improvement in the material circumstances of a great many Britons, especially in the three decades after the end of the war, when changes wrought in the late 1940s were most keenly felt. Sir William Beveridge's 1942 *Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services* became the basis for crucial reforms in many spheres of life, and the postwar nationalization of key industries and resources aimed to ensure a more stable economy. For a number of reasons, the rigidities of the English class system loosened, and changes in government policy provided opportunities for many more people, most notably through the passing of an Education Act in 1944 (the Butler Act), which established a three-tier system of secondary education

and ensured access for all students. Along with the National Health Service, the National Insurance Act, and other pillars of the early welfare state, the Butler Act aimed to produce a more equitable society.

This isn't to say that the English aristocracy lost its power or that the triangular hegemony of Oxford, Cambridge, and London failed to hold sway. Rather, it is simply to point out that Britain underwent immense changes in the second half of the twentieth century and that these changes had at their root not only national and global geopolitical shifts (more on which in what follows) but also internal shifts in how British society imagined itself and how people in Britain lived their lives. The playing field was certainly not leveled, but strict class-based stratifications began to be dislodged, however slowly and uneasily, while living standards and wages rose for much of the population. In addition, an overall liberalization of society meant increased rights, freedoms, and prospects for women, minorities, and marginalized groups, although racism and sexism continued to be systemic problems. While the major political parties disagreed about numerous aspects of the welfare state's makeup, the basic principle of it was at the heart of a political consensus that held until the 1970s, and there were periods of significant energy and optimism, especially from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s, when it was thought that many social problems had been largely solved.

Such progress is, however, part of a long-term narrative, and from another angle, Britain's postwar fortunes look much more like drowning than cheerily waving. If it was a period of social improvements, then it was also one of deep disillusionment. At war's end, Britain faced major challenges in almost every area, and a widespread sense of decline accompanied feelings of relief and renewed hope. The economy was massively damaged during the war, with Britain losing a quarter of its total wealth, and the postwar period featured a number of currency and balance-of-payments crises as the pound sterling's value in world markets was eroded. During the war, there had been huge military and civilian casualties, and German aerial bombings had caused major damage to cities throughout Britain. As Alan Sinfield notes, "by June 1941 more than two million houses in Britain had been damaged or destroyed; by the end of the war, two out of every seven houses were damaged, one-fifteenth of them beyond repair; in central London, only one house in ten escaped damage."<sup>7</sup> In addition, shortages and rationing continued for a time after 1945, and the pride of victory was tempered by continuing austerity in many areas of daily life. Such overwhelming human, economic, and material losses underwrote a definite sense of cultural decline, which became concretized in the rapid diminution of the British Empire from the late 1940s through the early 1960s.

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In the aftermath of the war, it became quickly apparent that Britain had neither the clout nor the wealth to maintain its preeminent place on the global stage. Considering that the size of the British Empire actually grew slightly just after the war, when it took control of several areas once held by Germany, the economic peril facing Britain soon came to a head. The burden was unfeasible, and the reduced role of Britain as a global power, coupled with growing calls for independence in many colonized areas, made it clear that the British Empire, as it was currently constituted, was unsustainable. The Indian Independence Act was passed by Parliament in 1947, dividing British India into the independent dominions of India and Pakistan. Despite the attempt to portray the withdrawal from British India as smooth, sound, and efficient, it was a devastating process. According to Wendy Webster, “the communal violence produced by the partition of India led to an estimated 180,000 deaths in the Punjab, while ten and a half million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs became refugees.”<sup>8</sup> Other colonies worked for their own freedom via both armed resistance and political negotiation, and between 1957 and 1968 many colonies throughout the Middle East, Africa, and the Caribbean achieved independence. The speed of decolonization was dizzying, and as early as 1962, Anthony Sampson characterized the period as the “aftermath of empire.”<sup>9</sup>

Along with imperial contraction, Britain’s geopolitical role was dampened by the start of the Cold War and the rise of the United States and USSR as predominant global powers. Through the Marshall Plan, which began in 1948, the United States provided vital economic assistance to rebuild and bolster the British economy, but this also underscored Britain’s reliance on the United States, especially in international matters. Additionally, American-style consumerism and popular culture entered more and more areas of individual and social life, and the increasing influence of mass media – especially television – assured the continuing presence of both in British society. According to Sinfield, only 4.3 percent of homes in Britain had television sets in 1950, a number that increased to “49.4 percent by 1956, and over 90 percent by 1964.”<sup>10</sup> Such statistics point to the kinds of material gains that many people enjoyed, but they also demonstrate the growing power of mass media and the swift entrenchment of consumerism, which – it was feared – would lead to an erosion of the particularities of English cultural life.

These fears were not exclusively over the potential ramifications of American influence. As decolonization and the rise of the Cold War superpowers forced a drastic shift in its place on the global stage, Britain sought to maintain its stature as a world player. Through the creation of the Commonwealth, a loose confederation of former colonies and dominions with the UK at its center, Britain aimed to project a semblance of its former imperial power. However, the

Commonwealth never became the economic or geopolitical force that many hoped it would, since it had to compete with other bodies – the United Nations, the World Bank, NATO, the European Union – that more successfully took the lead in international affairs. As Britain positioned itself as both the indispensable ally to the United States and the center of a global Commonwealth, it also set itself more firmly – though always warily – within the community of Europe. After no small amount of hand-wringing and several failed applications (mainly due to French vetoes), Britain entered the European Economic Community in 1973 and has been part of the European Union since its formation in 1993. At the same time, it has found numerous ways to keep its distance from continental Europe, most famously by retaining its own currency rather than adopting the euro. As this last fact might indicate, the status of Britain in relation to other political and international bodies – as well as in relation to the discrete but conjoined entities that comprise the United Kingdom itself – has been in flux over the past seventy years.

Although it isn't the case that every sphere of post-1945 British cultural and political life reflects perfectly on every other, it may not be too much to suggest that Britain's conflicted position globally has analogues at other levels. If the figure for the immediate postwar years is a person who is both waving and drowning, then a relative of such a figure – one less perilously placed – might do for the period more broadly considered. Feelings of relief and renewed hope were striated by loss and unease. Revitalization was coupled with exhaustion. The war was won, but the cost was enormous, and the rapid unspooling of the Empire concretized the sense that something major and vital was gone. It was, many thought, to be a minor age, and, almost immediately, nostalgia for the glorious days of England and Empire became a recognizable and prevalent feeling throughout Britain. Such nostalgia was harnessed during significant moments, as in the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, the pageantry and symbolism of which leaned heavily on Britain's imperial past and which was one of the first major events in Britain to rely on television's power to produce a sense of mediated simultaneity (Margaret Thatcher's exploitation of postimperial nostalgia in the run-up to the Falklands War in 1981 provides a different example of the manufacture of national feeling).

At the same time, and in many quarters, there was deep skepticism about the object of nostalgia. The history of the British Empire was, from this perspective, not one of enlightened glory but of callous colonialism and exploitation. The singular fact of the Holocaust exposed the barbarity at the heart of Western civilization. The circumstances of decolonization and the brutality of empire provided another form of civilizational exposure. Nearly simultaneously, then, there arose feelings of deep and irrevocable loss, of proud

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02963-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry, 1945–2010

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Excerpt

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nostalgia for that loss, and of utter skepticism about what was lost. For T.S. Eliot, such a discomfiting realization occurred at the start of the war. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1948), he writes about his reaction to the Munich Agreement, in which Britain, France, and Italy allowed the Nazis to annex the Sudetenland in a failed attempt to appease Hitler's Germany:

I believe that there must be many persons who, like myself, were deeply shaken by the events of September 1938, in a way from which one does not recover; persons to whom that month brought a profounder realization of a general plight. It was not a disturbance of the understanding: the events themselves were not surprising. Nor, as became increasingly evident, was our distress due merely to disagreement with the policy and behavior of the moment. The feeling which was new and unexpected was a feeling of humiliation, which seemed to demand an act of personal contrition, of humility, repentance and amendment; what had happened was something in which one was deeply implicated and responsible. It was not, I repeat, a criticism of the government, but a doubt of the validity of a civilization. We could not match conviction with conviction, we had no ideas with which we could either meet or oppose the ideas opposed to us. Was our society, which has always been so assured of its superiority and rectitude, so confident of its unexamined premises, assembled round anything more permanent than a congeries of banks, insurance companies and industries, and had it any beliefs more essential than a belief in compound interest and the maintenance of dividends?<sup>11</sup>

Eliot's lament brings with it a deeply conservative ideology, and one might read the poetry he wrote during the war – the *Four Quartets* – as his attempt to revalidate a civilization that had been so shaken through a reassertion of Christian faith. But his commentary also exemplifies a much broader structure of feeling that continued after the war, though with a more muted theological component. Writers in Britain grappled with these incommensurable conditions in the immediate postwar period and beyond, and throughout this book, I show how these forms of ambivalence manifested poetically.

Certain forms of dissonance also characterized the world of British poetry at midcentury. As Stephen Spender points out in *Poetry Since 1939* (1946), poetry was very popular during the war: “despite paper rationing, the sales of poetry increased, and even less-known poets could reckon their sales as between 2,000 and 4,000 instead of in hundreds, as would have been their circulation before the war.”<sup>12</sup> This wartime boom didn't last, and, indeed, poetry's overall fortunes within the mainstream publishing world have grown ever bleaker during the period that this book covers, despite several isolated



periods of growth (especially during the later 1960s and early 1970s, and in the mid- to late 1990s). But other factors helped to bolster poetry's profile in the postwar years. The Arts Council in England was founded in 1945 – followed later by Arts Councils in Northern Ireland (1962), Wales, and Scotland (both in 1967) – and although literary activities made up a very small portion of the overall Arts Council budgets, such support was important. Additionally, the establishment of the BBC's Third Programme in 1946 provided a promising new media outlet for poetry, with George MacBeth's *The Poet's Voice* (later changed to *Poetry Now*) proving to be the BBC's most popular poetry broadcast program after its inception in 1957. As mentioned earlier, the 1944 Butler Act commenced a huge expansion of higher education in Britain, and the recommendations of the government's Robbins Report in 1963 led to the construction of new universities throughout the 1960s (often referred to as the "Plate Glass" universities to differentiate them from the ancient universities and the "Red Brick" universities founded in the early twentieth century). Over the longer term, this has made for more teaching opportunities for writers. Especially in the last twenty-five years, the position of *poet* has become institutionalized in Britain – supported by arts grants and formalized within university creative writing programs – even as the market for poetry has shrunk, and these forms of institutional support have their roots in the mid-1940s.

In *Poetry Since 1939*, Spender placed Eliot's *Four Quartets* at the top of the heap of poetry written during the war, and he continued to proclaim the centrality of W.H. Auden and the group of poets surrounding him in the 1930s – Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis, and Spender himself. Auden was still the most influential English poet of the time, although John Betjeman's cozy lyrics proved him to be the most popular, with his 1948 *Selected Poems* becoming a bestseller. Auden's place at the center of English poetry was, however, far from assured in the postwar years. At the same time that Spender praised Auden's technical brilliance, he sidelined him: "W.H. Auden went to America in the autumn of 1938 and stayed there."<sup>13</sup> Auden's departure for the United States at the start of the war marred his reputation in England, and while younger poets continued to learn from him, his absence allowed a strange disjoining to take place, as though there were two Audens, the important English poet of the 1930s and the one who left and was no longer worth considering. Philip Larkin, one such younger poet, typified this stance:

I have been trying to imagine a discussion of Auden between one man who had read nothing of his after 1940 and another who had read nothing before. After an initial agreement by adjective – 'Versatile,' 'Fluent,' 'Too smart sometimes' – a mystifying gap would open between them, as one spoke of a tremendously exciting English social poet full

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of energetic unliterary knock-about and unique lucidity of phrase, and the other of an engaging, bookish, American talent, too verbose to be memorable and too intellectual to be moving. And not only would they differ about his poetic character: there would be a sharp division of opinion about his poetic stature.<sup>14</sup>

The postwar fate of Auden's reputation exemplifies a larger phenomenon in English poetry just after the war and into the early 1950s, one produced by overlapping circumstances and best described as a complex hollow. While there were a number of major poets on the scene, there was also something of a vacuum. Yeats died in 1939, Auden left for the United States, and Eliot completed his career as a poet with the *Four Quartets*. Thus, the central poets of the 1920s and 1930s had, in different ways, left the field. Eliot remained a towering cultural figure, and as a director at Faber and Faber from 1925 until his death in 1965, he had a massive impact on the course of poetry in England. However, his own poetry could be positioned as part of a literary past, still to be reckoned with but also placed at a distance. Additionally, while soldier-poets such as Roy Fuller and Charles Causley survived the war and had long careers, several of the most promising young poets were killed in battle, notably Keith Douglas, Sidney Keyes, and Alun Lewis.

For emerging poets in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it was possible to distance figures like Auden and Eliot from the on-the-ground workings of the literary scene, which had the effect of clearing room for the younger figures to emerge. No such maneuvers were possible when dealing with Dylan Thomas. He was the most famous – and most notorious – poet in midcentury Britain and a figure with whom younger poets had to reckon directly. Thomas had been celebrated since his early poetry of the 1930s, and he became the most influential poet within a brief Neo-Romantic movement that flourished during the war. The active core of this movement were the self-proclaimed Apocalyptic writers, a group led by Henry Treece, J.F. Hendry, and G.S. Fraser. Other poets in this circle included Vernon Watkins, Norman MacCaig, Lawrence Durrell, George Barker, and Nicholas Moore. Three wartime anthologies edited by Hendry and Treece – *The New Apocalypse* (1939), *The White Horseman: Prose and Verse of the New Apocalypse* (1941), and *The Crown and the Sickle* (1944) – are the central documents of this movement, which while coming short of the full surrealism of David Gascoyne's 1930s poetry does follow up on certain surrealist tendencies. In addition to being influenced by the surrealists and Thomas's early work, the Apocalyptic writers drew heavily on D.H. Lawrence, William Blake, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, and Herbert Read, as well as Christian eschatological writings, which gained new adherents during the war and with the start of the nuclear age.<sup>15</sup>