

Introduction

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On first glance, British literature of the 1930s offers a natural subject for a dedicated *Cambridge Companion*. As critics have often remarked, few other decades seem to claim such a compelling status as a distinct literary-historical era, with a series of political events, aesthetic debates, and emerging literary networks providing an identity that goes beyond the normal convenience of decade-based periodisation and into ‘one of literary history’s most stable and flourishing concepts’.¹ With just a slight nudging of the boundaries, the 1930s is often characterised as running from 1929 until 1939, from the stock market crash of 1929 until the arrival of the Second World War, with September 1939 marking an end to the epoch as the world entered a cataclysmic new phase.² Between these acute flashpoints came a climate of social and ideological tensions. Capitalism and the old order were, for many, at the point of collapse, making sections of the intelligentsia restless for alternatives. Events such as the rise of Nazism and fascism, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and the instigation of the Popular Front of anti-fascist activism added urgency to these debates. Consequently, much of the literature composed in the period engaged with distinctive ideas and concerns, such as how writing could best grapple with these new social issues, whether writing should be propaganda or art, and whether an author could remain detached or needed to commit to a firm political cause. A wave of new authors rose to prominence on the back of such impetus and a new constellation of literary publications, cultural associations, and literary movements took shape. Even authors who had established their reputations in previous eras were drawn into these concerns, as they joined debates about the appropriate roles of literature and art, or were forced to confront their own social and political views under the darkening shadows of the approaching war.

Yet, if this above narrative provides a convenient framework for analysis, and if library shelves provide various books attesting to the 1930s as a well-established concern, this can also obscure the extent to which the decade resists attempts to too-neatly tie down its parameters and preoccupations

in a single survey. For what is contained under the rubric of 1930s writing has proved to be a contested concept, the subject of revisions and competing claims, as various ‘myths, counter-myths, and [. . .] “intermyths”’ were constructed and then assailed over the past eighty years.³ Such debates were begun by key cultural actors in the decade, in manifestos and publications that sought polemically to seize the central literary ground for certain writers or types of art, and were consolidated in many of the memoirs and essays that followed the decade’s end, hindsight allowing authors and observers to privilege certain themes in their retrospective gaze.⁴ George Orwell’s 1940 essay ‘Inside the Whale’, for example, crafted a powerful yet contentious case for the politics and preoccupations of the decade’s literature – a case that, as the various engagements with Orwell in this present volume attest, continues to provoke heated debate to this day. And across the latter half of the twentieth century, academic critics followed suit, as the 1930s consolidated its identity as a distinct field, along with the reputations of certain authors and movements who became focal points of study.

Perhaps most influential in shaping later perceptions of the 1930s as a field of literary-historical study was Samuel Hynes’s account, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976). In this landmark work, the 1930s was framed as the realm of a specific generation: the young writers born after 1900, predominantly English and middle class, displaying some degree of continuity across their consciousness and types of art, and with W. H. Auden at the heart.⁵ The importance of Hynes’s work was immense, eloquently advocating the value of this as a literary-historical moment and setting out many of the themes and lines of analysis that continue to influence the field to this day. But this book was still only a partial view, with the organisation around Auden and his networks obscuring the wider range of authors and modes at play. Consequently, in the decades that followed, the revision and reconsideration of what made up ‘literature of the 1930s’ continued in various critical waves. If listing just a few central markers of these debates, they might include Valentine Cunningham’s *British Writers of the Thirties* (1988), a monumental work that greatly expanded the decade’s literary frame, and Janet Montefiore’s *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (1996) and Jane Dowson’s anthology *Women’s Poetry of the 1930s* (1996), works that asserted the importance of the many women writers who had been missing from earlier accounts. Others, such as Andy Croft’s *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s* (1990), provided crucial attention to the left-wing

literary climate that had otherwise been overshadowed by critical focus on the Auden group. And, as has been suggested,⁶ the titles of many of the essay collections dedicated to the era – John Lucas’s *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (1978), Steven Matthews and Keith Williams’s *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (1997), Patrick Quinn’s *Recharting the Thirties* (1996), Antony Shuttleworth’s *And in Our Time: Vision, Revision, and British Writing of the 1930s* (2003) – give the sense of a general and continued flux of scholarship: challenging, rewriting, recharting, and revisioning a constant critical preoccupation as competing versions of the decade were mapped out.

As the structure of this *Companion* attests, many of these once-pioneering positions have now become the norm: women writers, for example, no longer occupy a separate terrain and are instead integral parts of the literary spectrum addressed. But this expansion of the literary history of the 1930s is still a process in action, spurred by a range of new scholarship and new interdisciplinary approaches that continues to re-evaluate the 1930s on other vectors. Perhaps most notable is how developments in the field of modernist studies have changed the way the literary history of the 1930s is conceived. For much of the twentieth century, the 1930s had an awkward position in the overarching categories used by critics to periodise the modern period. It came after the peak of the ‘high’ modernism of the opening decades of the twentieth century, with authors such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce having already released many of their most influential works in the early 1920s. Yet it was not generally of the ironic ‘postmodernist’ sensibility that came to categorise the post-war literary fields. And, as Benjamin Kohlmann’s chapter in this volume explores at greater length, the frequent turn towards overt politics in 1930s writing grated against the politics and practices of much academic literary criticism of the twentieth century, which privileged characteristics such as detachment, ambiguity, and indeterminacy as the most rewarding literary traits for close reading and scrutiny.

Consequently, this awkwardness sometimes led to critical marginalisation or neglect: as one study assessed in 2003, looking back at the status of 1930s writing in the wake of poststructuralist literary theory, ‘Though the debates arising from various strands of theory had considerable impact on the kinds of texts studied at undergraduate level, there was no obvious or compelling place for the thirties in the new English.’⁷ However, in the past twenty years or so, with the expansion and recalibration of twentieth-century periodisation under the rubric of the ‘new modernist studies’, the 1930s now provides a major focal point for this field of research, with

critical concepts such as late modernism, intermodernism, or ‘the first media age’ all treating the 1930s as a crucial part of the modern literary terrain rather than some sort of outlier.⁸ Of course, the expanding concept of modernism is only one context of the current research on the 1930s: continued interdisciplinary work in media history and cultural history, the recovery of neglected or overlooked authors, developing understandings of political subjectivity and identity, the study of middlebrow and popular forms, and the expansion of postcolonial perspectives are just some of the other aspects of modern literary scholarship which are greatly expanding the figures and themes now understood as part of the literary history of 1930s Britain.

It is at this junction that this *Companion* is located, bringing together a team of international scholars to explore the literature of this decade in light of these scholarly concerns. Sustained attention is given to the writers most frequently anthologised as ‘1930s writers’, but the *Companion* also casts a wider net, with chapters analysing the development of key literary forms and modes as well as the relationship between literature and the decade’s pressing social and political themes. This informs the way the chapters have been structured. The *Companion* opens with a sequence of chapters addressing how the major literary genres evolved across the decade, before later chapters expand out into analysis of broader contexts and themes. As noted, in many literary-historical accounts, poetry has been considered the decade’s most significant literary form, as exemplified by the achievements of W. H. Auden and his circle. In the opening chapter, Janet Montefiore uses the influential anthology, Robin Skelton’s *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964), as a pivot for reflecting upon the shifting perceptions of the decade’s poetry, assessing the status of those canonised by inclusion in such anthologies as well as the importance of other poets whose significance has only more recently been recognised. For Montefiore, the works of Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Louis MacNeice continue to form the core of the decade’s poetry, as their best writing still stands as a powerful ‘creative response to the moment of the Depression, the rise of fascism and of the Popular Front, and the imminence of the Second World War’. But this chapter also balances their work against that of figures such as Nancy Cunard, Naomi Mitchison, and Stevie Smith, as well as the 1930s work of the major poets of the older generation such as T. S. Eliot and David Jones. What Montefiore’s chapter therefore conveys is not a dismissal of the Skelton-era canon but instead a demonstration of how expanding perspectives

have allowed the contribution of other poets to the decade's most pressing debates to be more clearly seen.

Given the prominence of 1930s poetry in many literary histories of the era, the novel risks being a secondary focus for critics, but, as Marina MacKay's chapter on the 1930s novel notes, 'the literary novel in the 1930s no longer suffers from this kind of neglect, even if some individual writers do'. As MacKay shows, the 1930s novels of Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and Christopher Isherwood attest to the literary energy of 'canonical' authors. Equally, the novels of Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Naomi Mitchison made major contributions to the Scottish literary renaissance, and Elizabeth Bowen, Stevie Smith, Jean Rhys, Rosamond Lehmann, and Patrick Hamilton are a further range of important novelists writing in the 1930s who have increasingly come to scholarly attention. Across this diverse span of authors, MacKay detects certain core tendencies that might be taken as characteristic of these 1930s novels. For one, there is a blurring of cultural modes: 'the "literary novel" of the 1930s routinely overlaps with a range of forms, including the novel of intrigue, memoir, satire, dystopian fiction, historical fiction, and the fable.' And underpinning this impulse is a political and social consciousness, with MacKay finding 'few corners in the 1930s novel into which the threat of violent upheaval does not intrude' – a lingering sense of 'self-destruction' giving the literary novels of this decade a distinctive, if unsettling, edge.

If poetry has overshadowed the novel in critical accounts of the 1930s, then drama is often relegated to a distant third place (if indeed achieving a place at all), with conventional British theatre historiography typically viewing the 1930s as a conservative era with little of the interest offered by the new wave of the 1950s. Claire Warden's chapter, through mapping the range of dramatic activity, challenges this omission, assessing that, while drama lacks 'a connecting through-line' for easy critical assessment, the 1930s saw a variety of theatrical innovations in 'terms of mode, genre, site, technique, and personnel'. In this reading, the 1930s stage becomes an important site for three core developments in British theatre history. It was the site of 'a small, turbulent, but fruitfully fertile experimental theatre scene' in which developments such as Expressionism gained some foothold in British theatre practice, most significantly in the work of Auden and Isherwood. It was also an era which saw important innovations in performance as a political form, with organisations such as the Workers' Theatre Movement and Unity Theatre 'creating theatre that challenged typical political and theatrical orthodoxy'. And drama remained one of the most significant cultural modes turned to by the public amidst the

darkening social and political climate, with ‘amusing or diverting theatricals (detective stories or historical dramas, for example) remain[ing] the most popular forms of performance’, with figures such as Noël Coward at the peak of their success, and with radio drama increasingly providing a significant new outlet for plays. What emerges from this chapter is therefore a renewed sense of the importance of drama as cultural terrain in the 1930s itself and the decade’s role as an incubator for many of the key debates that would come into fuller focus in later eras of modern theatre history.

The next sequence of chapters focusses on the wider contexts of literary markets and aesthetic debates. As Peter Marks’s chapter on publishing and periodicals makes clear, the 1930s was a particularly disruptive decade for the economics of literary publishing: by the end of the decade, many major venues had undergone transformations or had simply ceased to exist. Yet it was also the era of some of the most profound moments in modern publishing. The decade’s vibrant periodical culture saw the founding of literary-critical ventures such as F. R. Leavis’s *Scrutiny* and the continued operations of T. S. Eliot’s *The Criterion* – periodicals which indelibly changed modern perceptions of literature and criticism. The 1930s was also the site of key moments in modern left-wing literary publishing, such as the operations of *Left Review* and the Left Book Club, and of pioneering feminist venues such as *Time and Tide*. The book trade also responded to the times, from the evolving work of ‘high’ cultural venues such as the Hogarth Press to perhaps the most enduring development, the launch of Penguin Books, whose price and format fundamentally transformed the economics of publishing and accessibility of literature for a wide audience. While the restrictions of the Second World War curtailed much of this activity, it did not erase the achievements of the ‘boom time’ of the 1930s, which achieved an impact that continued long after the decade’s close.

As has already become clear from the above account, the 1930s presents slippery territory for many traditional literary hierarchies. It is no surprise, then, that the 1930s was a key moment in the ‘battle of the brows’ and has consequently become a significant site for new scholarship on middlebrow and popular writing. As Isobel Maddison’s chapter analyses, 1930s literature faced a range of cultural upheavals and challenges. Cinema attendance continued to grow exponentially, buoyed by the rise of the ‘talkie’ film, with the medium now providing a popular and affordable form of entertainment and attracting ‘audiences novelists could only dream of’. The decade also saw a growth in affordable lending libraries and a desire by many readers for lighter, escapist material to offset the foreboding political

and economic climate. Consequently, the literary marketplace saw a ‘proliferation of novels written predominantly for a wide readership, particularly of middle-class women’. This boom in commercial fiction generated profound ‘anxieties about cultural authority’ in intellectual circles, with critics often disparaging the work of middlebrow authors, which, as Maddison shows, has led to the undervaluing of successful and widely read 1930s writers such as Elizabeth von Arnim and Rosamond Lehmann. And, beyond the ‘middlebrow’, Maddison’s chapter also examines the crucial contributions of the 1930s to popular fiction and culture, such as its role in the so-called golden age of detective fiction, as well as being a crucial moment in the development of the espionage fiction genre – all evidence of the extent to which the 1930s was the site of a vibrant fiction-writing scene that has too often been excluded from ‘highbrow’ literary-historical accounts.

On the other hand, as Tyrus Miller’s chapter on 1930s modernism makes clear, this developing literary climate did not simply supplant the prior generation of the avant-garde, no matter how much new authors and networks clamoured for prominence. As Miller puts it, ‘it was not as if, on the final day of 1929, the key representatives of high modernism had simply vaporised’, with writers such as Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, and Eliot continuing to publish significant work, showing how this supposedly residual movement continued to develop across the decade and interact with the British literary scene. More broadly, Miller also sees the 1930s as a site in which modernism’s impulses evolved in other ways: in many of the ‘mixed mode texts’ that were written and published in the decade by authors such as Eliot and Auden, and in the forms of visionary and surrealist poetics developed by a range of authors such as Herbert Read, Humphrey Jennings, Len Lye, Charles Madge, David Gascoyne, Dylan Thomas, George Barker, and Hugh Sykes Davies. Miller’s chapter therefore pulls apart the modernist/anti-modernist divide that has often been used by 1930s writers and later critics as ways to separate the decade from earlier phases of literature, showing the complex ways in which the 1930s and modernism were unavoidably intertwined.

The next group of chapters considers the role literature played at the intersection of the decade’s social and political tensions. Of course, debate over the political identity of writers has always been a key 1930s theme: the famous pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (1937) made very public demands for authors to specify where they stood on issues such as fascism and the Spanish Civil War. But, while such overt declarations of left-versus-right political affiliations are well

noted, the politics of 1930s writing continues to be contentious terrain, both in terms of how it relates to the ideologies of left-wing movements and parties and, more recently, regarding how class-based political identity intersects with other sites such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. John Connor's chapter, on communist and working-class writing, analyses the much-debated nature of the influence that communism had upon the literary movements of the time. Connor is clear about the influence the Soviet Union-led Communist International had upon British culture: '1930s Britain found itself a node in a global movement of proletarian and revolutionary writers that took inspiration, and sometimes instruction, from Moscow.' Yet the lines of influence that Connor finds here are complex. Early in the decade, Britain's radical 'culture flourished rather in spite of than because of the [British Communist] Party', with a variety of writers attempting to develop new forms and creative networks at a point where supporting such ventures was not a Party priority. As the decade progressed, the loosening of official positions on art and the rise of the Popular Front saw an 'easing off' in 'the revolutionary rhetoric' and instead a focus on 'the defence of culture and civil liberties', and an increasing number of middle-class authors aligned themselves with the Party. Importantly, Connor's chapter also provides attention to a range of 'worker-writers' who did not operate in the typical networks of communist or radical culture. Such writers offered 'no vanguard sensibility' and there was 'no political didacticism or narrative arc of insurgency' to be found in their work. Yet their writing was nonetheless an important part of the decade's production of proletarian art, 'demand[ing] recognition and cultural justice for their works and days', and Connor shows how this writing played a significant role in the decade itself and established many of the parameters for more inclusive social realist cultural representations that would come to the fore in post-war culture.

While the mandate of this volume is 'British' writing, there is an acute consciousness that this is a contested term, and a sequence of chapters in the *Companion* question how 1930s literature dealt with issues of place, nation, and Britain's role in the global order. Britain in the 1930s was a nation near the peak of its reach as an imperial power, albeit one now tipping into the downward slope of decline, with the colonies and dominions demanding autonomy and independence, and the intelligentsia in Britain and abroad increasingly challenging the legitimacy of such a system – a process that Judy Suh's chapter on Empire charts out. While acknowledging that much of the popular

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culture of the decade presented a jingoistic glorification of this imperial ideology, Suh contends that the cracks in this edifice were increasingly evident in other aspects of the decade's cultural work. Suh locates this challenge across three main literary trajectories. Key British writers increasingly reflected upon the Empire in their writing, with authors such as Woolf creating 'a significant field for anti-imperial thinking in Britain' and activists such as Nancy Cunard overtly linking this to a critique of racial politics at home. Equally, Suh examines writers such as Jean Rhys, Rumer Godden, and George Orwell, individuals who were 'born into colonial governing-class families in the Caribbean, India, and Burma', a perspective that allowed them to cast a critical perspective over the colonial structures while also at times showing 'a deep ambivalence towards anti-colonial revolts that they had witnessed in the past and undoubtedly expected in the future'. Finally, the literature of the decade included the powerful voices of émigré writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and C. L. R. James, as well as the Anglo-Irish Olivia Manning and her work on the Anglo-Irish War – all figures who contributed 'proto-revolution[ary]' perspectives on colonised cultures to the heart of the 1930s British literary scene.

Tim Youngs's chapter detects a similar impulse behind much of the decade's proliferation of travel writing, which provided a major literary mode for 're-examinations of Britain's place in the world', spurred by 'conflicts abroad, uncertainty about one's position in the world, [and] dangerous inequalities at home'. As Youngs notes, the 1930s is 'remarkable' for the extent and sophistication of its travel writing. It saw landmark travel books published such as Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana* (1937), as well as experiments with the mode by established authors such as Auden and Isherwood, with these perspectives often spurred by the growing technology and infrastructure of the 'petrol age'. International travel narratives, while often overtly occupied with documenting an author's journey to wars and frontiers, also became sites for exploring inward-facing quests, whether Graham Greene's journeys to discover what 'home society has repressed in its members', or Freya Stark's positioning of herself as 'someone operating between cultures' when exploring the Middle East. And, when narratives focussed upon travel within Britain itself, some of these became powerful works of social critique, with the accounts of Orwell and J. B. Priestley allowing the authors to 'speak truth to power, exposing inequality, injustice, and poverty'. As Youngs's chapter highlights, such writing was not merely significant for the range of social and political themes it addressed but for the ways these narratives offered a major

experimental mode of literary expression, providing ‘a formal innovation and a critical seriousness about contexts, perspectives, and methods rarely seen since’.

This *Companion* also seeks to address some of the assumptions behind the ‘British’ national category. For British is too often assumed to be synonymous with English, and particularly with England’s south-eastern ‘golden triangle’ of Oxford–Cambridge–London that so often dominates literary maps. While this is a concern manifested across several chapters, it takes the forefront in Kristin Bluemel’s chapter, which analyses how the decade saw a distinct, important movement of literary works dealing with regional and rural concerns. As Bluemel notes, the 1930s saw the growth of the ‘cult of the countryside’ in literature, travel books, and periodicals, but her focus is not on this homogenised and sanitised ‘1930s print culture fixated on thatched roofs, village greens, and hedgerows’. It is, rather, on the regional rural novels of H. E. Bates, Winifred Holtby, Richard Llewellyn, and Lewis Grassie Gibbon – authors who offered ‘powerful cultural and aesthetic work’ that contested ‘the south-east England rural ideal’. Linking these distinct literary works – which focus on rural regions of the Midlands, Yorkshire, Wales, and Scotland – are concerns such as the rural worker and an aesthetic in which ‘land instead of landscape [is] the focus of our gaze’. Bluemel’s chapter therefore not only inscribes these authors and locations as significant manifestation of the British literary culture of the era but suggests that this work is the beginning of a new critical process and that ‘new attention to non-metropolitan arts and places’ challenges us to ‘redefine the history of 1930s literature itself’.

Glyn Salton-Cox’s chapter addresses the contribution of the decade to modern queer literary history, seeing the decade as in many ways ‘foundational for twentieth-century queer literature, politics, and culture in Britain’. Considering the role of well-known authors and reintegrating neglected writers into such debates, Salton-Cox resists frameworks that simply relegate 1930s literature to a narrative of ‘the closet and repression’ that is incomparable with open political action and instead provides a far more nuanced account of the complex negotiations at work. Certainly, much of this queer culture was developed ‘under conditions of censorship, repression, and vilification’. This includes the impact of obscenity trials, the ‘privatising sense of sexual radicalism’ exhibited by the works of several Bloomsbury authors, and a post-1930s legacy in which certain queer authors were privileged due to their new-found image of ‘respectable’ homosexuality. But as Salton-Cox’s analysis shows, this is not the full