

The sacred grove

Lost essays by modern masters in the *Listener*

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The BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), located in a leafy suburb of Reading, is a mecca for researchers of twentieth-century literature. Containing tens of thousands of manuscripts, letters, memoranda, scripts, internal BBC documents, dossiers and an expansive panoply of other ephemera, the WAC's holdings represent one of the world's most substantial collections chronicling modern English cultural life. Of particular value are the WAC's sheaves of material relating to the *Listener*, the journal of arts and culture published by the BBC continuously from 1929 to 1991.

The *Listener* reached its height under the exacting editorial aegis of J. R. Ackerley, who had begun working at the BBC in 1927 and became literary editor of the magazine in 1935, a post he held until 1959. As Peter Parker affirmed in his biography (1991), Ackerley courted controversy in his eagerness to publish many of the more experimental and unconventional writers of the time. A list of his contributors includes E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Philip Larkin, George Orwell, Marianne Moore and Dylan Thomas, in addition to the luminaries of the Auden Generation – Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, C. Day-Lewis and W. H. Auden himself. In a retrospective essay published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1969, Auden reflected on Ackerley's influence: "Those of us... who were starting our literary careers at the time have very good cause to remember how much he did for us; the *Listener* was one of our main outlets".

The magazine stands as a monument both to Ackerley's prescience as a literary tastemaker and to the efflorescence of new talent in the years immediately before and after the Second World War. Yet despite the indelible mark the journal and its contributors made on English literary history, the *Listener*'s archives remain largely unexamined. While the entire run has been made available electronically in recent years, the magazine's internal files are as yet undigitized and uncatalogued, accessible only to those who consult them in person. Chief among these ancillary documents are the *Listener*'s so-called "day book sheets": accounting ledgers that indicate, issue by issue, the magazine's contributors and the remuneration they received for their work.

Every issue of the *Listener* featured three pages of brief, unsigned book reviews – each no more than a few hundred words in length – in a section entitled "The *Listener*'s Book Chronicle". By cross-checking the anonymous reviews in each issue against the corresponding payment in the ledger's roster of contributors, it is possible to identify the reviews' authors, some of whom were major figures on the 1930s literary scene. There are over forty pieces by Stephen Spender, twelve by Graham Greene, nine by Elizabeth Bowen,



E. M. Forster, left, and J. R. Ackerley, right, 1950s

four by Louis MacNeice, one by Dylan Thomas and one by Stefan Zweig. These previously unattributed reviews are not noted in any of the extant bibliographies or checklists, and further consultations with scholars, literary executors, societies, authors' trusts and archival collections (such as the British Library and the Bodleian) confirm their status as "new" works. I hope that a resurrection and critical examination of these neglected writings will soon be under way.

On July 15, 1939, Greene wrote to Nancy Peam, a literary agent who worked in the London office of Curtis Brown, to express his desire to write "a non-fiction book, describing one of these rather appalling voyages from Constanza in Rumania on old wooden Greek boats carrying 3 or 400 Jews". He asked: "Don't you think there's a very good human interest story for the *Express*?" Two formerly unnoted book reviews in the *Listener* archive by Greene turn their attention towards the everyday realities of European Jewry – an appropriate topic for a documentary fiction writer of his calibre. His review (November 23, 1939) of the Christmas *New Writing Anthology* published by the Hogarth Press makes a point of highlighting the contributions of the proletarian writer Willy Goldman. Greene writes: "one notes particularly Mr Willy Goldman's description of the East End Jewish courtship – in which the documentary aspect has been properly subordinated to the human emotion". The admixing of fact and fiction, and the relationship between the documentary and the subjective, would be perennial aesthetic and moral considerations for Greene. He writes on Goldman again the following year, in his review (July 25, 1940) of

East End My Cradle, which treats "the peculiar nature of his neighbourhood, the frontier between Gentile Wapping and Jewish Whitechapel. (Literary talent before now has been born in conflict along a border)". Greene calls Goldman's book "one of the most remarkable pictures of poor life that even these last dozen proletarian-conscious years have produced".

He goes on to praise a travel sketch by George Orwell on Marrakesh, as well as "The Sailor" by V. S. Pritchett, in both of whom Greene finds the traits of a genuinely "new writing" – that of "life observed with an uncorrupted eye". In his review of Margaret Lane's biography of Edgar Wallace (December 22, 1938), Greene suggests that the popular press allowed for Wallace's meteoric ascent as a writer, whose work in turn "helped to form the fatal tradition that truth is less important than a good story". In his emphasis on an art that captures the lived reality of "life observed with an uncorrupted eye", Greene seems to have taken an interest in the writings of the cabbiecum-autobiographer Herbert Lodge, noting on September 1, 1938, in a review of *It's Draughty in Front*, how "very beautifully he conveys the pride of the new profession, the strategic pursuit of fares, the novel slang, the feel of streets at night". Greene's article of April 13, 1939 on Robert Holmes's *My Father was a Gentleman* praises the book as "the picture of an odd life without values, made up of extraordinary gambles, of returned cheques, of secret commissions, sharp practices and saloon-bar generosity".

In the *Listener* of February 8, 1940, Greene anonymously reviewed Colonel Franklin Lushington's *Portraits of a Young Man*. He felt that the book was significant and provi-

dent: "those who are going out to war now have had a different brand of peace to look back on over the untidy anxious post-war years, but the climax for the contemplative man today is much the same, and he will study this portrait with a personal and perhaps anxious interest, for soon he may be facing the same problem of fear in the same shattered landscape". In *The End of the Affair*, Greene's narrator recalls that the spring of 1940, "like a corpse, was sweet with the smell of doom". The shattered landscape of fear was realized with the bombing of Britain that began in earnest in 1940.

The subjects of Elizabeth Bowen's unsigned reviews map her lasting concerns as a mid-century writer: modernity and myth; the byzantine rhythms of Irish political and social life; and the "unconscious self-betrayal". In her review of M. J. MacManus's *Irish Cavalcade* (June 22, 1939), she emphatically praises the author's sensitivity to Irishness:

The contents are not only rich and varied, they are extremely evocative. Vignettes of private life, anecdotes, eccentricities, scorings-off, banshees, jokes, showy deaths and wild parties jostle each other – and, somberly imposed, there are accounts of battles, famines and massacres... [MacManus] has a great flair for the unconscious self-betrayal.

In exalting the author's portrayal of social realities (in a book ostensibly about military history), Bowen is obliquely illuminating her own thematic concerns.

One of Bowen's most interesting reviews is that of Constantia Maxwell's *Country and Town in Ireland Under the Georges*. Maxwell, the first female permanent member of staff at Trinity College Dublin, wrote of

the manners, the architecture, the usages, the economics, the communications, the practice of two different religions... Her chapters cover the social life of the gentry and their country houses, the peasants – their mode of life, dress, working conditions, religion, education (the hedge schools), agriculture, town life, communications and travel, parsons and priests... Every obvious aspect of eighteenth-century Ireland (which has become to many rather a boring myth) has been avoided.

Bowen's appraisal of Maxwell's decision to eschew the romanticized Ireland of the popular imagination is another artistic statement of purpose – one that sets her apart as a perspicacious observer of Anglo-Irish in-betweenness.

We can now add to Dylan Thomas's oeuvre a review of *Wales England Wed*, an autobiographical portrait of Wales by the Yellow Nineties poetaster, bon vivant and Everyman's Library founder Ernest Rhys. Published in the issue dated June 13, 1940, the hundred-word article – even for the Book Chronicle section that was short, suggesting that it was included by Ackerley primarily to aid the indigent poet – is notable for its praise of Rhys's casual, conversational tone and his vivid evocations of a Welsh childhood:

He had achieved the enviable delight of being able to write like the pleasantest talker, and his

anecdotes of great men of the past are valuable additions to their history and reveal Mr Rhys as a man with a genius for friendship. But perhaps the most entirely satisfactory part of the whole story is the description of his childhood in Wales; every incident is presented clearly, and the figures of his childhood appear as little worn or dimmed by time as are Mr Rhys's confident memories of them.

During the spring and summer of 1940, Thomas was in a familiar state of penury. He was paid a guinea for the review – something like £60 today. In a letter to Stephen Spender that year he complained of the “filthily desperate state of my money life”. In other letters from the period Thomas expressed anxiety over the prospect of conscription. He petitioned Kenneth Clark (a friend and former lover of Thomas's wife Caitlin, Clark was now running the films division of the Ministry of Information) for a job that would give him noncombatant status, writing, “My great horror's killing”. Spender appealed to his own artistic circle on Thomas's behalf, soliciting financial patronage from Lady Clark, Sir Edward Marsh and others. He ended up putting together a fund sufficient to pay off the poet's debts. Thomas had been publishing poems in the *Listener* since 1934, and Rhys's book, given its Welsh setting, was a suitable assignment. Rhys and Thomas also shared a publisher, J. M. Dent, which issued Thomas's *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939). In an obituary of Rhys in 1946, the modernist magazine *Wales* stated: “Dylan Thomas – the Dent connection made him interested in his [Rhys's] work – came over by Ferryman to meet him (from Laugharne) at the Castle Hotel . . . very much on his best behaviour, amusing despite the threat of impending call-up to the forces”.

In four newly attributed articles, Louis MacNeice expresses the same twinned interest in the concrete and the gnomic that we find in his poems, such as the well-known “Snow”: “World is suddener than we fancy it. / World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural”. He reviewed Robert Melville's study *Picasso* for the issue of August 17, 1939, and found it innovative because, “Unlike so many critics who now tend to think of Picasso primarily as a technical virtuoso, Mr Melville thinks of him as a unique spiritual genius who, in the Blue Period, was commenting like Goya on the world's miseries, and in his early cubist still lifes was taking such things as buns on a kitchen plate and releasing them, in Mr Melville's phrase, from their thingness”. MacNeice's review of Emily Dickinson's *Collected Poems* (October 20, 1937) distinguishes between poets who are “esoteric and obscure” and poets with a unique “private world”, like Dickinson: “Exhilaration is within” she says – the creed of the saint or the Romantic”.

The forty-nine *Listener* book reviews by Stephen Spender, spanning the 1930s to the early 50s, comprise a considerable addition to the corpus of a major English poet and commentator. On November 11, 1936, the magazine published Spender's review of David Wynn's *The World My Oyster* together with *World Stowaway* by J. B. Roberts. Spender, who was in the process of finishing *Forward from Liberalism* (1937), heralded Roberts's book as exemplifying an emerging literary movement founded by the “penniless young



Dylan Thomas, Soho, London, 1945

wanderers” of the world: “one is left speculating whether a literature of vagabondage may not grow up today – with poetry and music as well – and whether this may be the beginnings of a true proletarian literature”.

Although the late 1930s were politically transformative years in Spender's life, the bulk of his reviews for the *Listener* were concerned not with politics but with poets past and present. In 1935, he had published *The Destructive Element*, a critical study of Henry James, W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot, and both Yeats and Eliot would continue to occupy pre-eminent roles in his literary imagination. His essay of December 8, 1937, on Yeats's *A Vision*, for example, expresses his scepticism of the Yeatsian mystical cosmology. “At some moments it is difficult, with the best will in the world, to be convinced by Mr Yeats' experiences, for even if all his spiritual geese are not swans, yet every board that creaks in his house becomes an act of intervention, by diabolic forces, with his spiritualist intercourse.” He tempers this by recognizing that “the serious aspect of Mr Yeats' book is not the degree in which it convinces us as a real experience, but the degree in which it seems

illuminating as a system of values and as a view of the universe”. Yeats's system troubled Spender because it was “so completely an abstraction that its reference back to reality seems deceptive and perhaps non-existent”. Spender concludes by suggesting that Yeats's symbology is “largely a dictionary of the symbols in Mr Yeats's own poetry . . . the whole illuminated by a dim, sad light from Spengler's philosophy”. One of Spender's final writings on Yeats in the *Listener* was a review of *Yeats: Letters to his son* (March 16, 1944), in which he lamented that “the qualities of the individual and the human” had been, in the modern world, systematically replaced by “the collective and the mechanical”.

Spender reviewed Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* for the issue of April 6, 1939, holding it up as an exemplar of the dramatic possibilities of narrative poetry. In 1941, he wrote on *The Dry Salvages*, calling it “prosaic” and possessed of a “certain sententiousness”, while also praising the poem for its reaffirmation of lost spiritual values:

Living in an age of short-term politics and violent action, there is an underlying need to see the universal in the particular and the eternal in the

transitory, and to restore a sense of continuity to a broken pattern of phenomena. Eliot's poem is a sincere and moving effort to state a spiritual need for something of which we are particularly spared by the circumstances of today.

Spender's reviews from the 1940s and 50s suggest that he viewed the epoch as one “thirsting for ideals”, a product of what he termed, in a review of Rilke's *Selected Letters* (April 25, 1946), the “isolation of the human, poetic and religious sensibility in the modern age”. He was deeply affected by what he perceived to be a kind of moral bankruptcy wrought by the cataclysm of the war, a view expressed in his poem “In Memoriam” (1940): “Living now becomes withered like flowers / In the boring burned city which has no use / For us but as lives and deaths to fill / With fury the guns blazing back . . .”.

Large-scale archival digitization projects at major universities and at for-profit research companies have placed a vast amount of newly indexed, searchable information before researchers, but the rich literary inheritance stored at the BBC Written Archives Centre remains as yet only partially accessible. Digitization of the *Listener*'s day book entries, among other materials, would expand the scholarly possibilities of the Centre's collections, opening up previously unseen perspectives on twentieth-century English literary life. Writings by C. Day-Lewis, V. S. Pritchett, Geoffrey Grigson and John Betjeman remain unexhumed. In the first sequence of Stephen Spender's “Variations on My Life”, the poet imagines a “sacred grove” in which he can pluck the ripened voices with their ears

Bound into sheaves filled with the sun

Of summers that spoke and then went on;

And among them to place

My own posthumous voice

Which nothing does refuse

And only death denies.

The Written Archives Centre may well be one such sacred grove, full of sheaves of writing that await their day in the sun.

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As well as the items referred to above, a selected bibliography of unsigned reviews noted in the *Listener*'s day book sheets (R43, File 63 at the Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading) includes:

Reviews by Stephen Spender:

Sonnets to Orpheus by Rainer Maria Rilke. October 14, 1936, pp. XII. (This review is signed, but does not appear in *Stephen Spender: Works and criticism – an annotated bibliography* by Hemant Balvantrao Kulkarni.)

The Agamemnon of Aeschylus, translated by Louis MacNeice. January 13, 1937.

The Triple Thinkers by Edmund Wilson. September 29, 1938.

The Herne's Egg by W. B. Yeats. February 23, 1938.

Selected Poems by W. J. Turner. December 28, 1939.

Map of Love by Dylan Thomas. October 19, 1939.

Last Poems and Two Plays by W. B. Yeats. August 24, 1939.

Air Raid by Archibald MacLeish. August 3, 1939.

Letters on Poetry by W. B. Yeats. July 4, 1940.

Last Poems and Last Plays by W. B. Yeats. March 21, 1940.

Poetry of Yeats by Louis MacNeice. September 11, 1941.

If I Were Four and Twenty by W. B. Yeats. February 13, 1941.

Selected Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin, translated by J. B. Leishman. October 19, 1944.

Yeats, the Man and his Masks by Richard Ellmann. January 19, 1950.

Rainer Maria Rilke by F. W. van Heerikhuizen. February 21, 1952.

Reviews by Elizabeth Bowen:

James Joyce by Herbert Gorman. March 20, 1941.

Double Lives: An autobiography by William Plomer. December 2, 1943.

Reviews by Louis MacNeice:

Orion Marches by Michael Roberts. December 14, 1939.

A Servant of the Queen: The autobiography of Maud Gonne. April 6, 1939.

Reviews by Graham Greene:

Myself, My Two Countries by X. M. Boulestin. December 2, 1936. (This review is signed, but does not appear in *The Works of Graham Greene: A reader's bibliography and guide* by Mike Hill and Jon Wise.)

The Thought-Reading Machine by André Maurois. August 11, 1938.

A Flying Start by René MacColl. April 6, 1939.

The Story of J. M. Barrie by Denis Mackail. May 1, 1941.