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### Review Article

#### War and After: Poetry in the Forties

*A Prose Miscellany.* By Keith Douglas. Edited by Desmond Graham. Manchester: Carcanet, 1985. Pp. 159. £8.95.

*British Poetry of the Second World War.* By Linda M. Shires. London: Macmillan, 1985. Pp. xvi, 174. £10.95.

*The Poetry of the Forties in Britain.* By A.T. Tolley. Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1985. Pp. 394. Paper, \$14.95.

The 1940s are a problematic period in the history of British literature. Dominated by war itself for the first half and by its aftermath for the second, the decade nevertheless lacks a unifying literary mode or manner. For all the variety of literary styles and topics in Britain in the 1930s, the mood of Auden and others of his kind does set the tone of the period. *The Waste Land* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* can be seen as paradigms both of high modernism and of the "post-war" era in the 1920s. The Movement poets and angry young men do typify the greyer ethos of the 1950s. No such convenient exemplars exist in the 1940s.

There is not even a literary manner typical of the war itself. Not only do the concerns of many writers change utterly during 1939-45, but also the amorphous nature of war experience during those years meant that there was no unifying geographical or emotional motif, as there had been between 1914 and 1918. This many-sidedness in the writing of the period, the absence of handy models, is paradoxically at variance with other aspects of the age. Nostalgia and current interest in the social styles of the recent past have ensured that many people are familiar with popular wartime music, with Vera Lynn, with contemporary hairstyles and uniforms, with the appearance of household objects such as wireless sets of the 1940s (those carefully placed symbols in "listening to the news" photographs) and of cars, aircraft and trains. Grainy black and white war films and post-war classics like *The Third Man* have sanctified the cinematic memory of the decade for those who are at all interested in movies. But how many of these people who have ready-recall visual images of the forties have access to the same familiarity with its literary models: reportage from the services in

*Penquin New Writing*: a "Shaving Through the Blitz" sketch by Fanfarlo; an "Apocalyptic" poem; an editorial by Cyril Connolly; a short story by Elizabeth Bowen; a piece by "Flying Officer X"?

Two new studies deal with poetry of the 1940s and a new volume offers, for the first time, a collection of prose (both published and unpublished) by one of the best British poets of the Second World War, Keith Douglas, killed in action in 1944 at the age of twenty four. The critical books both discuss and embody the problems of viewing the decade as a whole. Douglas's *Prose Miscellany* is a haunting amplification of what we know about the short-lived and vital war poet.

Linda M. Shires's *British Poetry of the Second World War* deals with more than the poetry of 1939-45. She has an Epilogue on "The War's Legacy in Verse," and throughout her comments on poets writing during the war, she refers to the attitudes held by prominent poets of the succeeding generation towards the poetry of the early forties. The reaction by Movement poets against what they took to be the prevailing woolliness of the forties is central to her argument that the generally-held view of the period is over-simplified and distorted.

A.T. Tolley's *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* is a far more extensive study than *British Poetry of the Second World War*. It offers a wide-ranging survey of the poetry of the whole decade (not merely of the war years), and it too compares the achievement of those writing in the forties with that of those who succeeded them. Tolley does this not only to compare the moods of the forties and the fifties, but also to discuss the phenomenon that Movement figures such as Philip Larkin, although contemporaries of wartime poets like Sidney Keyes (killed in action in 1943), did not "find a congenial medium in the dominant idiom of the decade," and only came to prominence in the 1950s.

There is now a remarkably extensive body of Keith Douglas material in print. When Desmond Graham's biography appeared in 1974, it was difficult to get hold of Douglas's *Collected Poems* (1966) and no sustained attempt had been made to produce an authoritative text of poems previously assembled by editors distant from the young tank officer who often sent hand-written versions of his latest poems to friends and mentors in the hope that others away from the chaos of service life (including long spells of active service) could better preserve and collect them. The success of Graham's biography led to other successes. His carefully edited *Complete Poems of Keith Douglas* appeared in 1978 and a reissue of Douglas's prose "diary," *Alamein to Zem Zem*, was published in 1979. Now we have Graham's lovingly compiled *Keith Douglas: A Prose Miscellany*, which contains pieces written when the poet was a schoolboy at Christ's Hospital, corres-

pondence between him and Edmund Blunden, his tutor at Oxford, Douglas's prose contributions to *Cherwell* in April, May and June 1940, correspondence from him when in the army (including letters to Tambimuttu about publishing his poems and his "diary"), three short stories written in the army, his essay on "Poets and this War" (published in *TLS* in 1971), and a few pages of an early, slightly more frank, version of *Alamein to Zem Zem*.

The effect of the collection is unsettling. Douglas's best poems have an immediacy, and establish a ruminative intimacy with the reader, that are often painful, particularly since his subject is frequently his own sense of isolation or else the pathos of war. In his letters from the army that intimacy is even more natural and the reader's sense of waste heightened. As he tries to explain his current unlyrical seriousness to John Hall (in England) or writes with exasperation to prod Tambimuttu into speeding up publication of poems and *Alamein to Zem Zem*, his sense of living on short time is pervasive. The combination of vitality and doom in his letters is both pitiable and compelling. In one of his last poems he wrote, "but time, time is all I lacked," and this same emotion is the sub-text of much of his final correspondence.

These prose pieces, even the obviously routine *Cherwell* essays that he was churning out pseudonymously to keep the paper going in wartime Oxford, give a wonderful sense of the age, its pressures and assumptions, as well as documenting important aspects of the poet's life and thought.

A sobering feature of the volume is the intelligence of the essays and stories Douglas wrote while still a schoolboy at Christ's Hospital. This is particularly true of his autobiographical fragments, the earliest of which, written when he was twelve, opens:

As a child he was a militarist, and like many of his warlike elders, built up heroic opinions upon little information, some scrappy war stories of his father. Most of the time he was down in the field, busy, with an absurdly purposeful look on his round face, about a tent made of an old sheet, and signposted with a board saying "sergeants' mess." (13)

In offering this kind of illumination—both into the childhood values of the poet who was later to "weep" over the gentle foolishness of an obsolescent breed of British officer-hero and into his extraordinary control as a twelve-year-old writer—the *Prose Miscellany* is invaluable. The literary essays show little development between sixth form and Oxford, but also reveal a fluency that underlay Douglas's later poems capturing the verbal and cultural style of his colonel and other "perfectly mannered" members of his yeomanry regiment. The

new volume is essential reading for those interested in Douglas's poetry.

Of the two literary surveys, Tolley's *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* is the more useful. His poetic map of the decade is thorough, although he offers little extended comment on the verse published in the forties by poets whose reputations had been established earlier: Eliot (except as a verse dramatist), Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender. His decision is a sensible one, to preserve his lengthier analyses for those who were more obviously poets of the forties and whose verse typifies traits of the period. On the other hand, the cumulative effect of the book is episodic and fragmented, dealing as it does with so many false poetic starts and minor talents.

Because Tolley is a careful critic, he does not attempt to link styles or attitudes that cannot be forced into a pattern of shared response or aspiration. His judgement on the later manifestations of Apocalypticism is typical of his approach: "The movement that called itself Apocalypse has often been equated with the 'new romanticism,' or even with the poetry of the forties as a whole. In fact it began in the late thirties and can be said to have lost any clear identity by 1943" (101). These comments illustrate his critical manner: low key, terse, summary. What he offers is both judgement and survey. His instinct is to evaluate as he categorises the writing with which he is dealing. After listing many poets whom John Lehmann published (and those among them whom he praised) in *Penquin New Writing*, Tolley sums up the information given by the list: "The list of poets defines the type of poetry that Lehmann supported: controlled, unrheterical, humanist, grounded in personal experience, and, above all, perceptive and sensitive" (20). This is itself sensitive, sensible and succinct commentary, but there is a problem with Tolley's approach. "The list . . . defines the type of poetry," yet one of the aims of *The Poetry of the Forties in Britian* is to give basic information about the poets on the list. To respond fully to Tolley's comment on Lehmann's taste, "defined" by the poets he supported, one needs to be passing familiar with their work. However, as he goes through the period, group by group and poet by poet, Tolley begins each individual discussion from scratch, assuming that the reader needs basic information.

The result is a slight sense of circularity. Much of Tolley's skill lies in his ability to make just generalisations about the attitudes, mannerisms and beliefs of the poets he deals with. This entails an assumption that the reader has at least enough knowledge to appreciate the generalisations. And then the comments on individual poets make no such assumptions, often being in the form of potted (and intelligent) information of an introductory kind.

As a result, *The Poetry of the Forties in Britain* is less than the sum of its parts. It offers a useful map of the decade and is interesting to dip into. It will be helpful to students who use the index to gain quick information about comparatively minor figures. The chapter on Verse Drama is particularly worthwhile. But there is no unifying argument or theme, the text moves from one topic to the next without linkage. Poet follows poet, and the short sketches offer jerky reading, page after page. Here are the opening sentences of five successive paragraphs. They indicate Tolley's narrative technique:

Two periodicals of moderate stance were the quarterly, *The Wind and the Rain*, and the symposium, *Here and Now*. (178)

*Here and Now* remained true to the subtitle of its second symposium: "A Group Production of Collected Verse and Prose." (178)

Throughout the decade, and particularly in the first half, there appeared volumes of poetry by new writers that seem decidedly traditional in retrospect, but which formed at the time a part of the body of "new writing." (178-79)

The poet who best exemplified this type of writing was Patric Dickinson, famous in the middle forties for his B.B.C. "Time for Verse," which featured classic poems alongside modern ones. (179)

An altogether firmer talent was Anne Ridler's, showing a creative adaptation of the traditional and the modern to generate an individual idiom. (180)

Linda Shires' survey does not have the virtues of Tolley's. *British Poetry of the Second World War* is short and selective. Shires knows a lot about the period, and has researched the topic thoroughly. She is not a very sensitive reader, however, and is occasionally rather obtuse. Like Tolley, she too offers summary and potted commentary, but she does not cover as much ground as he does. Her book is not a useful, introductory reference work, offering a reader ignorant of her subject handy, short comments on a number of figures. What she does offer is little more than a quick survey of the field and quite extensive reference to the comments and views of others.

One problem with Linda Shires's book of literary history is her simplistic sense of history itself. To her, there is a war mood that is more or less constant. In her opening chapter, "Endings and Beginnings," she uses quotations from Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, Stephen Spender's "September Journal" (1939) and Orwell's London Letter to the *Partisan Review* of January 1941 to illustrate the same mood of weariness, wariness and confusion. This reveals confusion on her part. In 1939,

during the last days of peace and the first weeks of war, the horror and dread of war occurring are quite different from resigned acceptance of a long struggle in 1941 or 1942, and the accompanying sense of deadness caused by living a life constantly suspended by danger and risk. In September 1939 Stephen Spender's feeling of impotence and paralysis—because the unspeakable was happening again—is all the more menacing since the nature of that dreaded second war was unknown. Elizabeth Bowen's mid-war descriptions of shrunken emotional life under real bombardment and the concomitant assaults of personal identity are part of her brilliant analyses of what civilian wartime life was like.

What makes Shires's generalisations appear all the more insensitive is that in choosing Orwell and Bowen to make a general point about the war mood, she has chosen two writers who pre-eminently reveal change of mood during the war.

Orwell's change of heart after the fall of Chamberlain was typical of many intellectuals. In 1939 he was afraid that the threat of war would stimulate a totalitarian reaction from the National Government, who would institute a British-style "boiled shirt" fascism under cover of international emergency. After the fall of Chamberlain and the reorganisation of the British war effort, he declared himself a patriot, analysed the difference between the Nazi occupation of Europe and the British occupation of its Empire, and spent a great deal of his energy in the middle and later war years attacking British pacifists, anarchists and anti-war writers. This really profound change of attitude makes it very difficult to accept Orwell's views in 1941 as part of a summary of the mood of 1939 (as Shires does on page 5). The despair of summer and autumn 1939 *were* shared by many writers and did seem to sum up the intellectual and political failure of that decade. But later war moods cannot be made to resemble the mood of 1939. By the time Orwell was writing his London Letter of January 1941 (at the height of the blitz), the unrealised, dream-like dread of September 1939 had gone. One knew very precisely what one feared if one lived in an English city in January 1941.

Elizabeth Bowen is a marvellous chronicler of the effects of blitz and aerial bombardment on civilian attitudes. Shires also quotes her on page 5: "from hesitating to feel came the time when you no longer could." Again the quotation is part of the "Beginnings and Endings" chapter which uses *Between the Acts* as its main text to illustrate states of mind at the end of the thirties. But Bowen's depiction of shared endurance during the war, a communal desiccation because emotion had to be suppressed in order to carry on, is *utterly* different from the unfocused dread and sense of failure in autumn 1939. The

marooned middle class in *Between the Acts*, watching a flawed artistic depiction of English history, are indeed at the end of a road. On the other hand, the middle-class protagonists in Elizabeth Bowen's wartime fiction (both short stories and *The Heat of the Day*) are variously coping with the new-found sense of national cohesion after the fall of France, with the quasi-revolutionary change in social styles and expectations after June 1940, and with the problems of maintaining an identity in the midst of a danger-filled group effort.

*The Heat of the Day*, although only published after the war, is the novel above all other wartime novels that documents these problems and captures the shifts in moods between 1940 and 1944. Opening in 1942, the narrative moves backwards to the autumn of 1940, captures the shared excitement of the Battle of Britain and the blitz, then ends in the tired, drawn-out slog of 1944. The doomed love affair of the two protagonists is presented as beginning and flourishing in the euphoria of surviving the air raids of 1940. "They had met one another, at first not very often, throughout that heady autumn of the first London air raids. Never had any season been more felt; one bought the poetic sense of it with the sense of death" (Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949, 98).

Linda Shires quotes a phrase from *The Heat of the Day* to make a blanket comment on the mood of wartime England at odds with the careful analysis in the novel of the *difference* among the moods of wartime London. Here is Shires: " 'Wariness had driven away poetry,' wrote Elizabeth Bowen of wartime England in *The Heat of the Day*, 'from hesitating to feel came the time when you no longer could' " (5). This quotation does not contradict the passage I have just quoted myself; it adds a further comment. It is incredible that Shires can assume the novel depicts simply one kind of "wartime England." On her first page she tries to do this by using a few words from *The Heat of the Day* to describe a common mood of pointlessness and lack of direction. She begins by quoting from Virginia Woolf's diary for September 1939, "All meaning has run out of everything. . . Emptiness," and continues:

The experience of war—standing at the edge of it, living through it—was like being at sea on a raft or a liner to a surprise port, or to no port. Like the ocean itself, this widespread war meant danger and possible death as well as adventure. "War moved," wrote Elizabeth Bowen in her novel *The Heat of the Day* "from the horizon to the map"; unlike World War One, it was uncontainable.(1)

Shires' own prose is not very clear at this point, but that really is the least problematic element about this passage. As I have said, one cannot use a journal entry from the very first days of the war to

characterise its mood for the next five years. The difference for many English civilians between September 1939 and September 1940 was that at the latter date they were not "standing at the edge of it." But most important of all is the use to which Shires puts her quotation from *The Heat of the Day*. It is not apparent to me exactly what Shires does take Bowen's phrase to mean, other than that it shows the war was uncontainable. By implication, I think she is also suggesting that Bowen's words mean that the experience of war was to be standing at the edge of it as if at sea on a voyage to no port or a surprise port. How she can do this to the passage from which the Bowen quotation comes is beyond explanation.

What Bowen is describing—explicitly—is the change in mood in London once the blitz was over, the bombing stopped (temporarily—it returns during the course of the novel), and the protagonist's own experience of action diminished. For her the war moved from where she could see and hear it—in the skies above her—to where she could only follow it on a map.

That autumn of 1940 was to appear, by two autumns later, apocryphal, more far away than peace. No planetary round was to bring again that particular conjunction of life and death; that particular psychic London was to be gone forever; more bombs would fall, but not on the same city. War moved from the horizon to the map. And it was now, when you no longer saw, heard, smelled war, that a deadening acclimatisation to it began to set in. The first generation of ruins, cleaned up, shored up, began to weather—in daylight they took their places as a norm on the scene; the dangerless nights of September two years later blotted them out. It was from this new insidious echoless propriety of ruins that you breathed in all that was most malarial. (*The Heat of the Day*, 100)

A sense that Linda Shires' history is a little vague is coupled with a suspicion that she makes highly selective use of her quotations.

The facts of her literary survey are accurate enough, but her comments on individual poems are occasionally wooden. For instance, she makes heavy weather of the humour in "Naming of Parts":

The irony of "not having": "And this is the piling swivel, / Which in your case you have not got"; "and the point of balance / Which in our case we have not got," is part of a more serious statement. For in this lesson about a phallic weapon, a part is missing. The gun, and the war it represents—the diminished, endless, boring, hierarchical, stupid war—are set in contrast to the recruit's sensual imagination, keen to physical beauty . . . . Though phallic, war is also impotent in comparison to man's own private lusts. (81)

Not much of the irony is left by this point, especially since the instructor is referred to throughout the discussion as the "officer." What then of the ironic counterpoint of lavish literary language



appropriate to the middle class and the superbly rendered inanities of demotic army speech from someone surely rather less than an officer and a gentleman?

There is often a blur in Shires's account that is not the result of inaccuracy, but rather of indirection in her argument. Consider the following passage dealing, among other things, with Roy Fuller, who was never in action.

Reviewing a group of younger poets in 1943, Clifford Dymont used the phrase, "these poets are less critics of war than prisoners of war." *Dulled, bored, dead*—such words recur often in the poetry of the Second World War poets. Roy Fuller finds no easy identification with his role of war poet in "The Middle of a War" where "His fate [is] so obviously preordained":

My photograph already looks historic  
 The promising youthful face, the matelot collar  
 Say "This one is remembered for a lyric.  
 His place and period—nothing could be duller."  
 Like all soldiers, the poets faced a death that was imminent yet at the  
 same time fearfully abstract. (54)

I am sceptical that Roy Fuller is discussing his role as a *war* poet in this poem (he was a minor thirties poet before the war), but quite apart from that, what is the point of Shires' argument in these lines?

Literary surveys are difficult to write. The correct combination of fact, mood and flavour is hard to achieve. Tolley's book does serve a useful purpose as a reference map of the period. One really does learn more about the aura of Second World War poets from Douglas's *Prose Miscellany* than from Linda Shires's one hundred and fifty four pages of commentary.