

***Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature.*** By Patrick Deer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. x + 329 pp. \$125.00 cloth.

In 2004, visitors to the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool could have explored the permanent exhibition of the International Slavery Museum on the third floor before enjoying the “Spirit of the Blitz,” a popular temporary installation devoted to Liverpool’s experience of World War Two. Had they done so they would have moved from sustained critical self-reflection on Liverpool’s role in the slave trade to an invitation to share in “a time of comradeship and community spirit . . . a time of suffering and destruction.” Beyond the walls of the museum, “the dockside has also adopted the spirit of the blitz,” transforming the Piermaster’s House into “wartime style” and planting a wartime vegetable garden outside the Museum of Liverpool.<sup>1</sup> The recycling of this mythologized history of the Second World War as the people’s war, and its resistance to critical examination, motivates Patrick Deer’s revisionist account of war culture in *Culture in Camouflage*.

Literary historians have, according to Deer, taken at face value the assessment of Second World War writing by the post-war generation of writers who produced an image of the war period as one of “relative artistic silence,” in which writers were unable to encompass the new totality of war experience to “write large,” as Mass Observation’s Tom Harrison put it in 1941 (9). The defiantly provincial neo-realism and anti-modernism of both the Angry Generation and the Movement poets of the fifties obstructed later critics’ engagement with the reality of a wartime cultural boom, in which book sales increased over pre-war levels and “the appetite for print was insatiable” (11). In remapping literature’s place in Second World War culture, Deer produces a rich and detailed account of writers confronting a newly powerful and invasive war culture funded and actively produced by the British state and using all the resources of print, film, and radio. This was a mass culture aimed at the mobilization of the British population in the name of the “People’s War.” With resources as various as the government-run Ministry of Information, the BBC, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), forerunner of the National Arts Council, and

the Entertainment National Service Association (ENSA), this official war culture was able to construct a panoramic and totalizing view of the war. Deer argues that its operations depended on blackouts and oversight, in the sense of censorship, surveillance, and an overlooking of anything that contradicted its vision. Individual writers as various as George Orwell, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green, Virginia Woolf, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh found themselves struggling to represent the partial and “dislocated points of view of those living out the tactical realities of the conflict” (10). Deer’s book explores the hybrid forms, especially what he terms “camouflaged modernism” (90), devised by writers as tactics to question and resist the effects of this newly totalizing war culture.

The skill of Deer’s approach manifests itself in his careful structuring of each chapter. The third chapter, “Culture in the Blitz,” begins from the seemingly simple pairing of official culture, Humphrey Jennings’s propaganda film *London Can Take It*, for example, with examples of “resistance writing” (a term adopted by Deer from Elizabeth Bowen) set in the Blitz: Henry Green’s *Caught* and James Hanley’s *No Directions* (3). Deer’s examples of official culture illustrate overlaps and inter-relationships much more than contrasts. Jennings’s surreal visual imagery, for example, is at odds with the ideologically blatant voiceover. The working class comedian Tommy Handley’s sharp satire in the popular BBC radio show *It’s That Man Again* both domesticates and critiques government regulation. Moving back and forth between the popular mass media central to the creation of an official war culture and the novels of Green and Hanley, Deer demonstrates these writers’ active engagement with film, radio, and newsprint as they reinvent the form of the novel in the context of the Blitz. Hanley, after having worked for the wartime BBC, adapts the genre of the radio play into his novel, creating a “small scale” form capable of resisting the panoramic and strategic vision of official culture (148). Likewise, Green melds documentary, socialist realism, and modernism as a way of dramatizing the problem of wartime culture as state produced or orchestrated. The difficulty of expressing his hero’s Blitz experience is less a result of the inexpressibility of trauma than that of competing forms of expression, whether that of official culture, literature, cinema, psychology, gossip, or folk legend, which drown out experience. In each chapter Deer offers examples of productive crossings between a totalizing and flexible war culture that uses whatever aesthetic styles come to hand and the embattled writers who are either caught in an “ethical twilight” as cultural war workers for the Ministry of Information or the BBC or struggling against the “blackout” of that culture (119, 106).

Deer’s book also contains some superb discussion of both Elizabeth Bowen’s “reimagining of the Home Front as hallucinatory, haunted territory” (168) and Virginia Woolf’s insistent critique of masculine militaristic and imperial Englishness. At the end of a chapter on the role of air power

in the British war imaginary Deer shows how Woolf's war writing, so long "consigned to marginality," offers important analysis of the ways in which war technologies and militaristic ideologies converge to change perception and subjectivity (93). Fittingly, he returns to Woolf in the final chapter for the link she makes between "the battle for a common culture" and the struggle against the official "blackout" culture of the war "for vision and memory" (201). The focus on Woolf as a resistant writer and intellectual in this account is welcome, especially because her work is not treated as the female special case. It might seem mean-spirited, then, to complain that Bowen and Woolf are the only women writers given sustained attention in a book that covers a wide range of cultural production and familiar literary figures. The absence of figures such as Naomi Mitchison, Stevie Smith, H. D., Inez Holden, and E. J. Scovell raises the question of the difference their inclusion might make. In her poignant war elegies, for example, Mitchison, like Green, struggles with the proliferation of explanatory rhetorics, but claims both a Communist and a Scottish perspective. Her inclusion, along with Scovell, Smith, and H. D., might also suggest an alternative approach to war poetry, which is here represented by Keith Douglas "as perhaps the finest poet of the Second World War" (196)—perhaps, but perhaps not. In a book that is so thoroughly engaged with the production of a total war culture, Deer's recourse to a "men in uniform" category of war poetry is uncharacteristically reductive.

Nonetheless, *Culture in Camouflage* is packed with material of interest to a wide range of readers interested in British twentieth-century culture and open to an account of literature as one important element in an expanded cultural field in which film and mass media would seem to have displaced it. Deer's book will also appeal to any scholar seeking to understand the entanglements of modern culture in war. Deer challenges us to consider the results of a failure to understand Second World War culture properly. Deer rightly insists on the need for a more nuanced account of the relationships among literature, the mass media, modernism, and realism if we are to recognize this newly powerful and totalizing state culture and the forms of resistance to it. His book proposes and demonstrates that our misunderstanding of the war period is a problem for the way we see post-war British culture through to the present day, and that it blinds us to the degree to which the second world war ushered in an era of permanent war culture as the condition of modern culture.

#### Notes

1. "Spirit of the Blitz: Liverpool in the Second World War." National Museums Liverpool-Mercyside Maritime Museums, n.d. Web. 1 July 2010. <<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/exhibitions/blitz/home.asp>>.

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