

Modernism and World War II. By Marina MacKay. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 192 pp. \$100.00 cloth.

British Literature of the Blitz: Fighting the People's War. By Kristine Miller. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009. 240 pp. \$75.00 cloth.

It is no exaggeration to say that Marina MacKay's and Kristine Miller's studies of British fiction of World War II fulfill a promise made a decade ago. Between 1996 and 1998 four scholars restored to light a body of World War II British literature written by women. Emphasizing different writers, some

canonical, some neglected, and with varied approaches, Gill Plain, Jenny Hartley, Karen Schneider and I demonstrated that this writing represents crucial political, cultural, and gendered interventions in debates about the goals and prosecution of this war as well as its place in twentieth-century literary and political history. Our books focused on the importance of creating a cultural space for World War II and its women writers that should share the canonical position dominated by World War I and its literature. Why this breakthrough created no momentum for so long is a compelling literary-historical question and Miller's and MacKay's studies provide considerable insights.¹

Both Miller and MacKay begin their books by offering interpretations of the ongoing and intense significance of this war to English culture. With different approaches, both scholars agree that with variously conflicted points of view, the war writers they study interrogate the myths and rhetoric that characterized Britain as standing alone against the German blitzkrieg in its "finest hour," with its uniquely heroic and unified home front. Their writers also mark such key events as the Blitz and the 1942 Beveridge Report as influencing not only public responses at the time, but the collective memory of the nation's home front war. While MacKay is interested in the political discourse of wartime literature and its impact on British national and cultural identity, Miller focuses on social class and gender relations that inform concerns about the fate of the nation. In their insistence on grounding literary analysis in historicist attention to contemporary political arguments and archival documentation, both scholars make significant contributions to the study of twentieth-century British literature.

As her title *Modernism and World War II* indicates, Marina MacKay's book promises to question the inclusive barricades of modernist studies by arguing for complex cultural and political interrelationships between canonical British modernists and the transformative pressures of World War II on the aesthetics of late modernism. Chapters on Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, T. S. Eliot, Henry Green, and Evelyn Waugh revise the periodization of modernist studies, not by complying with its mandate to expand, but by asserting the significance of the World War II era. MacKay understands literary modernism as irrevocably affected by political debates about British national identity and culture as the war raged for six years. Her first chapter studies Virginia Woolf's change of heart at the end of her life and at the beginning of the Battle of Britain, from "radical pacifism of the 1930s towards the politically centrist *Between the Acts*" (18). Recalling Woolf's despair when her beloved London was blitzed, we can see how MacKay's argument for Woolf's "pastoral patriotism" works, how she views Woolf's radical feminism as sharing a nostalgic cultural identity with modernists like Forster and Lawrence (26). Concurrently, this insight attests to Woolf's recognition of the specific dangers that distinguished Hitler's war

from the mythic propaganda and horrific realities of the Great War and the Spanish Civil War and from her universalizing indictment of patriarchy. For despite her call in *Three Guineas* for women to abandon their oppressive nations, now that the danger of conquest was more than rhetorical Woolf openly identified with a little England she could distinguish from imperial Britain. Whether this epiphany can be seen as complicit with conservative renderings of a mythic rural continuity, as MacKay suggests, is undercut by the political views of other wartime writers who should be considered, such as Stevie Smith, Bryher, and Betty Miller, as well as non-literary Britons (quoted by Kristine Miller from Mass Observation archives) who recognized the necessity of this war.

MacKay juxtaposes Woolf with a formidable respondent—rebelliously “anti-imperialist, socialist and feminist” Rebecca West (44). In MacKay’s view, West’s modernism aligns the mythical method of the 1920s with religious myths of Christianity and Islam to interrogate imperialism, nationalism, and the nation state in her epic *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. The effect of this integration complicates the left-right division that prevailed not only in West’s day but as we can infer from MacKay’s manifold scholarly and political references, in our own time as well. MacKay’s interpretive method combines close reading of *Black Lamb’s* engagement with the fractious co-existence of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian histories and peoples with archly critical commentary that judges West’s political and cultural assessments as “racialized essentialism” on one hand, and then lauds West’s passionate investigation of history and breaks with conventional pieties on the other (49). Whether it’s a coincidence that MacKay’s ambivalences resonate with West’s, which in turn reflect the entanglements of Yugoslavia in the 1930s, I can’t say. I do think that sorting out West’s attitudes towards this crazy quilt anti-nation requires historical investigation into categories that West and MacKay both invoke, such as national identity and religion. Consulting cultural historians like Andrew Wachtel (*Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), and citing writers like Storm Jameson, Phyllis Bottome, and Olivia Manning, who shared West’s commitment to the defeat of fascism/Nazism and concern with the fate of Europe, would shed critical light on political and official attitudes in West’s day.

Analyzing T. S. Eliot’s, Henry Green’s, and Evelyn Waugh’s political and literary responses to World War II as a distinguishing mark of late modernism is one of MacKay’s major contributions. MacKay situates political arguments embedded in Eliot’s *Four Quartets* amidst a mélange of debates in the late 1930s that climaxed with the Battle of Britain about the failure of “the wisdom of old men” to recognize the dangers of appeasement and unpreparedness for war, not to mention the nation’s prevailing social and economic inequalities (74). Her close readings of Eliot’s poems

expose the unsettling presence of the war in poetic analogues that destabilize tropes critics most often take for granted as representing Eliot's religious and cultural conservatism. MacKay's reading of Henry Green's novels complicates further any critical vision of consistent social politics among late modernists. Classifying Green as a writer of "instinctively dialectical fiction" creates a coherent and balanced view of his entangled attempts to dislodge social class distinctions and establish a stable aesthetics of neutrality with his failure to do either. Yet as with her interpretations of other writers, including the class-conflicted Evelyn Waugh, MacKay finds it fruitful to see their World War II novels as expressing cultural anxiety about what the war would ultimately mean through paradoxically nostalgic rebellions "against conservative measures of social and cultural value" (121).

Kristine Miller reads the literature and films of the Blitz as interrogating the ideology of the People's War in terms of class and gender relations as well as the "friction between a collective national identity and distinctive individual identities" (20). In a comprehensive study of this tension, Miller views Elizabeth Bowen, Rosamond Lehman, Henry Green, Agatha Christie, Graham Greene, and Margery Allingham alongside Powell and Pressburger's 1943 feature film *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, the Ministry of Information documentaries *The Gentle Sex* and *Millions Like Us*, and personal testimonies from Mass Observation archives. Demonstrating the value of Mass Observation's ethnographic approach, Miller applies it to her interpretation of ideology and supports both with research into the material historical facts of the Blitz and consultations with such historians of World War II as Penny Summerfield and Sonya Rose. The very important result is to affirm how the Blitz brought the war home and transformed the debates studied by MacKay. In dialogue with MacKay's modernist emphasis, Miller asserts that to reflect civilian experiences of violence, the literature of the Blitz employs realist narrative forms that "demand their own place" in "modern literary history" (23).

Miller's first two chapters compare Elizabeth Bowen's and Rosamond Lehmann's war writing to show how each writer represents women's war work differently, revealing how Bowen's and Lehmann's narrative responses are shaped by their mobility as functions of their upper middle class status. A particularly valuable insight involves the social, gendered, and literary relationships she draws between the rhetoric of the People's War, privileged classes in actual British society and in Bowen's and Lehmann's fiction, and the literary imaginations of all the writers she studies. Miller's reading of *Bowen's Court* (1942) as a war text adds important new political and social complexity to analysis of *The Heat of the Day*, but criticizing Bowen's abstract discussion of the "outsize will" for its "benevolent" attitude towards Anglo-Irish power needs to factor in the persistent gendered critique of the Ascendancy we find in such stories as "The Back Drawing Room" and

in the Mount Morris section of *The Heat of the Day* (31).

Adding astute complexity to her focus on women writers and characters, Miller applies her gender analysis to the war novels of Henry Green and Graham Greene, revealing crises of masculinity compounded by the noncombatant status of their male protagonists and by the real and imagined heroic work of women. Miller's historical, biographical, and Mass Observation research is especially valuable here as it offers a context of social and work relations that productively informs MacKay's discussion of Green's deeply ambivalent class attitudes. Miller also shows how gender analysis relates to wartime detective and spy fiction. In Graham Greene's *Ministry of Fear*, the Blitz disrupts fantasies of heroic spying derived from boy's adventure thrillers when the protagonist's muddled moral consciousness is invaded by a German bomb that almost kills him. Miller's discussion of the wartime genre fiction of Agatha Christie and Margery Allingham adds critical texture to her interpretations of social and political hierarchies by arguing that both writers "scapegoat mainstream" criminals early in the war and then "deviant criminals" later on in order to highlight "how ruthlessly British society preserves traditional values and beliefs, even during the People's War" (121). Affirming the narrative complexity of these writers, one can also read these fictions as exposing the enemy within as a vision of social and political change.

Paraphrasing and applying Miller's conclusion to this chapter to the rest of her book and to MacKay's book, reveals the multifaceted significance of their studies—that British fiction of World War II interrogates literary conventions and scholarship "that evade[s] rather than confront[s] the reality and responsibility of life during wartime" (138). One of the great achievements of both MacKay's and Miller's books is their insistence on the material realities of World War II that challenged the moral consciousness of the world. After all, British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen and their documentary film footage informed us all of Nazi atrocities; British troops were also starved to death on the Bataan death marches. A major implication of Marina MacKay's and Kristine Miller's studies is that the next step in research on World War II British literature should relate writing from the home front to that which engages Britain's global roles in this cataclysmic war. This recognition of the war's destabilizing effects on British political and cultural oppositions should lead to scholarly reassessments of the attributed oppositional meanings of "conservative" and progressive or liberal. As the paradoxical "rebellions" of the late modernists demonstrate, it may very well be more politically realistic and challenging for literary studies to speak of elements of conservatism and liberalism within discourses about each.

Notes

1. The four books are Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World*

War (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996); Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us* (London: Virago, 1997); Karen Schneider, *Loving Arms* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1997) and Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of WWII* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998). There have been intermittent publications on British writing of World War II, such as Mark Rawlinson's *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) and the collection *The Fiction of the 1940s*, Ed. Rod Mengham and N. H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), but the subject of Britain's war and writers has not become mainstream, as a subject in itself or as a reference point of comparison.

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