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**James Smith (ed.).** 2019. *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the 1930s*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 250 pp., £ 74.99.

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James Smith's *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the 1930s* is a welcome and useful guide which strives to remedy the deficits in existing scholarship and to be open and inclusive. Eight of the fourteen contributors are women including Janet Montefiore whose pioneering work, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* (1996)<sup>1</sup>, did much to challenge the domination of the Auden circle in critical discussion of the decade that saw many important new developments in means of communication such as radio broadcasting, the advent of the paperback book and the documentary film.

The 'long 1930s' has now joined the 'long nineteenth century' and the 'long eighteenth century' with scholars vying to shift the book-ends to accommodate what they think are the important continuities, aesthetic, political and historical. The book-ends can be moved backwards and forwards. Back for historians of the 'pink decade': Glyn Salton-Cox is interested in both the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* in November 1928 and in Weimar Berlin in the 1930s, where English writers such as Auden and Isherwood could express political and sexual radicalism and homosexual desire in relative freedom. If one is looking for continuities in literary modernism, the book-ends can shift even further to take in 1922 and *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* or they can shift forward from the departure of Auden and Isherwood for the United States in January 1939, and, trying to think through literary deracination and homelessness, up to the

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<sup>1</sup> Montefiore, Janet. 1996. *Men and Women Writers of the Thirties: The Dangerous Flood of History*. London: Routledge.

end of the Second World War, and for some literary critics who are interested in the direction taken by social realism, even beyond that.

However one looks at it and whatever one is looking for, the history and literature of the 1930 are indivisible. As Mira Spiro points out in her chapter on fascism and anti-fascism, the decade began as one of the most idealistic for writers and intellectuals who believed that human beings, and the poetry, prose and drama that they wrote, could make a difference to the troubled world in which they lived and their interventions change it for the better. But by the time that Chamberlain and Hitler had arrived at the Munich agreement which licensed the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, and Molotov and Ribbentrop agreed to the non-aggression pact which enabled both Germany and the Soviet Union to invade Poland, disillusionment was everywhere and with the declaration of the Second World War the old certainties of the 1930s had been turned upside down and writers were faced with very different questions about their role in the coming conflagration.

The category of literary fiction, about which Marina MacKay writes, is at once a sign of our own times and of the 1930s. At one time, fiction would either have been literary or else not worth bothering with in critical discussion. Graham Greene, of course, distinguished between fiction and 'entertainments' in his own writing and then wisely stopped using the term 'entertainment'. As MacKay argues, the literary fiction of the 1930s is marked by "a pervasive sense of dispossession and instability across Britain and the European continent as a whole" (34). Her essay shows how homelessness is an insistent theme in the writing of Elizabeth Bowen and others.

Isobel Maddison makes the point that much of the scholarship on middle-brow writing has centred on writing specifically written by and for women, and that the 'golden age' of detective fiction was dominated by Agatha Christie, but that the debates on genre are widening. She offers a case study of Eric Ambler's attempt to align the spy novel with contemporary reality and the "anxiety ridden 1930s and with ideas of European political duplicity communicated in a nuanced register beyond that of simple propaganda" (91). The drama of the 1930s is often treated as the poor relation of fiction and poetry of the decade. Claire Warden discusses experimental theatre and the avant-garde expressionism which gained some ground as well as the political theatre of the Workers' Theatre Movement and Unity Theatre. The ever popular Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan were the doyens of commercial theatre and radio drama was fast becoming the national theatre of the air.

Tyrus Miller explores how many key 1930s modernist writers adopt "hybrid verse/prose 'epic' forms and lyric/discursive/dramatic modes" (101). He finishes with poets inspired by 'the visionary poetics' deriving from surrealism including

Herbert Read, Hugh Sykes Davies, Dylan Thomas, David Gascoyne and George Barker.

Kristin Bluemel addresses questions of region and nation through the English regional fictions of Winifred Holtby and H.E. Bates and the novels of rural Scotland and Wales by Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Richard Llewellyn, which reflected and shaped the 1930s preoccupation with the countryside. Bluemel draws an interesting distinction between novels which primarily ask us to regard the land as something to be lived on, and from which to derive one's living, and those whose characters regard the rural as landscape that can be viewed from a distance, aestheticized, and appreciated; in other words, a differentiation between the countryside of production and a "countryside that offers itself up for consumption, visual or otherwise" (164).

In his chapter on "Publishing and Periodicals", Peter Marks provides an account of the periodical *Left Review* and the astonishing success of the Left Book Club which at the height of its popularity boasted 1,200 discussion groups nationwide (72) with the readership reflecting the desire to know more about topical events from a left perspective, and, for those in more affluent parts of the country, the suffering of the 'distressed areas'. Given that one of the strongest challenges to the orthodoxies of the 1930s has come from Andy Croft's thoroughgoing excavation of working-class fiction in his pioneering *Red Letter Days* (1990)<sup>2</sup>, I would have welcomed engagement with some of the vibrant working-class writers of the 1930s, who are curiously absent from this excellent collection; James Hanley, John Sommerfield, Walter Greenwood, Lewis Jones, George Garrett, etc.

The British Empire 'on which the sun never set' was the largest to have ever existed and at its height immediately before the First World War had covered around a quarter of the world's land surface, including large tracts of North America, Australia, Africa and Asia. In their different ways, through addressing travel writing and the empire respectively, Tim Youngs and Judy Suh are both concerned with how the sense of Britain and of British values at the centre of the world, up to a sixth of which was shaded pink on the map at the high point of the British Empire, comes to be eroded. Suh brackets Virginia Woolf with Nancy Cunard, who turned her back on the life of white privilege into which she was born to identify with the struggles of black people and the dispossessed, both women sharing the critique of the "psychological and economic dependence of the British ruling classes on the imperial subjection of others" (129). Suh also looks at Orwell's experience of policing in Burma and Jean Rhys and C. L. R. James (the Caribbean), Rumer Godden and Mulk Raj Anand (India) whose

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2 Croft, Andy. 1990. *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

lived experiences of inequality inform their subsequent work. In his discussion of first-person accounts of travel, Tim Youngs shows how writers who are critical of the beliefs that they have inherited and eager to discover new allegiances embrace the foreign and cease to see their own country as the centre of the universe; Freya Stark in Baghdad, D. H. Lawrence in Mexico, Graham Greene in West Africa, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood in Iceland. The domestic travelogues of J. B. Priestley in *English Journey* (1934) and George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) speak truth to power exposing poverty, inequality and injustice. This is an interesting and insightful new addition to the published work on the literature of the 1930s.