

Maroula Joannou, 'Lucid Abnormality': A New Literary History of the 1940s

Review of

Gill Plain

*Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'*, volume 5, The Edinburgh History of Twentieth-Century Literature in Britain    Edinburgh University Press, 2013

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In her introduction to her latest monograph, the fifth volume in a series of ten, each covering a specific decade, in the Edinburgh History of Twentieth-Century Literature in Britain, Gill Plain discusses the problem of writing about the Second World War. This is a problem that 'manifests itself in a rhetoric of impossibility' since the literary texts 'repeat time and again that war defies representation, its events are indescribable and an approximation of meaning can only be conveyed through metaphor, litotes and silence' (p.177). Indeed such was the cataclysmic impact of the war that the second half of the decade is a 'paradoxical space in which the absence of war proves stranger and more disorientating than its presence' (ibid) and Britain was rebuilt out of ruined buildings, austerity and mass immigration. The book is divided into three sections, 'war, postwar' and 'peace' – the latter being the shortest. Plain places the word peace in inverted commas since she wants to make clear that its status is provisional. Though much anticipated, she argues that the longed-for peace never materialised, either literally or metaphorically, since its presence was not possible in the age of atomic bombs and nuclear annihilation. Taking her cue from the description of war time used in the *Collected Impressions* of Elizabeth Bowen, Plain sees the literature of the decade as being characterized by 'lucid abnormality'.

The volume is further subdivided into chapter headings that speak of the human responses to crisis; 'desiring', 'escaping', 'grieving', 'adjusting', 'atomising', 'documenting'. Amid them is one to which attention is immediately drawn because of its stark difference from the others, 'killing'. It is killing which marks a significant change in the focus of combat literature from the canonised works of the First World War. And while this insight is not, of course, original, Plain adroitly shows us how writers such as Roald Dahl, Alexander Baron and Keith Douglas wrote about the great unsaids of earlier wars. While the mechanised power to kill at a distance insulated combatants from the importance of their actions, the literature and film of combat both suggest that caring is essential before the killing takes place and that is also essential afterwards. Her cogent evaluation of the status of Orwell's *1984*, the book which has for many readers become synonymous with the *zeitgeist* and the decade, which she considers as an example of science fiction, or polemic, philosophy or horror is carefully contextualised and historicised with due attention to the meanings available at the time of first publication which are excavated with meticulous intelligence as is much else in this book. In a volume that is part of a series on the literary history of Britain I would have liked to have seen more analysis of Scottish and Welsh writing – what little she does offer, her discussion of the poetry of Dylan Thomas and the Glasgow theatre, for example, is, however, good.

Plain argues that the urge to document, to bear witness was strongly in evidence while the war resisted inscription and those who wanted to document it were frequently beset with a sense of déjà vu while the writing of political engagement was also newly self-conscious existing as it did in a climate that continually questioned its value. At the same time private diary writing arose from a need to make sense of the emotions and the short story witnessed a resurgence, suited as it was to the privations and conditions of the war. The chapter headed 'Escaping' approaches works that offer the reader frivolity as an antidote to war weariness or which 'conjure up fantastic worlds, including the world of childhoods, as an alternative habitus in the face of an inhospitable reality' (p.149). Georgette Heyer, Daphne Du Maurier, Naomi Mitchison and Nancy Mitford all provide various forms of entertainment and escape in their fiction, although still retaining traces of the war time context even where there is a narrative return to history, while Marghanita Laski's *Little Boy Lost*, Rose Macaulay's *The World my Wilderness* and Humphry Jennings's poetic documentary, *A Diary for Timothy* negotiate the postwar through a consideration of the generations that will inherit its legacy.

There is a pleasing emphasis on the importance of gender and sexuality throughout. Early on Plain signals her desire 'to escape from the habit of seeing the decade as almost entirely a male story built around Fitzrovia at home and the forces abroad'. (p.5) What makes *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* distinctive is the way in which critical discussion of literary texts by canonical writers, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Elizabeth Bowen and Virginia Woolf and others, are placed alongside accounts of film, middlebrow writing, crime fiction and other popular genres to give a rich overview of cultural history, literature and society. Plain has a long history of work on the Second World War dating back to *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (1996). To this she brings the expertise she has acquired in crime fiction, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh, 2001) and in cinema, *John Mills and British Cinema: Masculinity, Identity and Nation* (Edinburgh, 2006). Both do much to enrich our understanding of the literary-historical and cultural legacy of a complex decade.

This is an engaging, beautifully written and significant remapping.