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Maroula Joannou, review of Natasha Periyan***,*** *The Politics of 1930s British Literature: Education, Class, Gender*(London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). Hardback £85.

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In 1936, in ‘Notes on the English Character’, E. M Forster described the public school as the epitome of everything that he had come to detest in English society, inculcating as it did philistinism, repressive values, inhibition, duty, deference, and respect for hierarchy, all of which were calculated to produce young men ‘with well-developed bodies, fairly developed minds, and undeveloped hearts’. It was, of course, different for those girls who were sent away to boarding schools—but not so very different. Like her protagonist in her semi-autobiographical novel Frost in May (1933) Antonia White was expelled from her strict convent school where academic, familial, and religious authority were hyphenated and where, according to Natasha Periyan, ‘what is at stake is not merely temporary approbation at the hands of the school authorities, but eternal damnation’ (p. 135).

Periyan’s key achievement in The Politics of 1930s British Literature is to identify the centrality of education in all its protean forms in the literary, political, and historical agenda of the decade, drawing upon upon a wealth of primary sources to substantiate her irrefutable central argument: ‘To these perennial symbols of the decade—the gramophone and the loudspeaker—should be added the textbook and the blackboard’ (p. 2).

The society of the 1930s, which Periyan delineates so well, was rigidly stratified, culturally, socially, and politically along class, gender, and racial lines; nowhere more so than in the range of educational experiences and expectations analysed in this book. The grammar schools were, in the main, the preserve of the children of the middle and professional classes and aped the mores and the academic syllabi of the public schools. However, their pupils were usually spared the separation from parents and the obligatory dormitories and cold showers that hardened the future rulers of nation and empire. In stark contrast, working-class children went to elementary school and left with few expectations and no qualifications. Walter Greenwood, one of Periyan’s chosen authors, for example, recalled leaving his council-run school in a Salford slum in jubilation a few days after his 13th birthday with nothing but a testimonial and a farewell handshake from the head teacher.

The Politics of 1930s British Literature: Education, Class, Gender is an excellent contribution to a well-established tradition of feminist scholarship on writers of both sexes in the 1930s which received its initial impetus from Janet Montefore’s Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: the Dangerous Flood of History in 1996. In this meticulously researched new study Periyan moves from the home-educated Virginia Woolf’s critique of the educational institutions in the 1930s, from which the ‘daughters of educated men’, like herself, were excluded to Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain’s discussion of the politics of pedagogy. There is a lively discussion of the Eton-educated trio of George Orwell, Cyril Connolly and Henry Green and of the writers who contributed to Graham Greene’s symposium The Old School (1934): Walter Greenwood, Stephen Spender, Antonia White, and Arthur Calder-Marshall.

By the end of the 1930s, a chorus of literary voices intoning the death of the public school had reached a crescendo but their influence remained incontrovertible. However, the faith in the potential of education to bring about individual and societal change to benefit ordinary working people—what John Coombes terms ‘that perennial liberal panacea’ (quoted, p. 3)—was deeply entrenched within the British reformist tradition. Margaret Cole noted in Growing up into Revolution (1949) that over a hundred Labour MPs in the 1945 government had been tutors or students in adult education.

Periyan shows how authors combine the lens of their own school experience with the rationalizing perspective of maturity and with an activist agenda. There is a strong correlation between the concerns articulated in the novels and their writers’ engagement in wider educational debates. W. H. Auden was a teacher in a preparatory school taking up the role of teacher–polemicist in his tract Education Today and Tomorrow and contributing to The Highway, the journal of the Workers’ Educational Association. Cecil Day Lewis also taught in schools. Edward Upward worked at Alleyn’s school in Dulwich and was on the editorial board of The Ploughshare, the publication of the Teachers’ Anti-War Movement. Both Winfred Holtby and Vera Brittain were actively involved with the National Union of Women Teachers (NUWT) and Holtby spoke at their conferences and events. Holtby’s South Riding (1936) is set against a background of austerity and cuts in educational spending and the novel informed by her feminist participation in the NUWT and her articles for The Schoolmistress, a publication for which Antonia White also wrote.

What is often conspicuously absent in the educational and literary discourse of the time is the belief in the potential of the working-class to take control over their own lives although good writing by working-class authors were published in periodicals such as Left Review. Periyan is attentive to the relationship between literary style and politics, and her analysis of the textual variations in the 1935, 1939, and 1955 versions of Stephen Spender’s ‘An Elementary School Classroom’ in relation to working-class agency, reform, revolution, and the impersonal forces of history is accomplished. Also revealing is Periyan’s discussion of The Leaning Tower (1940), the wartime essay in which Woolf identifies with the ‘immense class to which almost all of us must belong to pick up what we can in village schools, in factories, in workshops, behind counters and at home’ (quoted, p. 175) as opposed to the public school educated elite represented by Auden and his circle.