The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: Some Personal Reflections on Researching the Literature of the 1930s.

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l am grateful to Natasha Periyan and Clara Jones for inviting me to contribute this very personal reflection on thirty-five years of research on the 1930s and the opportunity to reflect on some of the developments that l recall. l arrived at the Cambridge University Faculty of English as a mature student in 1984 intent on writing a Ph.D thesis on women writers of the inter-war period. Extraordinary although this might appear today, the notion that hardly any women writers of any note were published between the wars was widely held. In her introduction to A *Very Great Profession* (1983), Nicola Beauman recollects visiting her former supervisor in the English Faculty at Cambridge. The latter, ‘a dear, white-haired unashamedly intellectual don, the author of a classic work on Virginia Woolf’ looked ‘almost too appalled to speak’ when Nicola told her that she proposed to write a book on women writers of the 1920s and the 1930s: ‘From her point of view, there were no twentieth-century women writers worthy of critical attention, with the obvious exception of Virginia Woolf and the possible exceptions of Rosamond Lehmann and Elizabeth Bowen.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

My own responses to English Literature had been transformed beyond recognition by the new Marxist critical approaches and by the consciousness-raising of the women’s liberation movement l had participated in during the 1970s and 1980s. l had read everything l could get my hands on from Virago and the Women’s Press. l had also poured through Amabel Williams-Ellis, Carmel Haden Guest, Ethel Mannin, Storm Jameson, Sarah Campion, Irene Rathbone, Barbara Wootton, Betty Miller, Inez Holden and other forgotten women recommended by older friends in the Communist Party; a number of whom had participated in, still vividly remembered, and were happy to talk about, the polarised literary culture of the 1930s.

Why the fascination with the 1930s? This was clearly a turning point, a defining moment in British history; a unique decade which would determine the direction that Europe would take in the forseeable future, and in which the values of the left were hegemonic. Women writers, whose politics had often been shaped by the struggle for the vote, found themselves having to respond to the overarching threat of destitution at home and the Nazi domination on the continent in both their writing and in their personal lives. The best-selling popular novelist, Ethel Mannin, for example, ‘was clearly writing a new kind of novel, drawing on all her skill as a writer of romantic fiction to convey an increasingly explicit political message’ for a few years during the 1930s and ‘integrating a revolutionary vision of society with a hugely popular from of reading’[[2]](#footnote-2) in such novels as *Cactus* (1935) and *The Pure Flame* (1936).

l felt a particular affinity with those writers like Mannin and Sylvia Townsend Warner, Storm Jameson, Naomi Mitchison and Nancy Cunard, all of whom had unfashionably managed to retain their feminist ideals and their radical politics throughout the 1930s, the Second World War, and the Cold War. I’ve never quite understood, let alone subscribed to, the ubiquitous notion that we inevitably grow conservative with age. For a long time l had a photograph of Naomi Mitchison, aged eighty something, clinging to the perimeter fence of the Greenham Common Peace camp, pinned to my office wall.

l found the literary and historical images or the 1930s, and particularly the sharp contrasts evoked in Humphry Spender’s haunting black-and-white photographs of ‘worktown’ dramatic and arresting. As Jonathan Freedland puts it, the 1930s ‘has an international meaning, with a vocabulary that centres on Hitler and Nazism and the failure to resist them: from brownshirts and Goebbels to appeasement, Munich and Chamberlain. And it has a domestic meaning, with a lexicon and imagery that refers to the Great Depression: the dust bowl, soup kitchens, the dole queue and Jarrow.’[[3]](#footnote-3) What interested me about the 1930s, then, as it does now, is that the history and literary culture of the decade are indivisible. Few of the intellectuals in the 1930s whose work l respected made a rigid distinction between the two and l could see little point in doing so either. In 1936 Nancy Cunard called upon authors to sign a public declaration for or against Fascism (‘Are you for, or against, the legal Government and the People of Republican Spain? Are you for, or against, Franco and Fascism?’). The questionnaire was published as *Authors Take Sides.[[4]](#footnote-4)* Not surprisingly, hardly anyone refused to sign or chose to proclaim their support for Fascism or their neutrality*.* Storm Jameson explains the situation in which her contemporaries found themselves:

‘ On one side Dachau, on the other the “distressed areas” with their ashamed workless men and despairing women. Not many English writers had the hardness of heart, the frivolity, the religious certainty, the (why not?) noble egoism – noble or ignoble the gesture is precisely the same – to hurry past, handkerchief to nose, intoning, ‘My concern is with my art, what troubles are troubling the world are not my business; let those whose business it is attend to it, l must be about my own...’” [[5]](#footnote-5)

Because the involvement of Storm Jameson, Phyllis Bottome, Naomi Mitchison, Vera Brittain, Ethel Mannin, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Virginia Woolf, Nancy Cunard, Winifred Holtby and others in the life of their times was inescapable researching these writers works therefore offered the opportunity to revisit some of the key historical, social, political, cultural and artistic events of their day.

The women in whom l was primarily interested were poets, dramatists and fiction writers whose creative writing mirrored the turbulent living world they depicted in all its range, diversity and complexity. In private they were letter-writers and diary-keepers, recording their inner feelings and thoughts. In public they were journalists, essayists, news reporters, social commentators, or humanitarian aid workers. They had, moreover, seen the writing on the wall: Germany in ruins after the Great War (Brittain and Woolf), the scorched battlefields of the Spanish Civil War (Warner and Cunard); the dangers faced daily by the very brave dissidents in Fascist occupied Vienna (Mitchison); the sad exodus throughout Nazi Europe of Jewish refugees fleeing for their lives (Jameson); the searing inequities of a racially divided South Africa (Holtby); the disappearance of sexual freedoms with the demise of the Weimar Republic (Mannin) (‘l felt a need to leave not merely Berlin but Germany itself. The endless brown-shirts, swastikas, and pictures of Hitler were constant reminders of the existence of a regime alien to everything we believed in’).[[6]](#footnote-6)

One learns much about the intrepid fortitude and courage (often physical) of these women from their diaries and their copious correspondence with friends. One also learns how their public achievements were often underscored by personal struggles to overcome isolation, insecurity, and sometimes physical illness. There was evidence too in their diaries and letters of the importance they attached to women’s friendships, their consciousness of the gender inequalities that impinged upon their personal lives, and of the determined (and sometimes flamboyant) defiance of prejudice and social conventions by women like Nancy Cunard, Ethel Mannin and Naomi Mitchison.

l had first got to know Margot Heinemann, then a Fellow of the college to which l was attached, New Hall, through a discussion panel on the 1930s organised by the Communist University of London. Margot had kindly read my MA dissertation, encouraged me to apply to Cambridge, and was to remain a very dear mentor and critical friend in all the time l was working on my Ph.D. [[7]](#footnote-7) When l arrived, the English Faculty at Cambridge University was emerging from the ‘theory wars’ and l found it an intimidating, if not a terrifying, place to be with its famously high failure and non-completion rates for Ph.D dissertations. Having acquired my academic qualifications circuitously; part-time while teaching full-time in schools, Further Education colleges and adult education -- rather than coming to graduate work straight from university like virtually everyone else l met -- I felt deeply lacking in confidence and conspicuously out of place. l was, however, very fortunate to acquire Gillian Beer, the most patient and generous of Ph.D supervisors, who not only enhanced my own research with her invaluable scholarly insights into Virginia Woolf but to my delight also shared my love of Sylvia Townsend Warner. However, since very few people had heard of Warner, or, for that matter, Katharine Burdekin or Leonora Eyles or F. M. Mayer l simply replied ‘Virginia Woolf’ whenever the obligatory question, ‘Who are you working on?’ presented itself. The name Woolf endowed my project with badly needed respectability, although l realised that the Virginia Woolf l loved was a very different Woolf from the Virginia Woolf associated with ‘art for art’s sake’; the ethereal aesthete with a tenuous grasp on social reality who was the only Virginia Woolf who was recognisable to many in academe.

l was soon to discover that the city of Cambridge, where l lived in the early 1980s, and again from 1993 to the present, was a cornucopia. The Cambridge University Library, where l spent many a happy hour slicing open the pages of first editions with a paper knife was for me the eighth wonder of the world. l knew that a very frail Storm Jameson, whose autobiography *Journey from the North* so brilliantly captures the flavour of the 1930s, and whose tireless work in facilitating the entry of artists and intellectuals fleeing from Fascist Europe to Britain during her time as Chair of PEN is an inspiration, was living near me in Gough Way under her married name of Margaret Chapman. My great regret that l never summed up the courage to knock on her door.

l did, however, meet Naomi Mitchison, another unsung heroine, in 1997. l had managed to get myself to the Manse in Campbeltown on the Mull of Kintyre to write an interview for *Women: A Cultural Review* commissioned for her hundredth birthday.[[8]](#footnote-8) l had, unfortunately left this pilgrimage too late. There was much l wanted to ask the woman who had helped Viennese socialists by smuggling documents out of Austria in her thick woollen knickers.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mitchison was gracious, welcoming, happy to talk, to offer me (a total stranger) generous overnight hospitality and clearly still interested in everyone and everything around her, but alas her long-term memory had all but gone. The questions remained unanswered but the memory of our meeting will stay with me for ever.

The late Frida Knight was also active in the local CP in Cambridge. Frida was something of a living legend; a musicologist and accomplished classical violinist, she had driven an ambulance in the Spanish Civil War, was interred in Besancon by the Vichy regime, engineered a daring escaped to Marseille with the help of the French Resistance, and then worked with the Free French information bureau in London. l only pieced together the full story of Frida’s extraordinary life years later as she was very reluctant to talk about herself. Like many people in Cambridge who know Frida, l found myself agreeing to escort parties of her visitors to the city (musicians from Paris, students from the Soviet Union, teachers from Africa, etc) around the city. As l was to discover, Frida’s international contacts were innumerable and their understanding of English varied from good to virtually non-existent, but none of us ever had the heart to say ‘no’.

l was able to do a little work for Margot Heinemann as a research assistant working in the newspaper archives of the British Library and collating information on the works of her friend, the Marxist historian and literary critic, A. L. (Leslie) Morton. l vividly remember driving Margot in my old dilapidated 2cv to an idyllic summer garden party at Morton’s home in the Old Chapel in the pretty village of Clare in Suffolk in 1985 and coming upon an unlikely community of left-wing activists and academics living in and around Leiston (‘Little Moscow’) which had had a thriving branch of the Communist Party since the 1930s and a Communist councillor until the 1980s. This felt like stepping back in time to what Raphael Samuel described that very same year as ‘The Lost World of British Communism’, i.e.; a world in which Communism was practiced as the ‘philosophy of hope and faith in humanity’ and as a ‘moral vocation as well as a political practice’;[[10]](#footnote-10) a vanished world of ideas, books and music where political and aesthetic debates were conducted with a combination of passion and civility.

In 1993 l obtained my first full-time university teaching job at Anglia Polytechnic University and in 1995 my Ph.D thesis was finally published as ‘*Ladies Please Don’t Smash these Windows’: Women’s Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1918 – 38.* Huge advances had been made. Thanks to the proliferation of Women’s Studies degrees -- my own university’s MA in Women’s Studies was the first part-time MA in Women’s Studies in the country -- as well as women’s writing modules on English Literature degrees in both Britain and the United States, more twentieth-century women writers were being studied than ever before. However, the 1930s was still being taught -- when the literature was being taught at all --- as if *all* that mattered were poetry; a position which did much disservice not only to good woman writers of fiction but to Edward Updike, John Sommerfield, Lewis Grassic Gibbon and to all the working-class novelists such as the seafarer James Hanley and the coal miner, Walter Brierley, who had found their voices in the ‘red decade’.

The only poets who really counted, moreover, were those whom my good friend, Andy Croft and l used to call the ‘famous five’: W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis and Christopher Isherwood; a coterie of privileged young men born between 1902 and 1916, and thus too young to have participated in the First World War, who had reclaimed the subjective lyrical ‘I’ that had lost favour in modernist poetry. Indeed Samuel Hynes’s influential study *The Auden Generation* (1976) was subtitled *Literature and Politics in the 1930s;* the implication being that the two were one and the same.

The standard anthology in use this time was still Robin Skelton’s *Poetry of the 1930s,* first published by Penguin Books in 1964. Skelton included only one woman, Anne Ridler, who had worked as an editor with Faber and Faber and published *A Little Book of Modern Verse* with T.S. Eliot in 1941. Valentine Cunningham’s doorstep of a reference work *British Writers of the Thirties* arrived in 1981. Revisiting the recurrent imagery, topics, themes and preoccupations of the decade, in context rather than in linguistic isolation, Cunningham raised his readers’ hopes of inclusivity by listing a number of forgotten or neglected women writers while ultimately managing to say disappointingly little about any of them, Elizabeth Bowen being the exception.

What altered the literary-critical landscape radically for me was the publication of two important new studies; Jane Dowson’s *British Women’s Poetry of the 1930s* in 1996 and Janet Montefiore’s *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s* in 1997. Identifying the ‘Audenesque’ as a standard by which women had hitherto been judged and found wanting, Jane brought together very different authors in terms of their poetic style; Ruth Pitter, Nancy Cunard, Valentine Ackland, Winifred Holtby, Anna Wickham, Frances Cornford and Vita Sackville West, for the first time. John Lucas, provided this endorsement: ‘Jane Dowson’s work will mean that we shall have to redraw the maps of English literature between the wars. It is high time someone pointed out what we’ve far too long been missing – good poetry that has been carelessly buried under the heaped-up orthodoxies of literary history.’[[11]](#footnote-11)

JanetMontefiore, already highly respected on the reputation of *Feminism and Poetry* (1989), set out to do something radically different in *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History.* Instead of recovering lost women as part of a tradition of women’s writing as other feminists were doing, Janet inscribed women alongside men into literary history in order to reassess that very history as well as the historical relationship between the two sexes. She also ventured beyond poetry and fiction to analyse autobiography, memoir, travel writing as well as discursive writing with feminist revisions of the key essays Orwell’s ‘Inside The Whale’ (1940) and Virginia Woolf’s critique of the Auden circle in ‘The Leaning Tower’ (1940).

The time was clearly ripe to organise a conference but l hesitated because l privately doubted if there would be sufficient interest to justify a conference on women writers alone. Besides, it seemed important from the outset to work alongside David Margolies, editor of the journal, *Red Letters*, Andy Croft author of *Red Letter Days* (1990), Chris Hopkins at Sheffield Hallam, and John Lucas, critic, poet and editor of *The 1930s: A Challenge to Orthodoxy* (1978). My first conference held in Cambridge in November 1997 was entitled ‘The Literature of the 1930s: Visions and Revisions’. Gillian Beer was the keynote speaker on the then little known Sylvia Townsend Warner. Papers were invited ‘on any aspect of the 1930s which help to call into question Auden’s description of the period as a “low dishonest decade.”’ The conference which attracted just under 300 people exceeded everyone’s expectations, and was the largest one-day conference in England that year. To my delight, the overwhelming majority of papers were on women writers clearly signalling the sea change that had taken place. The proceedings were published in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History* (1997). By the time l organised a second conference, ‘The Literature of the 1930s: The Text in History’ in 2000 with Alison Light and Julia Briggs as keynote speakers, important friendships had been made and informal networks – we never used the word then – had been set up. Other conferences on the writers of the 1930s came in quick succession as well as invitations to speak in Britain, Europe and the United States. John Lucas and l edited a special issue of *Critical Survey* on the literature of the 1930s in 1998 and l was invited to be the guest editor of a second special edition on the 1930s in the same journal with a focus on gender and region in 2003.[[12]](#footnote-12)

l spoke at one gathering of English and American scholars in the graduate centre at the City College of New York at the invitation of the scholar activist Jane Marcus whose incendiary essay *Art and Anger* had been transformative for so many feminists of my generation: ‘Anger is not anathema in art; it is a primary source of creative energy’.[[13]](#footnote-13) l addressed another at St John’s College , Oxford in 1998; and a third at the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea in 2004 organised by Victor Golightly with an appreciative audience drawn largely from the adult education movement in 2004. Events on individual writers organised at my own university included a symposium on Storm Jameson convened jointly with Chiara Briganti and Jennifer Birkett in 2005, another on Sylvia Townsend Warner with Gill Davies in 2006,[[14]](#footnote-14) a third on Winifred Holtby with Marion Shaw in 2007,[[15]](#footnote-15) and a fourth on Rosamond Lehmann with Clare Hanson in 2009. The first conference on the writing of Nancy Cunard was held at Anglia Polytechnic University and organised by my colleague, Tory Young, in 2001. Tory also organised a path-breaking conference on Jean Rhys at King’s College London, in July 2010 working alongside Jeannette Baxter, and Anna Snaith.

The first academic conference on Elizabeth von Arnim was held at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge in 2015 organised by Jennifer Walker, Erica Brown and Isobel Maddison bringing the marginalised author of *The Enchanted April* (1922) *The Jasmine Farm* (1934) and [*Mr. Skeffington*](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mr._Skeffington_(novel)&action=edit&redlink=1)(1940) into the spotlight. An international symposium on Sylvia Townsend Warner was hosted by the Centre for South West Writing at the University of Exeter and the Dorset County Museum and organised by Vike Plock and Alex Murray in 2012. The most recent conference on Warner, ‘Sylvia Townsend Warner and Modernism’ took place at the Friends’ Meeting House in Manchester in 2018 and was convened by Howard Booth of Manchester University and Gemma Moss of Birmingham City University.

The study of women writers in the 1930s has received a welcome impetus from advances in our understanding of print culture, the all too revealing interface between literary writing and journalism, and the modernist periodical. In particular, Cathy Clay’s work on *Time and Tide* has unearthed an astonishingly disparate network of authors who were once contributors to this pioneering feminist journal: Valentine Ackland, Rose Allatini, Stella Benson, Elizabeth Bowen, Kay Boyle, Frances Cornford, Richmal Crompton, E. M. Delafield, Susan Ertz, Eleanor Farjeon, Stella Gibbons, Susan Glaspell, Beatrice Harradan, Winifred Holtby, Pamela Hansford Johnson, Marghanita Laski, Sylvia Lynd, Ethel Mannin, Naomi Mitchison, Kate O Brien, Hilda Reid, Jean Rhys, May Sarton, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Dorothy Whipple, Vita Sackville-West, E. H. Young, Edith Zangwill and Virginia Woolf. [[16]](#footnote-16)

Making neglected texts available at affordable prices has been crucial to the revival of interest in marginalized women writers. The great success stories in twentieth-century feminist publishing must include Persephone Books run with panache by Nicola Beauman from an old-fashioned bookshop in Lambs Conduit Street, London. Persephone boasts a flourishing newsletter, and a mail order service of books by and for women; many from the inter-war period including their best-seller, Winifred Watson’s *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (1939). In Edinburgh, Kennedy and Boyd have reissued extensive lists of works by neglected authors, for example, the ‘Naomi Mitchison Library’ with Isobel Murray of the University of Aberdeen as the series editor, as well as the novels of the Lancashire textile worker, Ethel Carnie Holdsworth which are now available to a new readership. In Wales Honno (a ‘sort of Celtic Virago’) can now claim to be the longest running independent women’s press in the United Kingdom celebrating over thirty years of titles of interest to the women of Wales by, among others, Margiad Evans, Menna Gallie, and Dorothy Edwards.

Like most feminist academics l know, l have always hated the relentless pressure to bid for large research funds which is alas *a sine qua non* in many universities. The Middlebrow Network, a flagship project funded out of a successful bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, was an object lesson on why it is worth our persevering despite all the the disappointments and setbacks. Set up in 2008 and led by Faye Hammil, then at the University of Strathclyde, with strong support from Chris Hopkins and from Erica Brown and Mary Grover of Sheffield Hallam University (both of whose doctoral theses on middlebrow fiction l had the pleasure of examining) the Middlebrow Network was instrumental in stimulating debate, inviting readers to question the disparaging connotations of the word ‘middlebrow’, and bringing together an eclectic combination of international researchers, the local community, and the reading public interested in non-canonical fiction. Sheffield Hallam followed this up with their curation of ‘Readerships and Literary Cultures 1900-1950 Special Collection’, a selection of bestsellers and lending library favourites by 350 authors. Members of the public were invited to attend monthly reading groups and community volunteers reviewed and filled in detailed catalogue forms for the database held in the university library. This project formed an impact Case Study for submission to the Research Excellence Framework in 2014.

Another path-breaking initiative was the digital Modernist Archives Publishing Project (MAPP) run by Nicola Wilson which is centred upon the Archive of British Publishing and Printing deposited by leading publishing houses at the University of Reading. MAPP aims to produce an online database of catalogued sales figures, distribution networks, dust jackets, book designs and contemporary reviews. Nicola Wilson has already produced substantial work on the literary and cultural impact of the Book Society Ltd (1926 – 60); Britain’s first mail order book club.

The three literary societies which flourish alongside the long-established George Eliot Fellowship (1930), the Jane Austen Society of the United Kingdom (1940), and the Bronte Society (1893) deserve recognition for bridging the gap between readers with university affiliations and enthusiastic readers outside academe; a strange distinction since academic readers (or at least those academic readers I’ve met who are any good at their work) are almost always enthusiasts. The Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain inaugurated in Bloomsbury in 1998, now chaired by my former Ph.D student Claire Nicholson, the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society started in Dorchester in 2000, and chaired by Janet Montefiore, and the Elizabeth von Arnim Society founded in Cambridge in 2015, have all raised public awareness and promoted an informed understanding of their authors through imaginative programmes of talks, study days, readings and discussion. Under the inspired editorship of Peter Swaab and Stuart N. Clark respectively the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society and the Virginia Woolf Society have both reprinted important biographical pieces, poems and letters as well as new critical essays. The free open access publications they produce have reached far beyond society members to attract student and non-specialist readers and are an admirable response to the challenges of a new digital age

What, one might ask, would those two erudite ‘outsiders’ to academe, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf, have made of what Peter Tollhurst, a Warner enthusiast, has criticised as the ‘academic industry’ of university-based writers; the paraphernalia of footnotes and citations that has grown up around their work?[[17]](#footnote-17) One suspects their response would have been ambivalent but not dismissive. For all her mixed feelings about formal education, particularly in the universities, Woolf demonstrated her own inimitable way with footnotes in *Three Guineas* while Warner had wanted to make visible the painstaking researches and the lifetime of reading that underpinned The Kingdoms of Elfin, her collection of magical short stories based on Scottish fairy tales: ‘Oh, how l long to give it learned footnotes and references.’[[18]](#footnote-18)

To summarise, while there have been major advances in our knowledge and understanding of the literary culture of the decade, the overall picture is somewhat mixed. We still have no critical edition of Jean Rhys to place alongside the wonderful Cambridge University Press edition of the Works of Virginia Woolf (General Editors **Jane Goldman** and Susan Sellers). This absence makes it difficult to prescribe a uniform edition of Rhys on student reading lists and is largely due to the difficulties reported by every scholar l know who has ever tred to negotiate with Rhys’s literary estate, although as l write l am told there is some hope that these problems will eventually be resolved.

We also have no anthology of the 1930s that reflects the interests of the twenty-first century reader with a fair representation of women, poets and poets from the English regions and the Welsh and Scottish nations Penguin Books continue to resist all the requests made by, among others, Andy Croft and myself, to bring their best-selling *Poetry of the 1930s* up to date. There has been much very interesting recent work on the literature of the 1930s with a non- metropolitan focus, for example Siriol McAvoy’s edited essay collection (2019) on the experimental poet, Lynette Roberts who was born in Argentinia of Welsh descent.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, more needs to be done to stimulate interest in Naomi Mitchison south of the Scottish border although Isobel Murray, Jenni Calder, Mitchison’s biographer, and James Purdon in his Carnegie Trust funded project on Mitchison’s cold war writing conducted at St Andrew’s University (2018) have all done justice to this most remarkable and eclectic of authors in her adoptive Scotland: Mitchison, of course, did much of her most important writing in England and only elected to relocate to Scotland in 1939. While Matthew Taunton and Benjamin Kohlmann’s insightful edited collection, A History of 1930s British Literature (2019)[[20]](#footnote-20) is be welcomed this too highlights the problem of writing about the 1930s that claims to speak for Britain while saying very little about Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

l began with my sense of lived connection to the women (and men) of the generation above me, but as the 1930s recedes from living memory into history there are alas now very few survivors who can now remember the despair of worklessness and hunger during the Great Depression and the political and economic traumas that stunted so many of their contemporaries’ lives. Jack Lindsay, David Gascoyne, Humphrey Spender, George Garrett and Naomi Mitchison were all alive in 1997. So were Jane Marcus, Julia Briggs, Victor Golightly, David Bradshaw, and other fine scholars who are no longer with us. l feel a deep sense of sadness at their loss but also great pride in knowing how much ground-breaking work has been done on the literary culture of the 1930s since then, and great pleasure in knowing that this work has done with the exemplary collegiality, conviviality, good humour and commitment to collaborative work that in my experience has so often been the hallmark of feminist research on women’s writing between the wars.

The distinctions l once made between personal friendships and professional friendships have long since vanished. l count Janet Montefiore, Jane Dowson and some of the others who were there from the very start at the conferences in 1997 and 2000, or who attended at the subsequent colloquia in my own university (David Margolies, Chris Hopkins, Anna Snaith, Catherine Clay, Andy Croft, Gill Frith, Lisa Regan, Faye Hammil, Chiara Briganti, Victoria Stewart, Nick Hubble, Diana Wallace, Gill Plain, Wendy Pollard, Nicola Wilson, and John Lucas) among my oldest and most cherished friends, although our paths regrettably tend to cross less often than they did. l now give very few formal papers but l always enjoy being asked to examine PhDs and being asked to write reader’s reports on new work submitted to publishers. Above all, l greatly appreciate, being invited to gatherings like the excellent symposium on the 1930s at King’s College organised by Clara and Natasha in 2018 at which the presence of a new generation of early career researchers such as Alice Wood and Elinor Taylor is always a joy.

# It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

This was, of course, the 1790s and not the 1930s but the worst of times can also be the best.

1. Nicola Beauman*, A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Andy Croft, Ethel Mannin: The Red Rose of Love and the Red Flower of Liberty’, in Angela Ingram and Daphne Patai (eds), *Rediscovering Forgotten Radicals: British Women Writers 1889-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), pp.205-25, pp.215-6, p.222. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jonathan Freedland, ‘The 1930s Revisited’, *The Guardian*, March 11, 2017, p. 8.**he 1930s were humanity's darkest, bloodiest hour. Are you paying attention? he 1930s were humanity's darkest, bloodiest hour. Are you paying attention?** [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish Civil War* (London: Left Review, 1937). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North*, two vols, vol. 1 (London: Collins and Harvill, 1969), p. 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ethel Mannin*, Forever Wandering* (London: Jarrolds, 1934), p.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. # See Maroula Joannou and David Margolies (eds*) Heart of the Heartless World: Essays in Cultural Resistance in Memory of Margot Heinemann* (London: Heinemann, 1985).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Maroula Joannou, ‘[Naomi Mitchison at One Hundred](http://arro.anglia.ac.uk/269752/)’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 9 (3), 1998, pp.292-304 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: a Memoir 1920-1940* (London: Gollancz, 1979), pp. 193-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Raphael Samuel, ‘The Lost World of British Communism’*, New Left Review*, no 154, November/December 1983, pp.3-53, p.41, p.46. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Lucas, cover endorsement to Jane Dowson, *British Women’s* *Poetry of the 1930s: a Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mary Joannou and John Lucas (eds) *Critical Survey*, vol. 10 (1998): Issue 3 (Dec 1998) and Mary Joannou (ed.) *Critical Survey*, vol. 15, (June 2003) issue 2 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Lisa Regan (ed.) *Winifred Holtby, ‘A Woman of Her Time’: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010) for the edited conference papers. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Catherine Clay, *Time and Tide: The Feminist and Cultural Politics of a Modern Magazine* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Peter Tolhurst, ‘The Changing Face of the Society: a View from the Terraces’, in The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society Newsletter, no 38, 2019, no page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Letter from Sylvia Townsend Warner to Marchette and Joy Chute, dated June 8, 1973, in William Maxwell (ed.) Sylvia Townsend Warner: Letters (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Siriol McAvoy (ed.) Locating Lynette Roberts: Always Observant and Slightly Obscure (place: University of Wales Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Matthew Taunton and Benjamin Kohlmann’s (eds) A History of 1930s British Literature (Cambridge University Press, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)