

## POETRY SINCE 1939

On the continent of Europe, and in other countries where, at any rate during the war years, few English books penetrated and little first-hand information about the Arts in Great Britain was for long available, many people asked: What has Britain produced during these five years? How did the impact of war influence painters, musicians, writers, those whose minds are best able to penetrate below the surface and offer some clue to the world's chaos?

Stephen Spender has in this essay answered the question as regards Poetry. He is able to speak with double authority—as a poet, and as one who played a full and active part during the years of stress. In writing of other poets, Stephen Spender was asked to include reference to his own work, which he has done in its proper place. But the Editor wishes to take this opportunity of reminding readers that the author of this essay is one of the most distinguished poets in England today.

# POETRY SINCE 1939

By  
STEPHEN SPENDER

*Illustrated*

Published for  
THE BRITISH COUNCIL  
by LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO  
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author and publishers are indebted to the following for permission to reprint poems which are quoted in full or at length: Mr. W. H. Auden and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "Song of the Master and Boatswain", from *For the Time Being*; Mr. George Barker and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "To My Mother", from *Eros in Dogma*; Mr. Ronald Bottrall and The Grey Walls Press Ltd. for "Peace"; Mr. David Gascoyne and Editions Poetry London for "The Gravel-Pit Field", from *Poems 1939-42*; Mr. William Empson and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "Missing Dates", from *The Gathering Storm*; Mr. Roy Fuller and The Hogarth Press for "What is Terrible", from *A Lost Season*; Mr. Robert Graves and Messrs. Cassell & Co. for "Dawn Bombardment" and "The Shot", from *Poems 1938-1945*; executors of Mr. Sidney Keyes, and Messrs. George Routledge & Sons Ltd., for "Office for Noon", from *The Cruel Solstice*; Mr. Laurie Lee and The Hogarth Press for "At Night", from *The Sun My Monument*; Mr. Cecil Day Lewis and Messrs. Jonathan Cape Ltd. for "Where are the War Poets?" and "O Dreams, O Destinations" (second sonnet), from *Word Over All*; Mr. Louis MacNeice and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "Brother Fire", from *Springboard*; Mr. Edwin Muir and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "Then" and "The Wayside Station", from *The Narrow Place*; Mr. F. T. Prince and Editions Poetry London for "Soldiers Bathing"; Miss Kathleen Raine and Editions Poetry London for "Still Life", from *Stone and Flower*; Mr. Henry Reed and Messrs. Jonathan Cape Ltd. for "The Door and the Window", from *A Map of Verona*; Miss Edith Sitwell and Messrs. Macmillan & Co. Ltd. for "Anne Boleyn's Song", from *Green Song*; Mr. Stephen Spender and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "Since we are what we are, what shall we be . . .", from *Spiritual Explorations*; Mr. Dylan Thomas and Messrs. J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd. for "Poem in October", from *Deaths and Entrances*; Mr. Vernon Watkins and Messrs. Faber & Faber Ltd. for "The Sunbather", from *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*.

Side of a gravel-pit, are not  
 The precious relics of some saint,  
 Perhaps miraculous ? Or that  
 The lettering on this Woodbine-  
 Packet's remains ought not to read:  
*Mene mene tekél upharsin ?*

### XIII. POETS WHO HAVE BECOME KNOWN SINCE 1939

So far I have been writing of poets and poetry which one can see against the background either of a life-time's work, as with T. S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Edmund Blunden, or else in relation to a tendency in literature and to quite recent events which are nevertheless now historic in that they took place in the last decade, as with W. H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice.

Now inevitably I can do little more than point to a few poems of outstanding achievement by writers who have written little, such as Roy Fuller and Henry Reed; to a few outstanding writers whom it is difficult to relate to any tendency and who, at the same time, although they have written a striking volume or more, seem to have exercised little influence on other writers, such as Laurie Lee, F. T. Prince and Vernon Watkins; and to one or two writers who are vaguely connected with literary movements which have attracted some attention but little result, such as Henry Treece and the Apocalyptics.

Perhaps the most considerable of the poets who appeared since the war is Vernon Watkins, who like Dylan Thomas is a Welshman. Watkins has been writing for many years, but he did not publish his first volume until 1941, and this book, *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* is the result of a great devotion to poetry over many years. He is a pure poet, devoted only to poetry, inhabiting a world of poetry. In this he reminds me of Walter de la Mare, though the influence most noticeable in his work is W. B. Yeats. All the values of

And we too have our bitterness and pity that engage  
Blood, spirit in this war. But night begins,  
Night of the mind: who nowadays is conscious of our sins?  
Though every human deed concerns our blood,  
And even we must know what nobody had understood,  
That some great love is over all we do,  
And that is what has driven us to this fury, since so few  
Can suffer all the terror of that love:  
The terror of that love has set us spinning in this groove  
Greased with our blood.

These wring and dry their hair,  
Resume their shirts, forget the fear and shame of being bare  
Because to love is terrible we prefer  
The freedom of our crimes. Yet as I drink the dusky air,  
I touch a strange delight that fills me full,  
Strange gratitude, as if evil itself were beautiful;  
And feel the wound of love, while in the west  
I see a streak of red that might have issued from Christ's breast.

Henry Reed's first volume, *A Map of Verona*, contains a mysterious and nostalgic poem of great beauty called *Verona*, a soldier's poem of memorable bitterness, *The Naming of Parts*, and contemplative poems on classical and mediaeval themes. When Henry Reed's volume is published he will take his place with F. T. Prince, Vernon Watkins and Terence Tiller as one of the really significant younger poets. A short poem, *The Door and the Window*, gives something of his quality:

My love, you are timely come, let me lie by your heart.  
For waking in the dark this morning, I woke to that mystery,  
Which we can all wake to, at some dark time or another:  
Waking to find the room not as I thought it was,  
But the window further away, and the door in another direction.

This was not home, and you were far away,  
And I woke sick, and held by another passion,  
In the icy grip of a dead, tormenting flame,  
Consumed by the night, watched by the door and the window,  
On a bed of stone, waiting for the day to bring you.

The window is sunlit now, the spring day sparkles beyond it,  
The door has opened: and can you, at last beside me,  
Drive under the day that frozen and faithless darkness,  
With its unseen torments flickering, which neither  
The dearest look nor the longest kiss assuages ?

The anthologies of *Poems from the Forces* remind one how many poets of promise have been killed. Of these, the most promising was perhaps Sidney Keyes, who published two volumes, *The Iron Laurel* and *The Cruel Solstice*. The second of these is overshadowed by the sense of his own and others' deaths:

*Office for Noon*

At the field's border, where the cricket chafes  
His brittle wings among the yellow weed,  
I pause to hear the sea unendingly sifted  
Between the granite fingers of the cape.  
At this twelfth hour of unrelenting summer  
I think of those whose ready mouths are stopped,  
I remember those who crouch in narrow graves,  
I weep for those whose eyes are full of sand.

Alun Lewis, also killed, had a real and facile talent. He wrote poems and short stories. He himself thought that his true talent lay in prose rather than in verse.

Two young poets of promise are Terence Tiller and G. S. Fraser. Both of these poets share the tendency which seems almost inevitably associated with the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. They are clear, transparent, intellectual poets writing from their heads rather than from their hearts or their bodies, analysing their passions and conscious of many difficulties in problems of sex and life. Their obscurity, unlike that of the poets who are followers of Dylan Thomas, comes from a too great intellectualisation, a too minute pursuit of their own sensitive reactions, their own inner complication and subtle ideas. Both of them write a disciplined clear poetry in a good, if somewhat invertebrate tradition. They write lines which give the pleasure of intelligence combined with sensibility achieving an effect none the less satis-

- NORMAN NICHOLSON—*Five Rivers* (1944); *The Old Man of the Mountains* (poetic drama) (1946).  
Edited: *An Anthology of Religious Verse* (1942).  
Prose—*Man and Literature* (1943).
- RUTH PITTER—*First Poems* (1920); *First and Second Poems* (1927); *A Mad Lady's Garland* (1934); *A Trophy of Arms* (1936); *The Spirit Watches* (1939); *The Rude Potato* (humorous verse) (1941); *The Bridge* (1945).
- F. T. PRINCE—*Poems* (1938).
- KATHLEEN RAINE—*Stone and Flower* (1943).  
Translation—Denis de Rougemont's *Talk of the Devil*.
- HERBERT READ—*Poems 1914-34* (1935); *Thirty-five Poems* (1940); *A World Within a War* (1944).  
Prose—*In Retreat* (1925); *Reason and Romanticism* (1928); *English Prose Style* (1928); *Phases of English Poetry* (1928); *The Sense of Glory* (1929); *Wordsworth* (1930); *The Meaning of Art* (1931); *Form in Modern Poetry* (1932); *The Innocent Eye* (1933); *Art Now* (1933); *The Green Child* (1935); *In Defence of Shelley* (1935); *Art and Society* (1936); *Poetry and Anarchism* (collected essays) (1938); *Annals of Innocence and Experience* (autobiography) (1940); *The Politics of the Unpolitical* (1943); *Education Through Art* (1943); etc.
- HENRY REED—*A Map of Verona* (1946); has published in *New Writing*, *The New Statesman*, *The Listener*, etc.
- KEIDRYCH RHYS (Editor of Wales)—*The Van Pool, and Other Poems* (1942).  
Edited: *Poems from the Forces* (1942); *More Poems from the Forces* (1943).
- ANNE RIDLER—*The Nine Bright Shiners* (1943); *Cain* (a verse lay) (1944).  
Edited: *A Little Book of Modern Verse* (1942).
- MICHAEL ROBERTS—*Poems* (1936); *Orion Marches* (1939).  
Edited: *New Signatures* (1932); *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936); *The Faber Book of Comic Verse* (1942).  
Prose—*Critique of Poetry* (1934); *The Modern Mind* (1937); T. E. Hulme (1938); *The Recovery of the West* (1941).
- ALAN ROOK—*Soldiers, This Solitude* (1942); *These are My Comrades* (1943).
- SIEGFRIED SASSOON—*Counter Attack* (1918); *Satirical Poems* (1926); *The Heart's Journey* (1928); *Vigils* (1935); *Rhymed Ruminations* (1940); etc.