

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

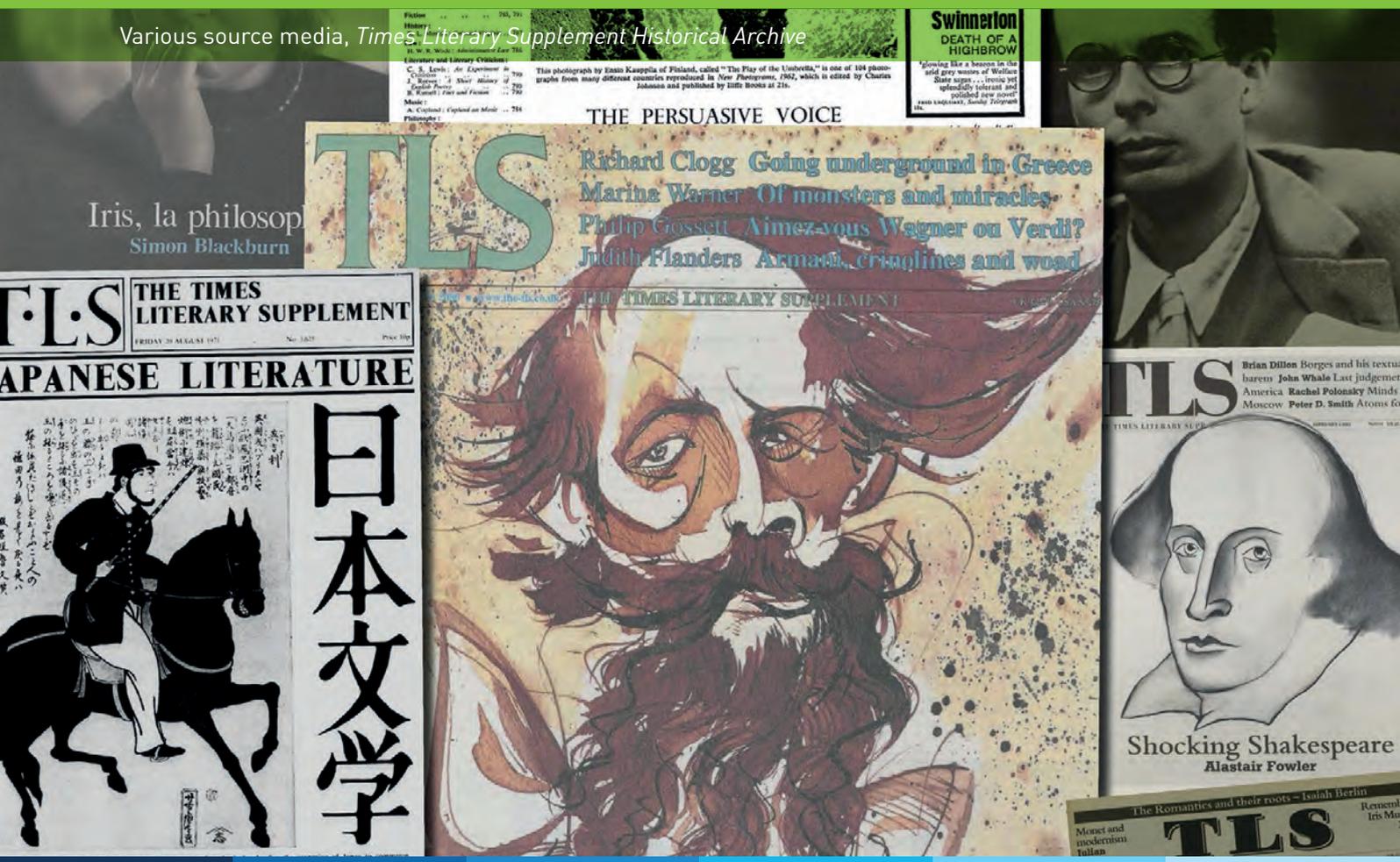
# The *Times Literary Supplement* in the Years of Anonymous Reviewing 1902-1974

## The Red and the Black: Political Coverage in the 1920s and 1930s

Deborah McVea and Jeremy Treglown

University of Warwick

Various source media, *Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*



As an editor, Bruce Richmond was apolitical and broadly tended towards whatever line was followed by his close friend the editor of *The Times*, Geoffrey Dawson. The sub-editors on the *TLS* in the inter-war years included the bibliophile and historian of publishing F.A. Mumby and Eric St John Brooks, a mathematician by training, who had wide-ranging interests but no particular bent for politics. D.L. Murray, the assistant editor, gave the appearance of never taking anything very seriously: his main enthusiasms were the theatre, horse racing and middlebrow fiction (he soon became a commercially successful novelist). But he was a clever man who, after winning scholarships to Harrow and Balliol and taking a First in Classics, had published a book on pragmatism while he was in his early 20s and spent the First World War in the Intelligence Department of the War Office. He later wrote a study of Disraeli. In 1938, Murray reluctantly succeeded Richmond as editor and it must have been partly under his influence that the *TLS* steered its way through the political minefields of the 1920s and 30s.

On Communism, the *TLS Historical Archive* fills out the picture sketched in Ferdinand Mount's *Communism: A TLS Companion* (1992), a useful selection of the journal's more polemical responses to the movement between 1902 and 1991. In the 1920s, the reviews were as often supercilious as morally hostile. A front-page piece on "The Aims of Socialism", for example, was written in the autumn of 1927 by Arthur D. Shadwell, a leader writer for *The Times* who had travelled widely, including in Russia, and had contributed regularly to the *TLS* since it began. Although Shadwell had published books on social questions such as water

supply, industrial efficiency and legislation on alcohol consumption, and although (or because?) the works under review included some by authors of the distinction of Harold J. Laski and A.D. Lindsay, his approach was nit-pickingly unsympathetic to the human concerns which lay behind their subject. He was more interested in spotting inconsistencies both in Marx ("if socialism is an inevitable evolutionary process", Shadwell asked, "why try to persuade anyone to help it along?") and in the books under review (which he said failed to distinguish between economic equality and economic justice) than in trying to get at what might have prompted such ideas, however misguided they were. There were many other pieces on related subjects and by a number of different reviewers. Some were straightforwardly descriptive, such as H.M. Stannard's 1928 account of an interim collection of Stalin's statements on Leninism. Others, especially those dealing with the more sentimental works of the 1930s literary left, were justifiably exasperated: Geoffrey West on John Middleton Murry's *The Necessity of Communism* (1932), for example, which incidentally demonstrated once again the *TLS*'s willingness to deal frankly with its own contributors; or Herbert Charles O'Neill on Stephen Spender's *Forward from Liberalism* (1937: 'Mr Spender would probably flinch at paradox, but he does not disdain incoherence'); or Stannard, again (one of the *TLS*'s most frequent contributors on politics and, like West, someone who first began writing there in the 1920s) on C.L.R. James's *World Revolution, 1917-1936*: "Here is truth. It must be true because the writer believes it. Yet the facts contradict it".

The most complex of the paper's reviewers in this area was also to be its most controversial. E.H. Carr, who later joined the staff of *The Times*, was a Cambridge-educated diplomat who had spent his mid-30s in the British Legation in Riga and had written a book on Dostoevsky. To him, Marxism was "amazingly penetrating, incisive and convincing" as a critique of 19<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism. Opinions of this sort have been seized on by his conservative critics, especially since his death, so it is instructive to look back at some of the pieces which he wrote anonymously in the 1930s and to see how his views changed and to what extent then, if not later, he opposed Stalinism. The words about Marxism just quoted, which appeared in the *TLS* in 1936, were followed by another sentence: "Constructively, it has nothing to offer but a workers' paradise no more substantial than the rose-coloured dreams of the French Utopian Socialists". Earlier that year, reviewing John L. Spivak's *Europe under the Terror*, Carr said that the "Red Terror" was quite as obnoxious as the "Black", on which the book concentrated. And in 1937 he was still clearer and more specific in a review of three books on the current situation in the Soviet Union, pointing out the number of people mentioned in them who had subsequently been shot or arrested, and concluding that nearly all of the arguments put by one of the authors in favour of "Soviet democracy" "could equally well be used to substantiate Herr Hitler's claim to have established 'true democracy' in Germany".

What should be done about Hitler was a different question. Carr was one of the *TLS*'s contributors who upheld the pro-appeasement line of *The Times*, not least as late as June 1939 in a supportive review of

Neville Chamberlain's *The Struggle for Peace*. Like many well-informed and well-intentioned people between the late 1920s and 1939, contributors to the *TLS* wavered over Nazism and still more over Italian Fascism. Sixty-five works on Fascism had been reviewed by 1939. Some reviewers, such as the Catholic historian R.E. Gordon George ('Robert Sencourt'), were at pains to point out the hazards of any threat to democracy and individualism, whatever its political colouring. But others, especially Stannard, were increasingly won over by the social improvements which Fascism brought to Italy. In June, 1934, a 28 page special issue on Italy began with two long pieces on Fascism, in one of which Stannard not only applauded Mussolini's social achievements but found a resemblance between his prose style and the poetry of Hardy. British Fascism, meanwhile, was treated with more caution, though it was accepted by H.C. O'Neill in a short notice of A.K. Chesterton's *Oswald Mosley: Portrait of a Leader* (1930) that Mosley's career contained "a thread of not ignoble purpose".

Most reviewers saw that totalitarianism in Europe had been born out of the First World War and there was an especially strong wish to see Italy, a wartime ally of the British, succeed, as well as to see Communism fail. In the case of Germany, there was also an awareness of the mistakes that the victors had made in the post-war Versailles settlement. The Italian special number had been preceded by one on Germany, published in April 1929, which focused on what could still then be seen as hopeful elements in the country's development, including the in retrospect chilling revival of the *Jugendbewegung*: "a living faith which rejects all credence in the world-picture of modern science". The

article by Rolf Gardiner, something of an enthusiast for Nazi Germany in its early days, related the movement's spirit to that of D.H. Lawrence's *The Plumed Serpent* and pointed out that the achievement of world peace was entirely unimportant to its adherents. It was a very long time before Hitler and Nazism were taken as serious dangers. Reviewing Wyndham Lewis's *Hitler* (1931), Stannard mildly took issue with Lewis's view that despite the intrinsic anti-Semitism of the movement, "Hitler himself, if he attained to power, would treat Einstein with proper honour". Stannard also judged that although Nazism "is for the moment in eclipse, more is likely to be heard of it". But in 1933 another regular political contributor, J.H. Freeman, writing about *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror* and Hamilton Fish Armstrong's *Hitler's Reich: The First Phase*, opined that it was "unduly alarmist" of the latter to suggest that a European war was not excluded from the Nazi programme. The following year, Leland Stowe's book *Nazi Germany Means War* was again dismissed as exaggerated, though a study of Nazism by Henry Wickham Steed, himself a frequent *TLS* contributor (and a former editor of *The Times*) was treated more respectfully. The book called for a readiness in Britain "to sacrifice the sovereign right of neutrality in order to redeem law-abiding mankind from lawless violence". This was towards the end of 1934 and the reviewer, Freeman, again was evidently coming to accept Steed's view that "those who believe in responsible freedom and democratic government must marshal their strength now".

Among the pieces of evidence which were beginning to increase readers' pessimism about Hitler in the early to mid 1930s were some powerful accounts by people who

had been in Nazi prisons. In 1935, Gollancz published *I Was Hitler's Prisoner* by Stefan Lorant, a Hungarian journalist who had been held without charge for more than six months. Among his fellow prisoners was the Jewish former curator of pictures in the Munich Pinakothek, who was beaten up by his captors so badly and so often "that he answered all questions in the affirmative. If he had been accused of the murder of the Emperor Maximilian he would have pleaded guilty to this crime as well. The inspectors perceived what a torment their questioning was to Professor Mayer. So they had him brought up every day. 'Let's take it out of the Jew a bit..'. Lorant also related that when he was released and returned home to Budapest, his three-year-old son greeted him with the Nazi salute and a cry of "Heil, Hitler". These bitternesses were relayed in the *TLS*'s review, the author of which, once again, was Freeman. By April 1936, Freeman was writing of Nazism as "the resuscitation of medieval barbarism" in a review of another Gollancz book, *The Yellow Spot: The Extermination of the Jews in Germany*, paired with Norman Bentwich's *The Refugees from Germany: April, 1933 to December, 1935*. The piece was headed plainly, "The Nazi Persecution".

Opinions evolved, then, and part of the value of the *TLS* to modern readers is as a uniquely detailed record of such processes, as well as a guide to the very many books, including books in German, Italian and other languages, published on these and other then-topical concerns. If few of them are still read today, far from all have been forgotten. The Spanish Civil War famously produced some of the best, including George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. The *TLS*'s review of that book, by Maurice Ashley, brought two combative letters

from Orwell. Ashley, a future editor of the *Listener*, had joined the staff of *The Times* in 1937 and began writing for the *TLS* at the same time, making a small corner in publications on Spain, perhaps on the basis that he had just written a book about the English Civil War. He was no supporter of the socialist writers who went to Spain, and Orwell was able to show that he had misrepresented *Homage to Catalonia* so as to suggest that it was critical of the Spanish militias. When Ashley replied, Orwell pointed out that his words had once again been distorted. Not for the first or last time, some of the most closely argued writing in the *TLS* appeared in its Letters columns.

### **From Ovid to Pooh Bear: literary coverage before the Second World War**

Because of the still striking modern-ness of literary modernism, it can be easy to forget quite how distant the 1920s are. Hardy, Shaw, Conrad and Housman, all of them born between 1840 and 1860, were not only alive but still publishing then, and all of them contributed to the *TLS*, albeit for the most part in the form of published letters. The team of reviewers which Richmond had built up since 1902 was of a younger generation but no longer the youngest, and its remoteness from new authors sometimes showed. However well-known Evelyn Waugh was among his large circle, to the author of the *TLS*'s short note on his first book he was no more than 'Miss Waugh'. And for all the commitment to new writing represented by the Hogarth Press, Virginia Woolf was to conclude that the 1930s generation was incapable of producing great literature.

Woolf wrote the bulk of her *TLS* pieces in the journal's first two decades but there were many still to come, on the Brontës, Jane Austen, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Hardy and Conrad, and on essayists like Montaigne, Browne and Hazlitt. T.S. Eliot's contributions had begun more recently. The first of his substantial pieces, on Ben Jonson, appeared in 1919 ("I have been asked to write for the *Times Literary Supplement* - to write the Leading Article from time to time", he told his mother in a letter on 2 October. "This is the highest honour possible in the critical world of literature.") It was followed in the 1920s and 1930s by his essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists and on Metaphysical poets, as well as important pieces on a range of other subjects including the influence of Ovid, "Creative Criticism", Wilkie Collins and Dickens, on Julien Benda's influential book *La Trahison des Clercs* and on the French philosopher and Catholic convert Jacques Maritain.

Meanwhile, of course, both writers were themselves the subjects of reviews. Being a contributor to the *TLS* has rarely won any editorial favours there but the qualities of Woolf's novels were always recognized by the journal's reviewers, principal among them the prolific Harold Child and A.S. McDowall, regular contributors since 1902. McDowall's 1925 review of *Mrs Dalloway* is notable for making a comparison with Joyce's *Ulysses*, which the paper failed, or refused, to review until the publication ban was lifted in 1937. "Mrs Woolf's vision produces something of her own", McDowall wrote. "People and events here have a peculiar, almost ethereal transparency, as though bathed in a medium where one thing permeates another. Undoubtedly our world is less solid than it

was, and our novels may have to shake themselves a little free. Here, Mrs Woolf seems to say, is the stream of life, but reflected always in a mental vision."

Eliot was less fortunate in the reception of his poetry by the *TLS*, though the paper's criticisms of *The Waste Land* were a matter of substantive critical disagreement, not, as has sometimes been suggested, of mere blindness to the poem's qualities. The reviewer was Edgell Rickword, a poet and critic then in his mid 20s, who was to become a powerful literary figure on the Left (and an influence on F.R. Leavis). He wrote for the *TLS* almost every week between the autumn of 1921 and 1925, when he began the important but short-lived periodical *The Calendar of Modern Letters*. A list of Rickword's pieces is a roll-call of significant publications: Elizabeth Bowen's first book of short stories, the first novels of Carl van Vechten and Liam O'Flaherty, first volumes of poetry by Roy Campbell and Edwin Muir, work by other young writers including Vera Brittain, John Dos Passos, David Garnett, Robert Graves and Alec Waugh, as well as new books by established figures as diverse as Valéry, Saki and Arnold Bennett. His verdict on *The Waste Land*, which appeared on the opposite page from an appreciative review by McDowall of Lawrence's *Kangaroo* ("a fine book: experimental, masterful, challenging the rules and his readers"), recognised and illustrated both the poem's sophistication and allusiveness and how its methods could be theoretically justified. Ultimately, though, it judged it an unsatisfying and somewhat exclusive experiment which, by its unwillingness to allow the reader "a direct emotional response", had taken Eliot in a wrong direction.

Rickword was one of several young critics published by the *TLS* in this period whose reviews brought to attention original work which otherwise might have taken much longer to break through. Both Joyce, despite the lacuna over *Ulysses*, and Ezra Pound, despite his claims to the contrary, had been scrupulously and for the most part favourably reviewed from early on and fragments of *Finnegans Wake* were painstakingly elucidated in the 1930s by Alex Glendinning, who also wrote favourably and with insight about Leavis's early criticism, among other topics. Users of the *TLS Historical Archive* will want to pursue their own examples but Faulkner, Lorca and Hemingway provide three interesting cases. The prolific Orlo Williams reviewed the first half-dozen of Faulkner's books published in England, beginning with a single-column piece which left no one in any doubt about *Soldier's Pay*: Faulkner had "a fertile invention," he wrote, "a power of illustrating and differentiating character, a force in depicting both tragic and comic incident and a nostalgic sense of poetry". Among other pieces by Williams are a sympathetic but far from uncritical account of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and a favourable review of Stephen Spender's 1935 book of essays *The Destructive Element*: "New winds are beginning to blow through English literature, and in a book like this one begins to feel their refreshing force". Spender's poetry was greeted more equivocally, George Buchanan pointing out that in *Vienna* "We are led not only to pity but also to a view of the poet himself in the act of being pitiful. This poem reveals that Mr Spender's charm, the readiness of his sympathetic response, is also his danger."

In the case of Lorca, *Canciones* (1927) was reviewed by the first critic outside Spain to have written about the poet, J.B. Trend. And it was a letter from Trend to the *TLS*, published in October 1936, which first told the world the truth about Lorca's murder: "The circumstances of the arrest," Trend wrote, "the trumped-up charge, and the barbarous detail of the burning of books of verse show what the attitude of the military-clerical reaction in Spain is likely to be towards literature and art".

By one of those chains of association which the *TLS* contributor index is full of, another book of Lorca's, *Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter*, leads one back to Hemingway's bullfighting classic, *Death in the Afternoon*. Hemingway's novels were well received in the *TLS*, especially by Orlo Williams, who described *A Farewell to Arms* as "a novel of great power" and wrote vividly about its author's "keen but selective vision, his dismal animation, his unrationalized pessimism". The review of *Death in the Afternoon* was more specialised. Its author, who was the book illustrator John Kettelwell, pointed out that the publisher's claim that this was the first book in English on bullfighting was wrong: there had been three others, published in 1683, 1852 and 1928. A connoisseurial discussion of Hemingway's account of the sport followed, praising his visual description but criticizing his prose style and saying that his "supercharged 'he-manishness' is brutal and infuriating".

Seventy-five years on, a very different item catches the eye. In 1924, A.A. Milne's *When We Were Very Young* was described as 'the pick of this Christmas bunch of

books', Marjorie Grant Cook rightly identifying its secret as the ability to amuse both the child being read to and the adult reader. As for *Winnie the Pooh*, two years later, the *TLS* expressed its hope "that 'that sort of Bear' may have a long life."

### Depopularisation? A new look and a new editor

In 1935, in anticipation of Bruce Richmond's retirement, the *TLS* was given a face-lift. The normal number of pages, eight in the paper's earliest days, 16 in the early 1920s, rose dramatically: 40-page issues became quite common. Illustrations appeared regularly for the first time and were used with increasing boldness. Some were even allowed to break into columns of type, rather than fitting tidily into the grid. The typography was generally more open: no rules between columns; fewer rules between items; headings and book titles a point or two bigger; section titles like 'Other New Books' centred on the page with space around them, rather than squeezed into the top of a single column. For the first time, too, many articles were treated as blocks of type, instead of running on in strips. Soon, the front page was composed of three wide columns instead of four narrow ones. These changes were not universally welcomed, and further would-be popularising efforts by D.L. Murray in his first months as editor brought, or at least coincided with, a new drop in sales. For a while, it looked as though having escaped being killed off in the early 1920s, the *TLS* was about to commit suicide in the late 30s. What saved it was the Second World War.

# CITATION

McVea, Deborah and Treglown, Jeremy: "Political Coverage in the 1920s and 1930s." *Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*: Cengage Learning, 2012

© Cengage Learning 2012

**REQUEST A  
FREE TRIAL**

**CONTACT YOUR  
REPRESENTATIVE**

**FIND OUT MORE  
ON OUR WEBSITE**

