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

1945-1947: The Age of Austerity

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Various source media, *Times Literary Supplement* Historical Archive



D.L. Murray's successor, albeit for the shortest editorship of the *TLS* since J.R. Thursfield's in 1902, was in some ways representative of the nascently 'meritocratic' world of socialist post-war Britain. Born into a poor family in 1889, Stanley Morison had left grammar school early to earn his living as a bank clerk but continued to educate himself on Saturday afternoons in the British Museum Library. His enthusiasms were orderly: stamp collecting, bibliography, the Roman Catholic Church, Communism. But enthusiasms are what they were. His experience of reading a supplement of *The Times* on printing was as much a revelation as his conversion to Catholicism in his teens. It led to his becoming typographical adviser of Cambridge University Press in the 1920s, and of *The Times* itself in 1929. In the latter role, he created Times New Roman, the most widely used typeface of the 20th century.

At the *TLS* between 1945 and 1947, he created a bridge between his intellectual passions, his love of order, and the austerity of post-war Britain. The self-effacing, even subservient terms which he set out before accepting the job could not have been more remote from the increasingly commercial and promotional climate of journalism. The editor of the *Literary Supplement* should, he wrote, be a kind of acolyte to the editor of *The Times*: "I should act as an assistant. placed in charge of the editorship". Wherever *The Times* had a line, political, even literary, the *TLS*'s reviewers should follow it. Beyond this, Morison wanted the *Supplement* to be more scholarly and of greater practical use to publishers and librarians, especially in sifting "the output of philosophical, religious, political and historical works", while giving "their due" (there is

something a little chilling in the phrase, as well as in the pecking order) to "poetry, biography, memoirs, art and art history, and fiction".

He carried most of this out, while retaining an element of wartime gungho-ism not mentioned in his manifesto. A typical week-by-week sequence of subjects for front-page review-essays during his editorship consists of: Proudhon; ancient India; the French Third Republic; naval power since the Bomb; Abraham Lincoln; an apologia for Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris and his book *Bomber Offensive*; Dumézil; linguistic philosophy; international peacekeeping; the postwar British economy ("Theorists may labour to formulate the inexorable laws which determine the rise and fall of civilisations; it is for Great Britain to prove the exception. The country of Shakespeare and Milton, of Newton and Faraday, of Chatham and Churchill is not going under..", etc); the ceiling of the Sistine chapel; the plight of Germany; Pan-Slavism; Léon Bloy; British foreign policy between the wars; Louis-Adolphe Thiers; Shakespeare; Ciano and the fall of Mussolini; Halifax; contemporary France; the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament; and Vinaver's new edition of Malory.

By the standards of the *TLS* before and after him, let alone those of the rest of British journalism, Morison's *TLS* looked forbidding, and its appearance wasn't helped by paper rationing. A normal issue ran to only 12 pages and Morison was determined that what space he had would be given to reviews. The four-column layout gave way to a more crowded five columns: a pattern which was to last until the 1980s. He

published no poems and in each issue only one picture, almost invariably either a reproduction of an old master or an English rural scene, at the top of the front page. Not everything that followed was predictable or complacent. It was under Morison that the *TLS* published the only review written for it by George Bernard Shaw (a biography of Beatrice Webb). In 1946, the paper reviewed Sartre's *Les Chemins de la Liberté* in the course of an absorbing three-page history and evaluation of existentialist ideas, written by Alexander Dru. The following year, in a very critical account of a book on American big business, the *TLS* developed its by now well-established view that Britain could "no longer afford to contract out of a common European destiny". And another 'front', reviewing eight books concerned with the position of blacks in the USA, pronounced that "Seen against the claims of the American credo, the position of the American Negro is an outrageous defiance of public doctrine". These words were written by the historian Denis Brogan, who had been a *TLS* contributor since his, and the century's, twenties. But Morison's radicalism was always at war with his conservatism and it is typical of him that one of the longest reviews he published was of the latest volume of *The Times's* official history, of which he was in effect editor-in-chief. All too often, the institutional voice of the *TLS* was that of R.D. Charques, huffing that in *Brideshead Revisited* Evelyn Waugh "has his felicities of illustration and phrase, of course, but..", or attacking Cyril Connolly's aestheticism in *The Condemned Playground*: "worship of Art should produce the healthy corrective of moral and political puritanism". These were respectively the 2,331st and 2,437th books that Charques had reviewed for the *Literary Supplement*.

While they continued to depend heavily on old hands, Morison and his staff brought in new contributors. To Morison, they were all something of a nuisance:

There are two sorts of reviewers, I find. First there are the hacks. They can always be relied upon to give a summary of the book and leave the reader without any particular taste in his mouth. Secondly, there are the non-hacks. These can always be relied upon to rise superior to the author they are reviewing, and show off their own knowledge. Both sorts send their reviews in late, and both sorts, when something in their review is questioned, can't answer it because they have already sold the books. The best reviewer of the book is the author. I asked an author the other day whether he could suggest anybody who would review his book, - thus giving him the chance to do it himself.

Unfortunately he was such an English gentleman that he did not even like such a question being put to him. So of course I had all the trouble of finding an alternative, one of these people who was so superior that he wrote an essay on the subject rather than a review of the book. (Quoted in Nicolas Barker, *Stanley Morison*, 1972, p 407.)

In keeping with his interests, an above-average number of the reviewers he brought in were from the book trade: booksellers, librarians, publishers, bibliographers; and there was also a high quotient of clergy and schoolmasters. The single largest category were academics: in this, the *TLS* reflected the cultural shift by which intellectual specialisation was increasingly becoming the domain of universities. 1945-47 saw the first contributions by Noel Annan, Max Beloff, Maurice Bowra, E.R. Dodds, G.S. Fraser, Lewis Namier, J.E. Neale, Hugh Seton-Watson, James

Sutherland and A.J.P. Taylor. The emphasis on history was strong, as some of these names suggest, though Morison's newcomers also included several theologians and moral philosophers. Hardly any good imaginative writers made their *TLS* debut in 1946, though William Plomer was one. Books on sport continued to fare quite well: golf, tennis, horse-racing, and sailing are among the areas of expertise of new contributors in the post-war years, and one of the minor coups of 1946 was the recruitment of the working-class poet, ex-policeman and cricket commentator John Arlott. He reviewed not only books on cricket but also novels, among them Christopher Isherwood's *Prater Violet*, and *The Devil in Woodford Wells*, by the future theatre critic Harold Hobson.

Arguably, however, the most important event for the *TLS* during Stanley Morison's caretakership was the rapid identification of his successor. Alan Pryce-Jones was recruited amid a flurry of competition from the *Observer* which involved financial negotiations of a kind to which *The Times* of those days was still unaccustomed. 'What price Jones?', Morison was heard to ask.

The editor-in-waiting was a gifted, charming and intensely sociable Etonian of the Harold Acton, Cyril Connolly, Anthony Powell generation, who had worked on J.C. Squire's *London Mercury* and had published books of poetry and fiction, travel and memoirs. He came in as an assistant editor, though it was understood that he was to succeed Morison in just over a year. His first day at Printing House Square, 1 November 1946, provides us with the first vivid

description we have of the atmosphere of the *TLS*: an atmosphere which Pryce-Jones was to transform. "Opposite me Edmund Blunden is reading the Times of 1826", he wrote in his journal. "He is like a knobly, charitable little bird, neither clean nor dirty, neither shaved nor unshaven. Not much talk - but what there is comes out with a most charming, immensely gentle, radiance. He is writing an article on Test Cricket for the Church of England Newspaper, I gather. Beside him is Philip Tomlinson - equally small and kind - dictating a small, kind letter. Whatever I wear I feel my clothes are wrong. If I put on a dark suit it looks like the suit of an interloper who has thrown in his lot with the editor. If I wear tweeds they are the wrong kind of tweeds. I hide my umbrella behind a tin-box, because I ought to be carrying a mackintosh. I feel like a family solicitor, or shareholder, or dilettante - anything but an unobtrusive new-boy."

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