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The BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC), located in a leafy suburb of Reading, is a mecca for researchers of twentieth-century literature. Contains tens of thousands of manuscripts, letters, memoranda, scripts, internal BBC documents, dossiers and an expansive panorama of other ephemera, the WAC’s holdings represent one of the world’s most substantial collections charting modern English cultural life. Of particular value are the WAC’s sheaves of material relating to the Listener, the journal of arts and culture published by the BBC continuously from 1929 to 1991.

The Listener reached its height under the exacting editorial gaze of J. R. Ackerley, who had begun working at the BBC in 1927 and became literary editor in the late 1930s, a post he held until 1959. As Peter Parker affirmed in his biography (1991), Ackerley courted controversy in his eagerness to publish many of the pieces rejected by the conventional editors of the time. A list of his contributors includes E. M. Forster, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Philip Larkin, George Orwell, Marianne Moore and Dylan Thomas, in addition to the luminaries of the Auden Generation - Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Christopher Isherwood, C. Day-Lewis and W. H. Auden himself. In a retrospective essay published in the New York Review of Books in 1989, Auden reflected on Ackerley’s influence: “Those of us... who were starting our literary careers at the time have very great cause to remember how much he did for us; the Listener was one of our main outlets”.

The magazine stands as a monument both to Ackerley’s prescience as an literary tastemaker and to the effervescence of new talent in the years immediately before and after the Second World War. Yet despite the indelible mark the journal and its contributors made on English literary history, the Listener’s archives remain largely unexamined. While the entire run has been made available electronically in recent years, the magazine’s internal files are as yet undigitized and unavailable, accessible only to those who consult them in person. Chief among these ancillary documents are the Listener’s so-called “day book sheets” - accounting ledgers that indicate, issue by issue, the magazine’s contributors and the remuneration they received for their work.

Every issue of the Listener featured three pages of brief, unsigned book reviews - each no more than a few hundred words in length - in the section entitled “The Listener’s Book Chronicle”. By cross-checking the anonymous reviews in each issue against the corresponding payment the listener’s roster of contributors, it is possible to identify the reviewers’ authors, some of whom were major figures on the 1930s literary scene. There are contributions by Stephen Spender, twelve by Graham Greene, nine by Elizabeth Bowen, four by Louis MacNeice, one by Dylan Thomas and one by Stefan Zweig. These previously unattributed reviews are not noted in any of the extant bibliographies or check-lists, and further consultations with scholars, literary executors, societies, authors’ trusts and archival collections (such as the British Library and the Bodleian) confirm their status as “new” works. I hope that a resurrection and critical examination of these neglected writings will soon be under way.

On July 15, 1939, Greene wrote to Nancy Pean, a literary agent who worked in the London office of Curtis Brown, to express his desire to write “a non-fiction book, describing one of these rather appalling voyages from Constantza in Romania on old wooden Greek boats carrying 3 or 400 Jews”. He asked; “Don’t you think there’s a very good human interest story for the Express?” Two formerly unannotated book reviews in the Listener archive by Greene turn their attention towards the everyday realities of European Jewry - an appropriate topic for a documentary fiction writer of his calibre. His review (November 23, 1939) of the Christmas New Writing Anthology published by the Hogarth Press makes a point of highlighting the contributions of the proletarian writer, Willy Goldman. Greene writes “one notes particularly Mr Willy Goldman’s description of the East End Jewish courtship - in which the documentary aspect has been properly subordinated to the human emotion”. The admixing of fact and fiction, and the relationship between the documentary and the subjective, would be perennial aesthetic and moral considerations for Greene. He writes on Goldman again the following year, in his review (July 25, 1940) of East End My Cruelty, which treats “the peculiar nature of his neighbourhood, the frontier between Genteel Wapping and Jewish Whitechapel. (Librarians note that his book has been in conflict along a borderline). Greene calls Goldman’s book “one of the most remarkable pictures of poor life that ever these last dozen proletarian-concious years have produced.”

He goes on to praise a travel sketch by George Orwell on Marrakech, as well as “The Sailor” by V. S. Pritchett, in both of whom Greene finds the traits of a genuinely “new writing” - that of “life observed with an uncorrupted eye”. In his review of Margaret Lane’s biography of Edgar Wallace (December 22, 1938), Greene suggests that the popular press allowed for Wallace’s metoric ascent as a writer, whose work in turn “helped to form the fatal tradition that truth is less important than a good story”. In his emphasis on an art that captures the lived reality of “life observed with an uncorrupted eye”, Greene seems to have taken an interest in the writings of the cabbine-cum-autobiographer Herbert Lodge, noting on September 1, 1938, in a review of It’s Dusky in Front, how very beautifully he conveys the pride of the new profession, the strategic pursuit of fames, the novel slang, the feel of streets at night”. Greene’s article of April 13, 1939 on Robert Holmes’s My Father was a Gentleman praises the book as “the picture of an odd life without values, made up of extraordinary gambles, of returned cheques, of secret commissions, sharp practices and saloon-bar generosity”.

In the Listener of February 8, 1940, Greene reviewed Colonel Franklin Lushington’s Portraits of a Young Man. He felt that the book was significant and provi-
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searches of great men of the past are valuable additions to their history and reveal Mr Rhys as a man with a genius for friendship. But perhaps the last word of the whole story is the description of his childhood in Wales: every incident is presented clearly, and the figures of his childhood appear as little wonders or demons as are Mr Rhys's confident memories of them.

During the spring and summer of 1940, Thomas was in a familiar state of penury. He was paid a guinea for the review—something like £0.50 today. In a letter to Stephen Spender that year he complained of the "horrible desperate state of my money life". In other letters from the period Thomas expressed anxiety over the prospect of conscription. He petitioned Kenneth Clark, a friend and former lover of Thomas's wife Caitlin. Clark was now running the films division of the Ministry of Information for a job that would give him some breathing space. Writing, "My great horror's killing," Spender appealed to his own artistic circle on Thomas's behalf, soliciting financial aid for Thomas. In May 1942, Spender received a letter from Sir Edward Marsh and others. He ended up putting together a fund sufficient to pay off the poet's debts.

Rhys had been publishing poems in the Listener since 1929, and his work, given its Welsh setting, was a suitable assignment. Rhys and Thomas also shared a publisher, John Lane, which issued Thomas's Twenty-Five Poems (1936) and The Map of Love (1939). In an obituary of Rhys in 1946, the modernist magazine Wales stated: "Dylan Thomas—the direct connection made him interested in his (Rhys's) work—came over by Ferryman to meet him (from Laugharne) at the Castle Hotel...very much on his best behaviour, and making little threat of impending call-up to the forces."

In the following obituary article, Louis MacNeice expresses the same twin interest in the concrete and the gothic that we find in his poem, such as the well-known "Snow. World is suddenly so we fancy it. / World is crazier and more of it than we think. / Incuriously plural."

He reviewed Robert Melville's study Picasso for the issue of August 19, 1939, and found it innovative because, unlike so many critics who now tend to think of Picasso primarily as a technical virtuoso, Melville saw him as a unique spiritual genius who, in the Blue Period, was commenting like Ooya on the world's misery, and in his cubist era still Picasso was taking such things as boys on a kitchen plate and releasing them, in Melville's phrase, from their thinginess. MacNeice's review of Emily Dickinson's Collected Poems (October 20, 1937) distinguishes between poets who are "aesthetic and obscure" and poets with a unique "private world", like Dickinson: "Exhibition is within" she says—the creed of the past or the Romantic.

The forty-one Listener book reviews by Stephen Spender from the 1930s to the early 50s, comprise a considerable addition to the corpus of a major English poet and commentator. On December 11, 1936, the magazine published Spender's review of David Wynne's The World My Oyster together with World Swornbay by J. B. Roberts. Spender, who was then satisfying the taking Forward from Liberalism (1937), heralded Robert's book as exemplifying an emerging literary movement founded by the "persuasive young wanderers" of the world: "one is left speculating whether a literature of vagabondage may not grow up today—which it surely is not an inadvisable moment to be the beginning of a truly proletarian literature."

Although the late 1930s were politically transformative years in Spinner's life, the bulk of his reviews for the Listener were concerned not with politics but with poets past and present. In 1935, he had published The Destructive Element, a critical study of Henry James, W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot, and both Yeats and Eliot would continue to occupy pre-eminent roles in his literary imagination. His essay of December 8, 1937, on Yeats's A Vision, for example, expresses his scepticism of the Yeatsian mystical cosmology: "At some moments it is difficult, with the best will in the world, to be convinced by Mr Yeats's experiences, for even if all his spiritual goals are not achieved, every logical and every reasonable mind in this house becomes an act of interaction, by diabolic forces, with his spiritualistic intercourse." He tempers this by recognizing that "the serious aspect of Mr Yeats's book is not the degree in which it convinces us as a real experiment, but the degree in which it seems illuminating as a system of values and as a view of the universe": Yeats's system troubled Spender because it was "so completely an abstraction that its reference back to reality seems deceptive and perhaps non-existent". Spender concludes by suggesting that Yeats's symbology is "largely a dictionary of the symbols in Mr Yeats's own poetry...the whole illuminated by a dim, soft light from Spender's philosophy". One of Spender's final writings on Yeats in the Listener was a review of Yeats: Letters to his son (March 16, 1944), in which he lamented that "the qualities of the individual and the human" had been, in the modern world, systematically replaced by "the collective and the mechanical".

Spender reviewed Eliot's play The Family Reunion for the issue of April 6, 1939, holding it up as an exemplar of the dramatic possibilities of narrative poetry. In 1941, he wrote on The Dry Salvages, calling it "prosaic" and possessed of a "certain sentimentlousness", while also praising his work for its reaffirmation of lost spiritual values:

In an age of short-term politics and violent action, there is an underlying need to use the universal in the particular and the eternal in the present, and to restore a sense of continuity to a broken pattern of happenings. Eliot's poem is a sincere and moving effort to state a spiritual need for something of which we are particularly aware by the circumstances of today. Spender's reviews from the 1940s and 50s suggest that he viewed the epochal as "thirsting for ideals", a product of what he termed, in a review of Dylan Thomas's Selected Letters (April 25, 1946), the "Starvation of the human, poetic and religious sensibility in the modern age". He was deeply affected by what he perceived to be a kind of moral bankruptcy wrought by the cataclysm of the war, a view expressed in his poem "In Memoriam" (1940): "Living now becomes withered like flowers / In the burning city which has no use / For us but as lives and deaths to fill / With fury the guns blazing back..."

Large-scale archival digitization projects at major universities and at for-profit research companies have placed a vast amount of newly indexed, searchable information before researchers, but the rich literary inheritance stored among the BBC Written Archives Centre remains as yet only partially accessible. Digitalization of the Listener's day book entries, among other possibilities, would expand the scholarly possibilities of the Centre's collections, opening up previously unseen perspectives on twentieth-century English literary life. Writings by C. Day-Lewis, N. S. Pritchett, Geoffrey Grigson, and many others remain unexamined. In the first sequence of Stephen Spender's "Variations on My Life", the poet imagines a "sacred grove" in which he plucks the "gnomonic voices with their ears."

As with the items referred to above, a selected bibliography of unsigned reviews noted in the Listener's day book sheet (E35) File 63 at the Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading} includes:

Reviews by Stephen Spender:
- "Sonnet to Orpheus" by Rainer Maria Rilke. October 14, 1936, pp. XII. (This review is signed, but does not appear in Stephen Spender: Works and criticism—a annotated bibliography by Henrieta Halvorsen Kulkarni.)
- The Heron's Egg by W. B. Yeats. February 23, 1938.
- Last Poems and Two Plays by W. B. Yeats. August 24, 1939.
- Last Poems and Last Plays by W. B. Yeats. March 21, 1940.
- Poetry of Louis de Mauny. September 11, 1941.
- If I Were Four and Twenty by W. B. Yeats. February 13, 1941.

- Yeats, the Man and His poetry by Richard Ellmann. January 19, 1950.
- Rainer Maria Rilke by F. W. van Heerikhuizen. February 21, 1952.

Reviews by Elizabeth Bowen:
- James Joyce by Herbert Gorman. March 20, 1941.

Reviews by Louis MacNeice:
- Oriens March by Michael Roberts. December 14, 1939.
- A Servant of the Queen: The autobiography of Maud Gonne. April 6, 1939.

Reviews by Graham Greene:
- This review is signed, but does not appear in The Works of Graham Greene: A reader's bibliography and guide by Mike Hill and Jon Wise.
- The Story of St. M. Barrie by Denis Mackay. May 1, 1941.

TLC FEBRUARY 15 2019