

# *The Right Book Club: Text Wars, Modernity and Cultural Politics in the Late Thirties*

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In September 1937 *The Times* carried a long article entitled, ‘The Battle of the Books’. With its Swiftian allusions to past conflicts between champions of modernity and guardians of traditionalism, the article reviewed the accelerating war between Victor Gollancz’s Left Book Club, and its antithesis, the Right Book Club.<sup>1</sup> Of the Left Book Club (LBC), its founder, internal politics, its authors and books together with its iconic importance in late thirties British politics, much is known and continues to be recorded.<sup>2</sup> However, the same statement cannot safely be made about the Right Book Club (RBC). Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that the RBC has been written out of the literary history and wider cultural politics of the decade. References to the Club in standard accounts of the period are few and far between, and where they do appear they are either dismissively short or uninformed.<sup>3</sup> As if to confirm this marginal status, while the British Library carries a more or less complete list of the LBC’s publications from its founding in 1936 to its winding up in 1948, the catalogue cites only one item by the Right Book Club.<sup>4</sup> Yet from its launch in 1937, through the twilight years of the thirties and into the war years and beyond, the Right Book Club occupied a distinctive place in the publishing landscape as a locus of conservative values and, just as importantly, as a successful entrepreneurial venture. By the time of its demise in the 1950s having outlasted its chief rival, the LBC, and book clubs generally, had played a major part in extending the literary franchise in Britain and diversifying the nation’s reading habits, leaving a legacy which persists in the present-day business of book clubs and mail-order literary consumption. The concerns of this essay, however, are the RBC’s formative years and

in particular, the Club's role in the ideologically weighted and shifting textual and cultural politics of the late thirties.

The Right Book Club was both a reaction to the leftward swing in thirties politics and an attempt at political renewal. The Club was owned by W. A. Foyle, founder and managing director of Foyle's bookshop in Charing Cross Road, London, one of the largest in Britain, and as it advertised itself proudly and with imperial overtones, 'booksellers to the world'. However, from its inception, the leading spirit and voice in the RBC was Foyle's daughter, Christina, who is perhaps better remembered for her role as a literary agent and impresario, and of course in later years, as an autocratic manager of her family bookshop.<sup>5</sup> In several interviews during the course of 1937, and in some reflections nearly fifty years later, Christina Foyle was clear about the purpose of the new Club. She was, she said, alarmed by 'the flood of communist and semi-communist literature . . . pouring forth from the printing presses and threatening to engulf the saner members of the reading public'. Referring directly to the Spanish Civil War, that cynosure of thirties ideological allegiance, Foyle told the *Observer* that the literary case of the Right had been allowed to go by default, a deficiency which the RBC and its authors would soon seek to remedy. However, Foyle was also precise about the wider remit of the Club. It was, she said, to counter the 'murderous embrace of the extremes'; to foster a renewed interest in democracy among the ordinary public, to stimulate interest in Conservative thought and to prove 'that truth neither began nor ended with an aged Victorian called Marx', and to show . . . that you need not be unprogressive because you happen to be a Conservative'. In time, she hoped, the RBC would fuel a reaction against modish literary leftism and give non-socialist authors a public. At the present moment, she concluded, they were 'left very much in the cold'.<sup>6</sup>

Taken at face value, Christina Foyle's comments reflected a widespread concern among Conservatives in the thirties to the effect that British culture, and particularly literature, was being assailed and subverted by Marxist propaganda masquerading as art. Indeed, similar views to those of Foyle were to be articulated at one time or another by right-wing writers as far apart as Evelyn Waugh, on the one hand, and Wyndam Lewis and the vituperative Count Wladyslaw Potocki and his *Right Review* on the other. More interesting, perhaps, was Foyle's attempt to elide Conservatism with progressive forces and by implication, with the 'new'. However Foyle's critical gaze was not upon the world of high modernism and the literary avant garde, or at least not openly. Rather it was directed at the middlebrow and popular literary market, an area of consumerism which in the thirties was increasingly seen as part of a fast developing mass-media culture which also embraced radio, film and advertising.<sup>7</sup> For Foyle, it was here that the twin messages of opposition to socialism and support for conservative values called for restatement. In this respect the guiding impulses behind the formation of the Right Book Club have to be seen as more than just a reaction to Victor Gollancz

and what Foyle decried in April 1937 as ‘an hysterical swing to the left’.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the motivations of the Foyles were calibrated towards what Alison Light in *Forever England* has dubbed as ‘conservative modernism’; that is, a Conservatism in some respects in revolt against the past and seeking to come to terms with the present in its many different political, social and material manifestations; a Conservatism, in the words of one RBC author, in which ‘tradition should . . . be able to blend with Modernity’; or put another way, a Conservatism in the thirties which was able to write forward as well as back.<sup>9</sup> Partly for these reasons the Right Book Club was seen from its inception as a significant political initiative, and one which was in tune with the times. More than this, however, the Club quickly became a reference point, not just within the extensive intellectual and literary territory of late-thirties political allegiances, but also in relation to the multi-faceted debates which surrounded the subject of late-thirties modernity and cultural values.

The Right Book Club was officially launched on 27th of February 1937 with a barrage of publicity across the national press. Banner advertisements under the slogan ‘Right is Might’ called upon readers to subscribe to the new venture. ‘Those who Love their Country must join the Right Book Club’ declared one advertisement which appeared in various newspapers, including *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and *The Scotsman*. By April 1937 the Foyles were claiming 10,000 members and by the end of the year, the figure was estimated to be 25,000, about half of the LBC membership.<sup>10</sup> From the outset the RBC unashamedly modelled itself on its rival, referring to itself and its project with a similar breathless earnestness and urgency; that ‘something must be done’ tone which marked so much of the political rhetoric of the time. Indeed the RBC even went as far as to mimic, much to Gollancz’s annoyance, the distinctive ‘Fanfare’ typography used by the Left Book Club on its publications and publicity, giving the RBC a similar contemporary look.<sup>11</sup> For two shillings and sixpence members of the Club would receive the RBC book of the month. But unlike the LBC, the Right Book Club did not commission its own authors, although this was an initial aim. Instead, the Foyles re-published political and current affairs texts, normally priced between seven shillings and sixpence and twelve shillings and sixpence, a few weeks after their appearance through normal publishing channels. At the beginning, the books themselves were flimsy and crude, with soft blue covers. But within a year the RBC was effectively reprinting in hardback style with professionally designed dust jackets. The monthly choices were determined by a Selection Committee which would, advertisements declared, ‘provide the Public with vital, interesting and authoritative books on the leading political and social questions of our time’.<sup>12</sup> The RBC’s Prospectus defined the aims and objects of the Club, listed the members of the Selection Committee, and provided an impressive list of Patrons. As well as reiterating the Club’s determination to ‘oppose and fight against Socialism, Communism and Left Propaganda’, the RBC presented itself as a

campaigning and propaganda organisation for order, common sense and the common man and woman, as well as a publishing and commercial venture. Thus the RBC would, it was promised, conduct an educative campaign in favour of constitutional government and individual freedom across the country; it would build Right Book Club Associations in all parliamentary constituencies, and it would arrange discussion groups, lectures, indoor and outdoor meetings, social activities, sports and games.<sup>13</sup>

Christina Foyle was an articulate right-wing woman in a political field and in a business dominated largely by men. On the Club's Selection Committee were Derek Walker-Smith, Norman Thwaites M. C., Trevor Blakemore and Anthony Ludovici. Walker-Smith, a former lawyer, was editor of *The English Review*, one of the leading literary and nationalist journals of the day. Thwaites and Blakemore were known sympathizers of Germany and National Socialism and were closely associated with a number of right-wing organizations, notably the Anglo-German Fellowship, 'The Link', a pro-Nazi organization with over 4,000 members and later, the notorious Right Club, founded in May 1939 to 'oppose and expose the activities of Organised Jewry'.<sup>14</sup> Ludovici merits particular attention. A close associate of the Foyles, he was a pioneering Nietzschean, one of the leading intellectual exponents of 'blood and soil' English nationalism, a eugenicist, and a fervent anti-semite. Of Ludovici, Foyle later recorded briefly but candidly that he was 'very right wing' but 'a great help to me in choosing the books'.<sup>15</sup> The Patrons of the RBC, although drawn from all sections of conservative opinion, were once again notable for their radical-right leanings. Thus alongside pillars of the Conservative political establishment such as Lord Halifax, Earl Winterton, and Leo Amery were figures such as Sir Henry Page Croft and Sir Harry Britain, staunch nationalists and imperialists, Sir Ernest Benn, the notable individualist, and others like Francis Yeats-Brown, Lord Colum Crichton-Stuart, Lord Sempill, Lady Mount Temple, the Marchioness of Bute and Peter Agnew MP, who were fellow travellers on the radical and anti-semitic right with, in some cases, direct and indirect links to the British fascist movement.<sup>16</sup>

In conjunction with Ludovici Christina Foyle worked hard canvassing public figures and writers either to become patrons of the Club or to contribute to the RBC's growing list of publications. In 1939, for example, Foyle successfully persuaded a diverse series of figures to be associated with the Club, including Walter Starkie, the Catholic historian and Mussolini apologist, the poet Siegfried Sassoon, Marjorie Bowen, the novelist, and Clive Bell. A leading figure in the Bloomsbury Group, Bell surprisingly described himself as 'being much honoured' to be made a patron of the avowedly populist Right Book Club, although others proved less amenable. For reasons that are hard to divine, Foyle also approached the left-wing scientist, Julian Huxley, only to receive the curt negative reply, 'No, I fear . . . not'. More amusing was the response from the novelist A. G. MacDonell, author of the distinguished satire on post-war life, *England, Their England* (1930):<sup>17</sup>

I have nothing but affection for Messrs Foyle's Book Shop . . . but I feel the bitterest animosity towards anything connected with the Right, and I have always trusted sincerely that the Right Book Club would very quickly come to the first stages of eternal damnation. I am sorry to see from your letter that it appears to be flourishing. I had no idea that there were twenty thousand members of the Right in politics who could read . . . Please rest assured that I look forward eagerly to the demise of the Right Book Club.

Between its formation and the outbreak of war the Right Book Club issued over thirty books covering a wide range of subjects. Initially, however, the omens were not good. In February 1937 the Club announced that its first choice would be a book about the modern monarchy, *Coronation Commentary*, by Geoffrey Dennis. But within days it was revealed that publication had been halted by lawyers acting on behalf of Buckingham Palace, on the grounds that the book contained defamatory statements about the Abdication. The first choice of the RBC, which appeared in March 1937, was consequently *The Empire in the World* by Sir Arthur Willerts and others, a rather dry and academic discussion of imperial politics, although one which was well received in conservative circles.<sup>18</sup> Thereafter, however, the RBC's list became more adventurous. Among the selections for 1937 were two radical critiques of Stalin's socialist utopia, G. Ward Price's sympathetic treatment of Fascism, *I Know These Dictators*, and Harold Cardozo's hymn to Franco and the Catholic Church, *The March of a Nation*.

In 1938 and 1939 the formula was much the same, but with some important variations. Thus, for example, alongside continuing reports on Soviet Russia and Spain, the selections included several books dealing with English heritage and character; Hugh Kingsmill's *The English Genius*, Philip Gibbs's extended reply to the reportage of George Orwell and J. B. Priestley, *Ordeal in England*, and Sir Arnold Wilson's similar reflections on the state of England, *Thoughts and Talks* and *More Thoughts and Talks*. Alongside this focus upon the cultural health and body of the nation, the monthly selections predictably addressed the darkening international scene, with publications like *Japan Over Asia* by W. H. Chamberlin, which warned of the dangers to the West from Imperial Japan, and two journalistic appraisals of the prospects of a general European war; Bernard Newman's *Danger Spots of Europe* and Philip Gibbs's *Across the Frontiers*. Interspaced among these publications were three powerful treatises on modern Conservatism which matched Christina Foyle's forward-looking and populist agenda, although in different ways: William Teeling's *Why Britain Prospers*, an exploration of new conservative thinking on economic and social policy; Reginald Northam's *Conservatism, The Only Way*, which explicitly linked Conservatism to that new suburban modernity so detested by the likes of Orwell and Betjeman, and, finally, *Famine in England*, by Viscount Lyminster, which was republished by the RBC at the request of Anthony Ludovici, who described the book 'a

find'.<sup>19</sup> As Foyle must have been aware, Lymington was the main figure in the English Array, an ecological and agricultural movement which was pro-Nazi and included Ludovici and several RBC patrons within its ranks. In his book Lymington called for a new self-sufficient agricultural policy for Britain, which he argued would be vital in wartime. However, he also devoted considerable space to discussing 'alien' immigration and Jewish financial influence which, he contended, had brought 'corruption and disrespect for . . . ancient decencies' and weakened the nation's character. In this connection, Lymington extolled 'the new spiritual awakening of Germany'.<sup>20</sup>

When, however, *The Times* in 1937 recoined the phrase 'The Battle of the Books' it was of course drawing attention to more than another example of 'taking sides' in the thirties. It was also pointing to a parallel text war; that within the publishing and related industries about the commercial and cultural significance of book clubs, and more generally, the spread of cheap reading, or 'Wisdom at Sixpence' as one commentator put it sarcastically.<sup>21</sup> Cheap reading was a long-term trend which stretched back into the early part of the century and beyond, and was pioneered by publishing companies like George Newnes and Ward Locke which produced pocket editions and the first paperbacks proper. In the thirties, the launch of Penguin Books by Allen Lane in 1935 had added a new twist to the economics of publishing and bookselling. *The Times* was quick to make a connection between the success of paperbacks and the activities of Gollancz and the Foyles. It observed: 'There may be points of connection between the 6d boom and other developments now agitating the bookselling and publishing worlds: the growth of what are called "book clubs"', and added pertinently that the 'simple evidence of one's eyes . . . is enough to show the emergence of a new social habit on a large scale'.<sup>22</sup>

*The Times* correspondent was on the mark. The LBC and the Right Book Club were by no means the first book clubs in Britain, but they were the first of any national significance.<sup>23</sup> But whereas Gollancz ran the LBC first and foremost as an ideological project, Christina Foyle's agenda, for all its genuine political purpose, was essentially socio-cultural and commercial in its trajectory. In September 1937 the Foyles stunned the industry when they launched a new venture with the totalising title: 'The Book Club'. Modelled on the RBC, the Book Club was announced grandiosely as 'the most important publishing event of the century', selling recently published fiction and prose at two shillings and sixpence. With the novelist T. F. Powys and the writer and heritage journalist S. P. B. Mais on the Selection Committee, and a list of patrons drawn from the British establishment, this was an extension of the Right Book Club in all but name, but with a potentially larger reach across the social classes, designed in its own words, to render 'a useful service to the reading public, and English literature at large'.<sup>24</sup> Over the next six months, the Foyles mounted other initiatives, including the Religious Book Club, the Scientific Book Club and the Travel Book Club. But perhaps the

most surprising was the Socialist Book Club. This was founded in February 1938 by Ronald Batty, a senior employee of Foyles who had recently married Christina Foyle. Batty claimed to be a concerned socialist, but the whole exercise was clearly an attempt to undermine the LBC. Dubbed the 'Batty Book Club' by Gollancz in *The Left News*, the venture folded a few months later, having recruited a mere three hundred members.<sup>25</sup> The Foyle's archipelago of book clubs, however, was not without competition within its own self-declared territories. Soon after its formation, the RBC was challenged by the appearance of the National Book Association. With Stanley Baldwin as its President, the historian and establishment crony Arthur Bryant as its editor, and the leading publisher Walter Hutchinson as its backer, the Association claimed to be 'neither a "Left" nor a "Right Book Club"', but an organisation committed to resisting the 'revolutionary purpose of a small body of denationalised intellectuals' and supporting 'the sane moderate opinion of the vast majority of the people of this country'.<sup>26</sup> During its pre-war existence, the Association commissioned and published books on topical political and social issues, gaining an estimated membership of 3,000. In reality, however, the National Book Association was a propaganda mouthpiece for Chamberlain's National Government, and financed by Conservative Party Central Office. Other political book clubs entered the fray in due course, including the Labour Book Service, set up by the Labour Party and TUC in competition to the LBC, which they judged sectarian and overly influenced by the British Communist Party, the Peace Book Club, and the Liberal Book Club, which was announced in 1938, sponsored by the publishers Ivor and Nicolson. By this date there were over twenty book clubs in Britain, catering for specific and general interests.<sup>27</sup>

The formation of the Right Book Club and the book club boom which followed divided the publishing and bookselling industry, authors and, more generally, cultural commentators. Their voices were heard in major newspapers like *The Times*, in trade journals such as *The Author* and *The Bookseller*, political and literary magazines both in Britain and the United States, librarians' magazines and within the organisations which monitored the book trade, such as the Society of Authors, the Publishers' Association, and the Booksellers Society. Much of this attention focused on the Foyles and with good reason. Not only were the RBC and its stablemates seen as novel, they were perceived as a challenge to the publishing and reading status quo. As *The Bookseller*, the chief trade organ, put it shortly after the launch of the RBC, it would 'need to be watched carefully'.<sup>28</sup> In October 1937, in a lively public debate with publisher Walter Harrap on the future of the industry, Christina Foyle threw down the gauntlet when she launched a stinging attack upon publishers and booksellers, describing them as 'the most old-fashioned, narrow minded, stifling and unimaginative of men'. She called for a complete rethinking about how publishers and booksellers marketed their authors and pointed to the United States as a source of new ideas. The

industry, she concluded, should commit itself to making the book a key feature of modern mass culture, and even suggested a marketing slogan: 'A home without books is like a body without a soul'.<sup>29</sup>

In the same month in the letter pages of *The Times*, W. A. Foyle sparred with Sir Hugh Walpole and Frank Swinnerton, who had both expressed doubts about the real purpose of political book clubs like the RBC, and book clubs generally. Foyle responded that book clubs 'have come to stay in this country' and argued that they would boost the sale of books, and spread the habit of reading across classes.<sup>30</sup> Others, like the popular novelist, Howard Spring, expressed a different dimension of concern. Speaking before a conference of booksellers in Cheltenham, he deplored the politicization of the book trade. Not only were publishers taking sides, he argued, so were booksellers. But there was a bigger point: 'Left . . . Right, Left . . . Right. I don't like the sound of it. It sounds too much like the tramp of the grey menacing humanless hordes'. In November 1937 no less a figure than Winston Churchill entered the fray speaking at the National Book Fair in London. Here, with direct reference to the Left Book Club and the Right Book Club, he attacked what he saw as the looming polarisation of writing, publishing, and bookselling through the 'deliberate publication of books of a uniform political tendency to an organised mass of reader'. He went on: 'Nothing can be worse than to introduce totalitarianism into the field of literature, and to try and breed in a single country, races of men and women incapable of understanding one another'.<sup>31</sup> Writing in the following year on the subject of political propaganda in England, the feminist and novelist Cecily Hamilton stretched the point further, arguing that political book clubs, left or right, were 'one of the by-products of that process of mental regimentation which . . . has largely superseded the former ideal of education, as an aid to mental growth and development'.<sup>32</sup>

Within the publishing and book industries, antagonism towards Foyles was not derived principally from their political allegiances, but from their business practices which threatened the integrity of the Net Book Agreement. This perceived threat was brought to a head with the formation of the Book Club in September 1937, which one Sunday newspaper announced under the headline: 'Girl's Bombshell for the Book World' and continued: 'A strikingly attractive black-haired girl, flying across Europe in a holiday plane, (has) had a brain wave that may revolutionise the world of books'.<sup>33</sup> The announcement of the new Club, which eventually acquired 50,000 subscribers, drew a furious response from some publishers but even more so from booksellers, who saw in it the financial ruination of their precarious trade through a sharp reduction in profits for authors, publishers and booksellers alike. The Foyles responded that it would simply mean that more books would be sold, rather than less, and perhaps fewer books would be borrowed from travelling and public libraries. As W. A. Foyle put it in an advertising campaign designed to win over the industry, 'The more experience we gain of book clubs, the more

we are convinced of their advantages . . . Book Clubs do, unquestionably, reach a new reading public'.<sup>34</sup> The argument was to run unabated during 1938–39 involving the Foyles, the Publishers' Association and the Booksellers Association and led to attempts to promulgate a code of practice for book clubs, designed to minimise their undercutting of the market. By the time war broke, however, this aspect of the battle of the books had receded in its importance helped by, as the Foyles predicted, a steady increase in book production, book sales and popular reading. Much more sustained, although more complex, were the parallel and wide-ranging debates about literary propaganda, cultural capital, and the consequences of cheap reading. These were aired in forums as diverse as F. R. Leavis's *Scrutiny*, and *The Library World*. In the case of *Scrutiny*, in a critique laid out at length in December 1937, political and general book clubs were condemned as representing yet another accretion to that enemy of cultivated sensibility: mass society, or as the article put it, 'a further extension of the lazy book reading habit, comparable to that made by Northcliffe in the newspaper world'. An alternative view was squarely expressed by a librarian from Bolton. Writing in April 1938 on the subject of 'Book Club Hysteria', he observed that: 'The growth of book clubs, political . . . and general has struck fear into the hearts of many high-minded persons. Emanating from hysterical idealists of the pseudo-cultural school, this fear has no grounds.'<sup>35</sup> But it was left to the socialist intellectual and historian, Margaret Cole, to make explicit the logic of the book club phenomenon, pioneered by Gollancz but brilliantly exploited and developed by the Foyles. In her widely noted pamphlet, *Books and the People*, she argued that book clubs, whatever their political persuasions, together with paperbacks 'marked the opening stages of a real revolution' in material culture which would have far-reaching egalitarian consequences.<sup>36</sup>

How then do we reincorporate the Right Book Club within our understanding of late-thirties cultural politics? Firstly, the RBC offers a different example of Alison Light's 'conservative modernism', which she discusses in relation to four female writers of the inter-war period. The RBC straddled a variety of cultural practices: publishing, bookselling, advertising and reading. But viewed simply as a political organisation, it can be seen as symptomatic of the fault lines that ran through British Conservatism in the thirties, as individuals like Christina Foyle and loose groupings of Conservative cultural activists, sought to position themselves in opposition to socialism and Communism, while reacting positively to the challenges of modernity, a negotiation which, as the case of the RBC shows, could also mean embracing the new politics of the radical right. In this sense, the Right Book Club occupied the cultural interstices of thirties Conservatism, functioning as a meeting and transmitting point, although an uneasy one, for different shades of right-wing opinion.

Secondly, even a brief review of the politics of book clubs, such as the account given here, indicates that constructions of the thirties which

foreground Gollancz and the Left Book Club, while at best footnoting the RBC, miss a larger point. The business of book clubs in the late 1930s was fraught; it was as much contested ideological ground as other parts of thirties politics and culture, a territory of ideological faction and textual friction, rather than a homologous contact zone between committed left-wing intellectuals and the reading public. That it has frequently been represented as such owes much to the canonizing and mythologising narratives of the post-war decades which privilege texts like *The Road to Wigan Pier*, against the more widely read travel and heritage literature of writers like W. S. Shears and Hugh Kingsmill, or the social and international reportage of Philip Gibbs and Sir Arnold Wilson. Indeed it can be argued that the full significance of such books can only be properly assessed when viewed, not as isolated cultural and material objects, but in their intertextual relationship to one another and other forms of media, and alongside the competing political and social realities which they sought to describe.

Thirdly, and related to this, the RBC has to be seen as an active participant in the cultural politics of truth, which inscribed itself on so much of thirties writing, non-fiction and fiction. Considered as a set of cultural practices, the Right Book Club further politicised the aesthetics of book production and the book itself, turning consumable objects of thirties material culture into symbolic objects of cultural capital and markers of political and social knowledge. While that process was undoubtedly inaugurated by Gollancz and the LBC, the Right Book Club augmented it by refusing the left-wing version of the equation between reading, education and truth. Vital to this refusal, of course, was the RBC's own version in the shape of its texts. Although it might be dismissed as merely *bricolage*, as diverse as it was quirky, the RBC's catalogue should nevertheless be viewed as a serious attempt to pave a conservative textual canon which was forward looking, contemporary, and which represented, in the language of the thirties, 'things as they are'; an attempt to engage with the material and the real which was mirrored in the bigger area of fiction by the ubiquitous and patently middlebrow Foyle's Book Club.<sup>37</sup>

However, evaluating the Right Book Club as an instrument of political and social agency is difficult. Received wisdom has reserved this status for the LBC, which was typically described by a thirties commentator as 'one of the most subversive influences in this country, if I am not mistaken'.<sup>38</sup> Few if any similar evaluations of the political impact of the RBC exist. Nor is it easy to assess how far the Right Book Club impacted upon reading practices in the late thirties, although there are some useful pointers in the Mass Observation survey, *Books and the Public*, first mooted in 1938 by Tom Harrisson and eventually compiled during 1942–1944.<sup>39</sup> But the importance of the RBC, and of book clubs generally, was signalled well enough in the war of words which was conducted in the publishing and bookselling industry in and after 1937. There, as I have indicated, the RBC represented a material intervention in an argument which was not just about books and economics, although

this was important, but also an interjection in the long running ‘minority culture versus mass culture’ debate. In this sense, to see the book club wars of the late thirties first and foremost as a political contestation, left versus right, as has normally been the case, is to displace other less obvious but nevertheless important forms of politico-cultural contestation in the period. Book clubs like the RBC and its stablemates were signs and sites of transatlantic modernity in themselves, proactive participants in the complex debates over mass literary consumption and the value of mass culture as a liquid currency which threaded through the culture industries in the 1930s; part indeed of what Keith Williams has called the thirties media crisis, in which established boundaries of text, genre and form were challenged.<sup>40</sup> As such, the Foyles’ enterprises were also part of a growing but usually, at the time at least, unacknowledged coalition of interests which upheld the popular, the mundane and the ordinary in opposition to cultural elitists who were to be found on both the Left and Right. This was a coalition of commercial as well as literary interests and one which cut across ideological lines. Ventures like the Right Book Club and its literary adjunct, the Book Club, together with their rivals were central to this.

But finally, if as it has been argued here, book clubs and the wars which they generated were a key referent of late thirties modernity, they were also important instruments in the privatisation, domestication or feminisation of political consciousness in the thirties.<sup>41</sup> What after all could be more private and domestically sublime than the political book or novel arriving by post each month to be read at the suburban and rural fireside, and most certainly too, at the fireside of the new upwardly mobile working class which was identified by several literary tourists of the thirties. Indeed it was this nexus of text, home and domesticity which so infuriated many of the early critics of book clubs, political and non-political. It was however precisely this coming together of the political and the domestic which was to be at the centre of the literary and cultural populism which marked the war years. J. B. Priestley, that *bete noir* for the intellectual avant garde, voiced the moment of crisis and change precisely in his polemical *Out of the People*, published in 1941, in which he posed the fundamental, and for high modernists, impossible question, ‘What is Britain?’ In the heightened atmosphere of wartime Britain Priestley could answer unequivocally, ‘Britain is the home of the British people’.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, perhaps, for Christina Foyle and the Right Book Club in the late thirties the answer was the same, although who and what constituted ‘the people’ raised a question which would remain unresolved. Yet how this question came to be framed, with all its consequences for social democracy and cultural politics in post-war Britain lies, at least in part, in the forgotten history of the Right Book Club.

Appendix: Publications of the Right Book Club 1937–1939

*In approximate monthly sequence*

*March–December 1937*

Sir Arthur Willert *et al*, *The Empire in the World*

Sir Charles Petrie, *Lords of the Inland Sea*

Andrew Smith, *I Was a Soviet Worker*

Rex Weldon Finn, *The English Heritage*

Laurence Housman, *Victoria Regina*

William Henry Chamberlin, *A False Utopia*

C. J. M Alport, *Kingdoms in Partnership*

G. Ward Price, *I Know These Dictators*

Harold Cardozo, *The March of a Nation*

Douglas Jerrold, *Georgian Adventure*

*January–December 1938*

Fred E. Beal, *Word From Nowhere*

Sir Charles Petrie, *The Chamberlain Tradition*

William Henry Chamberlin, *Japan Over Asia*

Viscount Lymington, *Famine in England*

William Teeling, *Why Britain Prospers*

Sir Arnold Wilson, *Thoughts and Talks*

W. S. Shears, *This England*

Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia*

Philip Gibbs, *Ordeal in England*

William Foss and Cecil Gerahty, *The Spanish Arena*

A. J. Mackenzie, *Propaganda Boom*

Prince Christopher, *Memoirs of HRH Prince Christopher of Greece*

*January–December 1939*

Arnold Lunn, *Revolutionary Socialism*

Hugh Kingsmill (ed), *The English Genius*

R. O. G Urch, *The Rabbit King of Russia*

Count Puckler, *How Strong Is Britain?*

Bernard Newman, *Danger Spots of Europe*

Sir Arnold Wilson, *More Thoughts and Talks*

Donald Cowie, *An Empire Prepared*

Reginald Northam, *Conservatism. The Only Way*

Philip Gibbs, *Across the Frontiers*

Edith Sitwell, *Victoria of England*

Rosita Forbes, *India of the Princes*

Clarence K. Streit, *Union Now*

Notes and references

1 'The Battle of the Books: New Selling for New Readers', *Times*, 28 September 1937, p. 15.

2 See Stuart Samuels, 'The Left Book Club', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 1:2 (1966), 65–86; Sheila Hodges, *Gollancz: The Story of a Publishing House* (London, 1978); Betty Reid, 'The Left Book Club in the Thirties', in Jon Clark, Margot Heineman, David Margolies and Carole Snee (eds), *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London, 1979); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Victor Gollancz: A Biography* (London, 1987); and Paul Laity (ed.), *Left Book Club Anthology* (London, 2001).

3 See for example, Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties*, (London, 1971), p. 303, Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1989), p. 231 and Rosa Maria Bracco, *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War 1919–1939* (Oxford, 1993), p. 56.

4 This bibliographical gap is compounded by the absence of an official archive for the Right Book Club. RBC publications cited in this article are in the possession of the author.

5 William Alfred Foyle, 1885–1963, founded Foyle's Bookshop Ltd with his brother, Gilbert S. Foyle in 1904. Christina Agnes Lillian Foyle, 1911–99, see obituary, *Guardian*, 10 June 1999, p. 22.

6 'Right Book Club Success', *Observer*, 25 April 1937, p. 12 and Letter, Christina Foyle to Terence Rodgers, 21 July 1986.

7 See Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media* (London, 1996) and Keith Williams and Steven Mathews (eds), *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After* (London, 1997).

8 *Observer*, 25 April 1937, p. 12.

9 Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London, 1991), p. 11; William Teeling, *Why Britain Prospers* (London, Right Book Club edition, 1938) p. 19, and more generally, John Baxendale and Christopher Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties. A Decade in the Making: 1930 to the Present* (London, 1996).

10 'The Battle of the Book Clubs', *The Bookseller*, 3 March 1937, p. 228; 'Notes and News', *The Bookseller*, 28 April 1937, p. 414 and *Scotsman*, 1 March 1937, p. 15.

11 *The Bookseller*, 10 March 1938, p. 262 and 14 April 1938, p. 426. For Gollancz's early reaction to the RBC, see 'Editorial', *The Left News*, April 1937, p. 304.

12 'Right is Might: Join the "Right" Book Club', *Observer*, 28 February 1937, p. 6.

13 The Right Book Club, *Prospectus*, 1937 and *Prospectus*, 1938. Examples of the Club's wider political activities can be found in the *The Bookseller*, 20 January 1938, p. 41, the *Times*, 30 March 1938, p. 16, and in *The Right Bulletin*, which was circulated privately to all patrons and members of the Club. Notable initiatives included the formation of a 'Right Theatre Movement' and the publication of a number of 'Right Booklets' attacking the British left and its leading voices. In 1939 the notoriously thin-skinned Victor Gollancz instigated legal proceedings against Christina Foyle and Stanley Johnson, the RBC's Organisational Director, for alleged slander and libel. See *Bookseller*, 4 May 1939, p. 45.

14 Richard Griffiths, *Patriotism Perverted: Captain Ramsay, the Right Club and British Anti-Semitism 1939–1940* (London, 1998), p. 122.

15 Letters, Christina Foyle to Terence Rodgers, 1 August 1986 and 22 August 1986. See also Dan Stone, 'The Extremes of Englishness: The "Exceptional" Ideology of Anthony Mario Ludovici', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 4:2 (1999), 191–218. Christina Foyle eschewed formal links with right-wing political organisations, but

during the late thirties she travelled regularly to Germany.

16 See Griffiths, *ibid.*, and also Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933–1939* (Oxford, 1983). For example, Peter Agnew (1900–1990) was a member of the Anglo-German Fellowship, an enthusiast for Franco and a member of the Right Club. In Parliament he spoke frequently and disparagingly on the subject of alien immigration and Jews.

17 Julian S. Huxley to Christina Foyle, 2 November 1939; A. G. MacDonnell to Christina Foyle, 3 November 1939. Copied to the author by Christina Foyle, 1 August 1986.

18 See *Times*, 27 April 1937, p. 8; *The Spectator*, 5 March 1937, p. 394.

19 'It seems admirably suited to our purpose . . . and in view of the difficulty that undoubtedly exists of getting good Right books, this one seems to be a find.' Anthony Ludovici to Christina Foyle, 15 February 1938. Copied to the author by Christina Foyle, 1 August 1986.

20 Viscount Lymington, *Famine in England* (London, Right Book Club edition, 1938), p. 203. See also Thomas Linehan, *British Fascism 1918–1939: Parties, Ideology and Culture* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 140–1.

21 *Times*, 28 September 1937, p. 15.

22 *Ibid.* See also, Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914–1950* (Oxford, 1992).

23 Precursors included the Times Book Club established in 1905 and the Book Society, which was formed in 1929. But as a concept, book clubs had their beginnings in the USA and Germany. See John Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (London, 1988) and Janice A. Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill, NC 1997).

24 The Book Club, *Prospectus*, 1937 and *Morning Post*, 17 September 1937, p. 6.

25 *The Left News*, March 1938, p. 719.

26 *The Bookseller*, 10 March 1937, p. 245; *Times* 3 March 1938, p. 9; National Book Association, *Prospectus*, 1939. The NBA's most significant achievement was the republication of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in January 1939 with an inserted editorial by Bryant in which he praised Hitler and likened his politics to those of Benjamin Disraeli.

27 See for example, *The Bookseller*, 20 January 1938, p. 41, and 19 May 1938, p. 83.

28 *Ibid.*, 28 July 1937, p. 111.

29 *Ibid.*, 20 October 1937, p. 418.

30 *Times*, 1 October 1937, p. 17; 'The New Writer', 5 October 1937.

31 *The Bookseller*, 3 June 1937, p. 132; *ibid.*, 10 November 1937, p. 412.

32 Ciceley Hamilton, *Modern England* (London, 1938), p. 178. American critics of book clubs voiced similar concerns. See Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992), pp. 94–8.

33 *Sunday Referee*, 29 August 1937, p. 11.

34 *The Bookseller*, 12 May 1938, p. 46.

35 H. A. Mason, 'Education by Book Club?', *Scrutiny*, 4:3 (December 1937), 242; S. H. Barlow, 'Book Club Hysteria', *The Library World*, 11:464 (April 1938), p. 211.

36 Margaret Cole, *Books and the People* (London, 1938) and 'Mrs Cole and Us', *The Bookseller*, 2 February 1939, pp. 122–3.

37 For an interesting discussion of thirties reportage, see Keith Williams, 'Post/Modern Documentary: Orwell, Agee and the New Reportage', in Williams and Mathews, *Rewriting the Thirties*, pp. 163–81.

38 Philip Gibbs, *Ordeal in England* (London, Right Book Club edition, 1938),

pp. 272–3.

39 See ‘Mass Observing the Book Reader’, *The Bookseller*, 9 March 1938, pp. 344–5 and Steve Chibnall, ‘Pulp Versus Penguins: Paperbacks Go To War’, in Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (eds), *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two* (London, 1995), pp. 131–49.

40 See Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, p. 173 and Williams, *British Writers*, pp. 1–19.

41 See Light, *Forever England*, p. 8.

42 J. B. Priestley, *Out of the People* (London, 1941), p. 45.

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