Review Article

The Long Week-End *Revisited*

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John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties: Writing, Politics, Culture*, Five Leaves Publications, 1997, pp. 263, £11.99; Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (eds), *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, Longman, 1997, pp. x + 221, £13.99; John Baxendale and Christopher Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making: 1930 to the Present*, Macmillan, 1996, pp. viii + 246, £15.99.

In their Authors' Note to *The Long Week-End*, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge apologised for their failure to cover every event and topic that could have been considered worthy of inclusion in this 'Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939'. 'Fill the gaps in for yourself, please, everybody!', they exhort their readers: 'A score of books could be written on the same general lines as ours, each completely different from the rest' (Graves and Hodge, *The Long Week-End*, 1941, p. 10). This was written in 1940: yet it displays a clear awareness that the 'twenty-one year interval between the two great European wars' had been a distinct period in history, and that this period was now over. Graves and Hodge were not the only commentators to view September 1939 as a distinct ending: W. H. Auden's view from 'one of the dives / On Fifty-second street' of the closing stages of 'a low dishonest decade' is probably the most famous version of this understandable view that an age was over. What is interesting for our current concerns is Graves' and Hodge's – albeit flippant – remark about the possibility of a 'score of books … each completely different from the rest'. Even disregarding more main-

stream political and social history, which itself has a massive historiography on the period, we have witnessed since the late 1970s a massive growth in cultural historical interest in this period, a growth that has fostered a significant literature in both disciplines of history and literary studies: and while each book within this historiography may not be as 'completely different from the rest' as Graves and Hodge anticipated, the diversity has been remarkable. Samuel Hynes' 1976 *The Auden Generation*, John Clark *et al.*'s edited collection of 1979, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, Frank Gloversmith's *Class, Culture and Social Change* of 1980, and Peter Miles' and Malcolm Smith's *Cinema, Literature and Society* of 1987 are just a few examples. Thanks to this body of work, many features of interwar culture, ranging from the social significance of mass cinema-going to the public political affiliations of poets, are now permanent features of our mental landscapes of the period. Indeed, some of these features have become both iconic and clichéd: the touchstone memory of the Jarrow Crusade in *Our Friends in the North*, the mainstream use of 'the Auden generation' as a descriptor of certain poets and types of poets, and the apparent nostalgic ease with which Brideshead has been re-revisited in the 1970s and 1990s, are all examples of this.

These three new offerings are welcome additions to this body of work. Not only do they prove our continuing fascination with a time in which modernism flourished in the arts, and in which politics and culture were forced to recognise each other: they also offer new ways of reading the period, and a number of rehabilitated voices from Graves' and Hodge's 'interval'. The authors involved – Lucas, Baxendale and Pawling, and the twelve contributors to *Rewriting the Thirties* – apply contemporary research and theoretical agendas to this well-worked period. Each of the three books works as an interdisciplinary text, without being divorced from its academic roots; and, despite Lucas' warning of the 'folly of trying to define cultural history in terms of decades' (*Radical Twenties*, p. 211), each one works as a study of a clearly definable period in the recent past.

In *The Radical Twenties*, Lucas has devoted his skills and attention to the relatively neglected decade of the inter-war period. It represents something of a chronological infilling for Lucas, who has helped to map out links between social history, politics, and literature in the nineteenth century and the 1930s. Lucas scrutinises the decade that is, he claims, frequently explored by cultural historians purely in terms of two significant trends: modernism and social decadence. Using a variety of texts, Lucas has challenged this predominant view that has seen the culture of the period only from the point of view of a London literary establishment (albeit an experimental one), and only in the context of a social history peopled by Bright Young Things: 'my principal concern', he notes, 'is to provide evidence that England in the years following the Great War cannot sensibly be accounted for as London Society writ large' (p. 3). Once this point is made, he sets the General Strike of 1926

up as the decade's 'definitive moment' (p. 3), and then explores through thematic chapters ways in which the period's literary culture can be read in terms of struggle, contestation, controversy, and – a key phrase – 'taking sides'. This scene-setting then allows Lucas to explore themes and texts that challenge the prevailing obsessions with modernism and London society. Lucas, for all his insistence on placing texts in historical contexts, is primarily concerned here with the literary output of the period. However, as has been evident in all of his work, he is always relating the contours of history to the literary culture of the period.

What emerges most strongly is just how much writing of the period was self-consciously radical and political, in one form or another. Many of the texts he considers are by authors who have been neglected in relation to the 'canonical' Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, Pound, Woolf, Wyndham Lewis, Yeats, and Waugh (p. 4). Ivor Gurney, Patrick Hamilton, Edgell Rickword, Mary Webb and others have been marginalised: either because they were not as immediately influential as the canonical figures named above, or because they have been overshadowed by the very public political commitments of the generation who came next. The shades cast by T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf as predecessors and contemporaries, and by the mature W. H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender as successors have frequently obscured these figures. Lucas restores them to view. They may not have had such an apparently obvious cause as the Spanish Civil War to rally to: but the aftermath of the Great War, the dislocation of the twenties, and the class antagonisms evident in the General Strike, were all political issues for these writers. Moreover, Lucas is also interested in a variety of radicalisms: not just partisan commitment, but also radicalism in the realms of gender relations, sexual activity, the use of alcohol and drugs in social life, and the class politics involved in the contemporary debate about masses and elites. This should come as no surprise. Young people of this generation, including the literary and artistic individuals who left the traces which Lucas explores, were famously affected by the Great War and its aftermath, a period in which orthodoxies were there to be challenged. Modernism in the arts was one of the cultural parts of this reaction: and there is no attempt here to take Eliot, Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Woolf out of that moment of social history. Indeed, they are not marginalised in any way: *The Waste Land*, for example, is evident throughout as both literary influence and social commentary. But Lucas has successfully argued that those working outside the canon of modernism still had significant voices, and were still prepared to experiment with both form and content in their chosen fields of expression.

The great strength of Lucas's work is the way in which, to effect this analysis, he explores individual texts in detail without losing sight of either the authorial contexts, or the wider context of a troubled decade. A few examples must suffice, both to illustrate the themes and the diversity of texts covered. They include Douglas Goldring's 1920 novel *The Black Curtain* for

which he later offered a 'coded apology' (p. 45) by saying that in order to protect literature from the 'greed, corruption and brutality' of the post-war period authors 'were forced to become politically-minded at the expense of our art' (p. 44); David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* of 1922, one of many of the period's pieces that explored female nature in terms of animal imagery; the use of cocaine by key characters in Noel Coward's *The Vortex* (1923) which 'may be about decadence but … certainly doesn't celebrate it' (p. 114)); and the political commitment of some of the poets who had served in and survived the war, such as Rickword and Gurney, radicalised by what Gurney in 1917 had described as the 'hard and fast system which has sent so many of the flower of England's artists to risk death, and a wrong materialistic system' (p. 198). These examples highlight some of the themes, and demonstrate Lucas's consummate ability to blend the canonical with those overlooked by posterity in order to show the depth of people's concerns and the influence of various radicalisms throughout literary culture. Through these diverse explorations, Lucas provides a convincing new interdisciplinary reading of the decade.

Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After, a wide-ranging collection of essays, is similarly based on the premise that a narrow orthodoxy from previous cultural history needs to be challenged. Where Lucas attacks those who see the 1920s as a time of modernism and decadence, Williams' and Matthews's target is the 'persistent aftermyth' that the 1930s was a 'homogeneous anti-modernist decade' (p. 1). Through their contributors' thematic and author-based analyses, Williams and Matthews attempt to show how the 1930s were a 'troubled but symptomatic transitional phase between modernist and postmodernist writing, art and politics, a complex mutation that defined itself within, and in some ways against, the wider background of the popular writing and mass culture of the time' (p. 1). This book is part of Longman's series 'Studies in 20th Century Literature'; and, like *The Radical Twenties*, its roots are more firmly in literary studies than in history. The majority of the contributors are from English departments, including Valentine Cunningham, Lynette Hunter, Marion Shaw, and Stan Smith. However, the collection also includes a piece by Jeffrey Richards, a cultural historian, and pieces by Steve Nicholson from a professional and academic drama background, and community writer Andy Croft. This mix is a great strength of the collection, as it allows not just different voices but also different methodologies and agendas to be brought to bear on this topic. While the whole collection is not rounded off by an editorial conclusion, the individual contributions all work as self-contained analyses that will be useful to serious students of the period.

While it may be invidious to select examples from such an interesting collection, a few must again suffice to illustrate the editors' overarching themes. A key theme is that writing in various media in the 1930s was not only moving away from modernism but also moving towards postmodernism. This is

present in a number of pieces, such as Williams's 'Post/Modern documentary', an exploration of ways in which George Orwell's non-fictional writings were influenced by techniques from the cinema: not just in his use of framing devices for particular incidents, but also in his emphasis on representation. The theme is very clear in Stan Smith's close reading of Auden's *The Orators*, 'Remembering Bryden's Bill', which exemplifies the editors' concern with how 'the work of High Modernists was being modified by its rewriting in … the texts of the next, upcoming generation' (p. 2). Using a seminal phrase from Auden in 1940 as a keynote – 'the provincial England of 1907, when I was born, was Tennysonian in outlook; whatever its outlook the England of 1925 when I went up to Oxford was *The Waste Land* in character' (quoted p. 53) – Smith traces the ways in which *The Orators* helped to negotiate the formal concerns of the modernists with the political concerns of a younger post-war generation. The shift towards postmodern concerns is also present in Peter McDonald's fascinating exploration of the construction and maintenance of mythologies about the decade, 'Believing in the Thirties'.

Political commitment is another theme. As with Lucas's attention to diverse radicalisms, the contributors to this collection do not spend too much time on the familiar territory of, say, Spain. Instead, a number of essays explore commitment at less well-known levels, and successfully challenge reductionist readings of the decade's political literature as purely propagandist. In 'Illusion and Reality', Peter Marks explores the limited influence of the 1934 All Union Congress of Soviet Writers on English literature, while Steve Nicholson's examination of the political theatre of the period stresses a far more ambivalent relationship between 'artistic concerns' and 'political didacticism' than reductionist readings allow. The decade's debates over women's roles are explored in Marion Shaw's sensitive analysis of the personal and literary relationships between Virginia Woolf, Winifred Holtby, and Vera Brittain.

Alongside the essays on how literary elites coped with the cultural impact of modernism and the political options of the period, we are also offered pieces on the links between modernism and mass culture. Simon Dentith's piece on how literature covered the new townscapes of the suburbs takes us beyond John Betjeman's familiar – indeed, 'unavoidable' in this context – call for the 'friendly bombs' to fall on Slough (p. 112) and into a much wider range of sources that display similar strands of 'simple snobbery' (p. 113): they include Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron', and Day Lewis's *The Magic Mountain*, where the bourgeois suburbanites are 'Bent double with lackeying' and 'paying for death on the instalment plan' (p. 115). Again, though, the point is that such readings were not the only ones: and MacNeice, Stevie Smith, and others are cited to show an ambivalence about the suburbs, a difficulty in balancing their essentially modern nature with the conservative existences associated with their inhabitants. Jeffrey Richards' piece on modernism and mass cinema-going, 'Modernism and the People', is also excellent

in this respect: he balances the explicit modernism of the medium itself and the architecture of some of its flagship theatres against working class audience's perceptions and expectations, and challenges the notion of the decade as a time of either modernism or postmodernism: 'From the perspective of popular culture it is best seen as a decade of premodernism.' (p. 182)

Rewriting the Thirties works extremely well, both as a collection of historical literary criticism, and as a more general cultural history of the period. It fully achieves its editors' aims of setting up agendas for demythologising the 1930s. The final book, Baxendale and Pawling's *Narrating the Thirties*, takes this a stage further. This is interdisciplinarity at its finest. With their respective professional backgrounds in Cultural History and Communications, Baxendale and Pawling have produced an exemplary case study in historical construction that also provides – as all case studies should – an extremely well-rounded insight into the period itself. Their starting point is that all historical 'landmarks' are invented rather than found: that 'however adequately they encapsulate actual historical experience, they are still constructs of the … collective, cultural imagination' (p. 1). They then explore various aspects of the 1930s, and various post-1930s accounts of the time, to trace ways in which the decade has been 'under construction' from the time itself to the present, a process characterised by the emergence at different times and in different settings of 'manifold, contradictory and ever-changing' meanings of the 1930s (p. 2).

In common with the other books under consideration, *Narrating the Thirties* is a thematic rather than chronological study. However, it is different in one important respect. It is not just about internal mythologies and meanings of the confused period that hosted the Jarrow March and the growth of Marks and Spencers: how the people of the decade made meanings of their own cultural experiences. It is also about how the decade has been represented in subsequent years, after Walter Benjamin's quoted call for historians to '[grasp] the constellation which [their] own era has formed with a definite earlier one' (quoted p. 8); and about what these representations tell us about the thirties and about the time of representation.

Three of the seven chapters are about the time itself. The diverse themes chosen cover some familiar ground, including cinema and Mass-Observation. However, the place of these chapters within the authors' agenda ensures that the coverage is original. For example, Mass-Observation is treated with the documentary film movement as an example of the emergence of 'ordinary people' into public view (p. 18). Popular cinema is covered through a case study of Gracie Fields' films and their relationship with J. B. Priestley's writings as ambivalent and multi-layered texts on Englishness, class, gender, and provincial identities: and while we are reminded that Graves and Hodge described Priestley in *The Long Week-End* as the 'Gracie Fields of literature' (quoted p. 70), Baxendale and Pawling make a persuasive bid for this influential author's rehabilitation. One of Priestley's most

famous books of the time was *English Journey*, which is given detailed coverage as an example of one of the ways in which the period saw itself: while other travel writings are explored to show contemporary representations of the United Kingdom's place at the centre of the Empire. Here, Orwell's journey from Burma to Wigan, and C. L. R. James's journey from Trinidad to London and Nelson, are linked in a persuasive way as 'narratives of empire'.

In the four remaining chapters, the authors deal with examples of how those coming later 'have sought to construct and reconstruct the decade posthumously' (p. 8). It is here that the book comes into its own as a piece of cultural history and historiography in the widest sense. The authors continue to concentrate on diverse case studies. The first is probably the most dramatic (and, in many ways, the most persistent): the immediate posthumous versions created during 'the People's War', where 'a critical reading of the Thirties prevailed', dominated by the failures of the period's foreign policy and economy (p. 117). This is followed with post-1945 representations of the decade in a variety of forms: political discourse and historiography, up to and including the 'good press' (p. 167) the period received under Thatcherism; popular culture and nostalgia, explored here in a detailed case study of Dennis Potter's *Pennies from Heaven*; and the very different nostalgia of conservatism, explored again in a textual case study, this time of Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 *The Remains of the Day*. Ending with this text for the 1990s allows Baxendale and Pawling to close their study with a contemporary example of representation: a post-Thatcherite 'disquisition on national identity', a call for 'a return to those *social* values which are bound up with the emergent socialist and social democratic discourses of the Thirties' (p. 212, emphasis in original).

These three different texts have much in common. They all successfully challenge dominant readings and mythologies about their chosen periods: and while Baxendale and Pawling go the furthest in their analysis of how myths are made, broken, and replaced, all three provide us with alternative and unorthodox readings. All three manage to rehabilitate certain authors and texts; and they all enhance our understanding of this potentially overworked period. In their Introduction, Williams and Matthews describe cultural history as 'a mosaic', with 'many overlapping, competing and contradictory' features (p. 1): and the triumph of these books is the way in which they help us to interpret that mosaic, deconstruct it, and understand its reconstruction. These might not be the types of books that Graves and Hodge had envisaged: but they are original and inspiring contemporary studies that add significantly to the historiography of the period.