

## *This Is London . . .*

**Under Siege: Literary Life in London, 1939-45**, by Robert Hewison, *New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. x + 219 pp. \$11.95.*

*Under Siege* is a history of literary life in London during the Second World War, chronicling the responses of writers, artists, and musicians to the conditions of war and viewing interest in literature and art as both an expression of and an escape from the issues and attitudes of the time. Hewison is at his best in writing evoca-

tive social history, in stringing together documentable facts, descriptive accounts, and the recollection of others to depict social perspectives, like attitudes toward conscientious objectors or the strains of class or racial feeling articulated in the midst of the Blitz. At every point in the social history, Hewison uses writers from newspapers and journals of the time to demonstrate and comment on the particular facts, facts of concert and theater attendance, book publication, and exhibitions of painting, as well as facts of disastrous raids, of military activities, and of bureaucratic preoccupations. Hewison is skillful in handling the illustrative anecdote, particularly if it has political implications. For example, when Robert Sherwood's *There Shall Be No Night* opened on Broadway in 1940, starring the Lunts, it was set during the Russian invasion of noble Finland. By the time the play was put on in London, in 1943, Russia had become an ally and the setting was simply transposed to Italy's invasion of Greece. With a rich profusion of detail, Hewison outlines the various changes in the atmosphere of London during the war: the almost simultaneous shock of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the beginning of the war that caused many writers to retreat into themselves; the "phony war" of 1939-40 during which theaters, concerts, and writing resumed, a sense of liberation expressed by Cyril Connolly as a freedom from two burdens, "the burden of anti-Fascist activities, the subtler burden of pro-Communist opinion"; the searing intensity of the Blitz which, at least for some writers, like John Lehmann, led to a "new consciousness" and dedication to avoiding the mistakes of the past; the despair of early 1942 with the fall of Singapore, austerity, a bitter winter, and world-wide defeats; the resurgence of theater and interest in books as, in late 1942 and 1943, beginning with the North African invasion, victories abroad and journalistic and parliamentary talk of postwar reform helped to offset the boredom and sheer weariness of the war's "lull"; the sudden seeming depopulation of London when the first V. 1 rockets followed the departure of troops for the Normandy invasion; the erratic pattern of destruction in the final raids.

Born in 1943, Hewison is necessarily reliant

on his sources, who seem both responsible and perceptive. For the most part, they are writers like Priestley, Orwell, Maclaren-Ross, Heath-Stubbs, Julian Symons, as well as Connolly and Lehmann. Hewison's own judgments are, however, more questionable. He sometimes polarizes issues excessively, as in calling the dual function of the Ministry of Information to propagandize the war and censor information that might aid the enemy a "fundamental contradiction." More seriously, Hewison fails to distinguish between different kinds of sources, so that quoting several gossipy anecdotes from files and memoirs leads him to conclude broadly that "It is clear from the discussions within the Ministry that the bureaucrats thought that authors were not serious people and could not be trusted." This insensitivity to tone sometimes becomes outright misunderstanding: a quotation from Julian Symons that characterizes poets as not very responsible in organized social action, as "erratic individualists with a *taste* for Catholicism, Communism, or conscientious objection" is interpreted as meaning that poets "are fully excused from responsibility, but on Marxist grounds"; Stephen Spender's thoughtful retrospective wartime self-criticism about the failures of thirties' intellectuals to ask enough questions is brought to conclusion by Hewison's statement that "This is a clear break with Marxism, but it is difficult to say what Spender puts in its place." A few quotations that use words like "disgust," "depression," and "exhaustion," all in different contexts, at the end of the war, allow Hewison to leap to his finale on his last page: "The idealism of the Thirties had been supplanted by the frozen academicism of the Cold War." The problem is not just tonal inaccuracy (a matter not helped by Hewison's method of acknowledging sources in summarizing paragraphs), but distortion by slogan as well.

Hewison recognizes the difficulty in generalizing about artistic response for a whole country of different artists over a period of six years. But he conveniently decides that not much was going on in the provinces anyhow and that the times were not propitious for the novel, generalizations that permit him to concentrate on

poets and literary journalists in London, particularly on those who regularly drank in the pubs of Fitzrovia (a useful map is provided). That Fitzrovia was central only for a short time during the middle of the war, and that many writers were in the forces or doing other jobs or trying to write in the country, seems to halt Hewison only momentarily: "Yet for a brief moment artists and writers in London felt a sense of communal identity, if only negatively by withdrawing from the conflict around them." Apart from essays about the writer's plight, the principal literary expression Hewison discusses is poetry. Although he acknowledges that some poets, productive and widely read during the war, like Edith Sitwell, were "isolated," and that poets actually serving in the forces combined a sense of harsh reality, a "particularly Oxford note of sensual nostalgia," and premonitions of death (too often accurate), most of Hewison's history of wartime poetry follows a formula of labels. Dominated, so far as publication was concerned, by the contrary tastes of T. S. Eliot and Herbert Read (called a "Romantic"), poetry revolted against the "Auden generation" with its "matrix of Marxist and Freudian theory" toward a "new Romanticism," which, in turn, combining with "varying amount of European symbolism, Celtic romanticism, and latterly Surrealism" led to the poetry of "Apocalypticism." Although he mentions all the names—Dylan Thomas, George Barker, David Gascoyne, Henry Treece, Roy Fuller, G. S. Fraser, and others—Hewison sees them only as representative of movements. He reserves the accolade of his judgment for Henry Reed's "The Lessons of War," "the *poem* of the Second World War." From the fond and extensive quotation that Hewison provides, Reed's poem sounds like a slightly more restrained version of W. E. Henley's "Invictus."

Hewison's summaries of paintings are similarly labelled and his criticism of novels is probably even less acute than his commentary on poetry. Although Hewison does mention the war as part of the origin of the "serious-absurd" character in fiction, most of his comments on fiction are simplistic distortions. The different and brilliantly dense fictional worlds of Joyce

Cary and Evelyn Waugh are contrasted through their authors' respective conditions; Rosamond Lehmann's *The Echo from the Source* is irrelevantly moralized; the tragedy of the story is that the possessive vital impulse uses it for destruction rather than good." The whole purpose of Hewison's history of fiction is "to explain the psychological conditions" caused by the war. A later section at least fourteen literary or Bohemian figures working in or passing through Egypt, concludes that Lawrence Durrell's "Alexandria Quartet" is "one product of the cross-currents of Egypt in wartime." But, one wonders, what kind of "product"? What does the art express? The objection is not simply that Hewison's history reveals about the war's time and space? The objection is not simply that Hewison is so inadequate in dealing with literature, although without literature, the "literary life" is only a reticulated gossip. Rather, the failure in dealing with literature is but one measure of the blunted historical insight that mars the book. So many of the crucial phenomena, sometimes only partially understood, are present: the early novels, like Patrick Hamilton's, that welcomed conscription as an alleviation of dreadful personal responsibility; the myth of Richard Hillary, that fascinating combination (for people on both sides of the Atlantic) of unpatriotic heroism, of function welcomed without conviction; the democracy of pubs and violence; the sense of isolation from anything official or panoramic; the skepticism about words and the fear of being taken for more than one was; V. S. Pritchett's realization, during the war, that interest in social legislation was as much a part of the war itself as it was a blueprint for postwar peace. Yet these phenomena are never shaped, never molded in any framework that can account for their complexity. The shapes are only those of headlines: "It is ironic that after all the political struggles of the thirties the general election [of 1945] meant very little to the intelligentsia, if anything at all." The profusion of Hewison's details and the richness of his sources merited, and would still welcome, a more penetrating and perceptive control.

Reviewed by JAMES GRINDIN