

THE HISTORY OF BRITISH WOMEN'S
WRITING 1920 – 1945
Vol. 8
HISTORY OF BRITISH WOMEN'S WRITING
SERIES

Ed. *Maroula Joannou*

Houndsmill, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
pp.340 £58 (Kindle £49.26)

This set of essays on women's writing provides a thorough introduction to the authors and topics discussed. Each chapter focuses on a clearly defined theme or writer, and includes ample background information as well as attention to the individual styles, qualities and achievements of the texts in question. Maroula Joannou's introduction gives a concise account of the cultural conditions women faced during the period, which is useful grounding for the chapters. The aims of the book are clearly set out: to discuss 'a broad spectrum of writing by women' which is 'not widely known' (p.1), and to challenge the dominance of experimental, largely

male-authored 'high' Modernist texts in academic analysis and popular circulation. Sophie Blanch's chapter 'Women and Comedy', for example, focuses on the 'pleasure and playfulness' (p.112) of women's writing – an aspect that has traditionally been neglected in the struggle 'to ensure that women's contributions to Modernism are taken "seriously"' (p.112).

Humour in women's writing is a recurrent theme throughout the book, suggesting that playfulness and wit are sustained and significant qualities of women's literary production. Maud Ellmann's chapter 'The Art of Bi-Location' celebrates Sylvia Townsend Warner's deft handling of comedy and irony, but also cites these aspects of her writing as central reasons for Warner's neglect by the academic and literary community. Despite Warner's innovative and distinctly Marxist approach to the historical novel genre in *The Corner That Held Them*, which recounts the social relations and finances of the fictional Oby nuns and local community, Ellmann concedes that her sentence structure is 'too orthodox to count as "modernist"' (p.83) in the traditional sense. By focusing on Warner's 'compelling plots, her mordant wit, and her penetrating insight into character' (p.82) Ellmann makes a case for viewing traditional categories of Modernism as a 'stranglehold' (p.83) that prevents a huge range of minority writers from being appreciated in a popular and scholarly context.

Ellmann's chapter on Warner includes several plot summaries of her novels and stories, including her early work *Lolly Willowes* and *Mr Fortune's Maggot*, the historical novels *Summer Will Show* and *The Corner That Held Them*, as well as her later fantasy fiction *The Kingdoms of Elfin*. The considerable space given over to plot summaries and biographical information attests to the difficulty of discussing in detail literary works and authors who are as yet relatively unknown - at least in comparison to their canonical contemporaries. The plot summaries are an attempt to familiarise readers with Warner's novels and 'tempt new readers' to discover them (p.91). Ellmann punctuates her discussion of

Warner with biographical information that gives the non-specialist reader a sense of the complexity of her romantic life, her musical and literary achievements and the evolution of her politics and writing.

The lack of attention given to women writers in the classroom and popular consciousness is a central tenet of the book, but not all women writers in the period went unacknowledged. Jane Goldman's chapter 'Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Modernism' recognises Woolf's dominant position as a female author in contemporary literary circles. Woolf's popularity means that plot summaries can be avoided, allowing a more in-depth analysis of her work. Goldman explores Woolf's complex and often contradictory relationships with race and gender issues, and the philosophical literary position she developed over the course of her life. The chapter discusses Woolf's investigation of universality and gender through anonymous early English poetry and songs; prompted by considering the genderless figure 'Anon' Woolf imagines forms of literary production that might act in the interests of all humanity – 'the common life' (p.60) – rather than the few. Despite Woolf's unique position in the male-dominated modernist canon, Goldman shows her to share the same concerns about equality many other women writers – and other women – faced during the period.

There is a consistent attempt within each chapter to provide a detailed contextualisation of the period, and the social conditions that produced women's writing during that time. The book shows that women writers, far from being isolated and unknown as many of their works appear now, were in fact part of a diverse and politically engaged literary community who influenced and supported one another (chapter 1 even provides a diagram showing how key female modernists were socially connected). Many female writers dealt directly with gender inequality and worked to effect cultural change, as well as producing literary documentation of women's experiences and perspectives. Bonnie Kime Scott repositions feminist concerns as central to Modernism in

chapter 1. Placing gender and suffragism within the context of Modernism, she traces how certain feminist values and movements aligned with modernist concerns about identity in the face of war, and the wartime experiences of subordinate citizens whether female or colonial. Scott suggests that awareness of gender inequality was not simply 'awakened' by war and modernity, but rather 'suffragism preceded modernism' (p.32), in one of the most compelling feminist arguments in the book.

Diana Wallace's chapter 'The Woman's Historical Novel' places the emergence of new forms of historical novel in dialogue with growing awareness and anxiety about the ways women were confined by marriage and other cultural institutions (p.133). Wallace also shows women to be politically engaged, exploring Phyllis Bentley's *Freedom Farewell!* as a novel that looks 'back to Rome to provide a parallel with the contemporaneous rise of Fascism' leading up to World War II (p.133).

While overall the book covers a variety of female authors within the historical period 1920 – 1945, Warner and her writing reappear in several chapters. In Wallace's discussion of the historical novel, *Summer Will Show* is analysed in terms of the important theoretical and critical paradigms of Marx and Lukacs (p.131); Jane Dowson's analysis of women's poetry considers Warner to unhinge 'the association between conventional verse forms and ideological conservatism' (p.171); and finally in Catherine Clay's discussion of 'The Woman Journalist' she notes that Warner 'joined an ambulance unit in the Spanish Civil War and reported on the Spanish situation in the *Left Review*, the *New Statesman* and *Time and Tide*' (p.209), emphasising her political engagement. Warner's presence throughout the books attests to the volume of her writing, its ability to produce fruitful discussion and her overall significance as an author.

If the book has any shortcomings, they stem from the difficulties involved in sparking interest in and reclaiming the importance of neglected writers' work. *The History of British Women's Writing 1920 – 1945* has a considerable

amount of work to do in familiarising readers with non-canonical texts. Due to the volume of information readily available about James Joyce, for example, one would never expect to find a plot summary or much background information in a discussion of *A Portrait of the Artist*: analyses of canonical novels have much more freedom to provide detailed close readings. Nonetheless, the importance of these female authors' work is convincingly stressed throughout the book. The essays offer a detailed outline of the diverse cultural, historical and political circumstances surrounding women's literary production in the first half of the twentieth century, paving the way for further in-depth engagement with these writers, and providing a critical overview that will be an invaluable support to such studies.

Gemma Moss