ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

English Literature Between the Wars

B. Ifor Evans

Routledge Revivals

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First published in 1948, *English Literature Between the Wars* sets out to answer a question: to what extent did the years between the two wars constitute a period in literature? Its exploration leads the author to assess the changes in the reading public, and in the movement of taste. He is led to the conclusion that in the inter-war period some writers were aware that a crisis in civilization was taking place and that these were the more genuinely creative writers.

Apart from a consideration of these general problems, the volume contains studies of E.M. Forster, James Joyce, Aldous Huxley, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and others. It also assesses the influence of war on the literature of the period, comments on the work of the younger writers, and adds a note on the theatre. Students of literature and history will find this book particularly interesting.

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by

B. IFOR EVANS

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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
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TO

SIR FREDERICK MAURICE

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PREFACE

A part of this volume was delivered as lectures at the University College at Bangor, under the Ballard Mathews Foundation.

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CHAPTER I

THE GENERAL BACKGROUND

THE practice by which names, whose immediate application lies in history and politics, are employed to divide the arts into periods is open to a number of obvious objections. At the same time it can be agreed that the years between the war of 1914-18 and the war which began in 1939 constitute not only a separate age in literature but mark a new era in which the whole mind of man and his conception of his destiny have changed in a fundamental way. The test of genius within the period is largely the degree to which a writer has been able to convey into imaginative forms an awareness of how profound these changes have been. In looking back over these decades one sees so much work of obvious technical agility and alertness, which yet somehow falls flat when the ultimate computation is made. The missing quality is often difficult to discover, but it lies always in some failure to recognize that human life is passing through a great tragic period. For the second, third and fourth decades of this century have seen not only destruction, human and material, unparalleled in recorded history, but the mind itself has revealed a capacity for evil of which it was previously unaware.

In England the shock of this change was all the more severe, as the opening years of the century, particularly from 1906 to 1914, had been full of hope. They formed a period of economic prosperity, of expanding opportunity, and in many minds of an increased faith in humanity and in its capacity for progress. England was not without self-criticism in those years, but it was allied to a generous belief that the ' Island Pharisees ' were

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capable of improvement, that social injustice could be eliminated by a process of gradualism, and that imperialism could in time and without violence be assimilated to democratic ideals. Above all it was to be a world where man would have increasing opportunities of exercising his attainments to the full. It may well be that such impressions were illusory, and that any portrait of society as a whole would have yielded large ranges of suffering, depression and disillusionment. But the vocal elements, which were mainly of a middle class, as yet not deprived of its confidence, gave expression to a conviction of the desirability of the world in which it lived and of its faith in a general capacity for improvement.

Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century there had been a literature of social criticism of which H. G. Wells, G. B. Shaw, and John Galsworthy were the main exponents. They were all anxious to reform the world, but they did not question the ultimate possibility of reform, nor postulate the inadequacy of man as an instrument for the good life. Nor did they have any conception of a possible disruption of civilization. Wells and Shaw sometimes questioned the inevitability of progress, but never during this earlier period did they explore this idea with any seriousness. Nor were any of them interested profoundly in the nature of the human mind itself. Shaw's characters were too frequently automata whom he hired to deliver his own brilliant speeches. Wells, along with the well-ordered asylums which he planned for humanity in his theoretical volumes, did portray characters such as Mr. Kipps and Mr. Polly, poignant, irrational, and inconsequent. But he never allowed them to walk into the new Utopias which he was erecting with another part of his mind, and he never admitted even to himself, that they were the instruments from which life had to be made. One of the extraordinary phenomena is that both Wells and Shaw lived on throughout the inter-war period and kept themselves aware of the changing shape of the times.