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Lassner, Phyllis. "Introduction." British Women
Writers of World War II, New York:
St. Martins, 1998.

Introduction

As recently as 1983 it was still assumed that English literature had somehow glossed over the century's most cataclysmic event. Salman Rushdie made the point:

If you think of World War II – America, Germany and Italy all produced extraordinary novels about it; England didn't. Perhaps that also has something to do with the fact that the end of the war and the end of the Empire happened at almost the same time. There's a certain amount of living in a green world of the past in England. . . . There have been few attempts to come to terms with contemporary England, though perhaps that's beginning to change.¹

In the years since Rushdie's claim, we have only begun to recognize that for women writers the World War II home fronts were fertile grounds for the production of a varied and powerful literature. As their writing is studied, it is reshaping critical debates about war literature. Among many others, the work of Stevie Smith, Storm Jameson, Elizabeth Bowen, and Phyllis Bottome dramatically refute Rushdie's assumptions. But equally important, these writers question ongoing approaches to the cultural politics of war and its representation by women.

The assumptions supporting Rushdie's contention were already established in 1941 by Tom Harrison, who collected British home front testimony for the Mass-Observation Archives. Writing on 'War Books' in *Horizon* magazine, and claiming to have 'read literally every book which has anything to do with the war, reportage, fiction or fantasy', Harrison concludes with mocking despair, 'Never have I felt that I owed so little to so many.'² In this case as in Rushdie's, such a claim holds up only when women's war writing is not taken seriously. With 'hats off to Naomi Mitchison quietly cultivating harsh lands in the Mull of Kintyre', Harrison goes on to dismiss other women as part of 'the large number of different writers who have poured out indifferent material' ('War Books', p. 418). Harrison's plaint can be seen as the result of a

self-fulfilling manifesto he co-signed in October 1941 with other male colleagues, 'Why Not War Writers?'³ After calling for government support of war writers in order to 'implant consciousness' of 'the relation of our every action to the conduct of the war', the co-signers prescribe war writing by delimiting the meaning of action: 'Why are there no novels of value about the building of shadow factories, the planning of wartime services, the operation of . . . an evacuation scheme? Why are there no satires on hoarders, or the black market? Why no novels of army life?' ('Why Not', pp. 237-8).

Harrison's manifesto and Rushdie's statement, like so many surveys of British World War II literature, reflect critical values that predetermine the neglect of women's war writing. These surveys polarize the war fronts so that women's debates and experiences of the war do not figure in the studies which define war experience.⁴ By defining war literature as representing combat experience, critics omit the writing of those who merely suffered through the Blitz, the aerial bombardment of British cities in 1940 and 1941, and for whom home front and battlefield merged. Although some, like Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Taylor, Betty Miller, and Katharine Burdekin have been reprinted, too many remain out of print and unavailable in most libraries. As a result of this neglect, much of this complex 'world of the past' remains invisible, and so it seems, an entire front of the war is still buried.

Instead of living 'in a green world of the past', most British women writers represented their wartime lives in a grey and stormy present. Because this difference emerges with so much interesting complexity, I decided to concentrate on women writers themselves rather than compare them to their male compatriots. Instead, I offer a reading that argues for the value of British women's World War II writing as a distinguished and multiform literary tradition and as individual novels of political and social analysis. Avowedly political, these writers tested the ideological and aesthetic grounds of traditional genre definitions in relation to their own ideologies and the language of wartime representation. Most studies, however, give them only a single voice or ideological framework.⁵

Despite expanding canons of women writers, British women writers of World War II remain at the margins of literary movements and ideological concerns with war. To complicate matters, many of these writers preferred the margins to the mainstream,

and as a result were either trivialized or ignored. To recover them requires that we see their literary and political differences both as they identified them and as they were defined for them then and now. I maintain that exploring their individual and group differences takes us into uncharted literary and cultural territory. To group them testifies to the collective power of their arguments and contribution to the broad range of literary productivity in Britain in the thirties and forties. The result will be to expand our historical and cultural knowledge about a time we still find so compelling.

I contend that in their writing about fascism, the Nazi blitzkrieg [the coordinated campaign by air and ground forces] and Allied responses, many British women writers represent a challenge to two dominant cultural discourses: (1) British national and cultural identity and relationship with Europe; and (2) theories and practices of literary and cultural critics of women and war today. In response to the political discourses of their day (and Salman Rushdie's echoing voice), women writers ask: How does one reconcile a thriving British imperial identity based on claims of moral hegemony with the politics of appeasing Hitler and misogynist domestic ideologies and social policies? The failure to confront what Storm Jameson called 'the reality of evil men' causes these women to wonder whether Britain was ever justified in its claims to moral rectitude.⁶ And finally, even as the war ended with the Allies' victory, they asked: Was this indeed a just conflict and what difference will victory make for the women and men on British and European home fronts?

Of particular interest to cultural debates is how these writers challenge the project of recovering women writers and women's wartime experiences. For while studies of women and war have exposed the masculinist ideologies of all wars and all kinds of women's resistance, they ignore the particularities of World War II that engendered a new definition of resistance. Many British women writers resisted policies of making peace with Hitler by insisting that this war, unlike others, was the only way to save the führer's victims. With full recognition that women rarely influenced government policies, many became active resisters through writing that questioned their social and political status in relation to accepted definitions of victimization. Even as their writing became political, however, many British women were intensely concerned about whether being active made them resisters or complicit with aggressivist policies. In their dilemma, they might

very well have agreed with Elizabeth Bowen's declaration that all war writing is 'resistance writing' as it works out its own politics of concern⁷. We see this as they debated definitions of liberal democracy, international peace, offensive and defensive intervention, and British imperialism; as they resisted complacency towards the political and social effects of wartime dislocations, about victims on all sides, and about postwar social planning.

This women's discourse of World War II destabilizes the universalist anti-war conclusions of many influential studies of women and war.⁸ Those studies, which are based on World War I as the foundational anti-war text and Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* as the canonical feminist anti-war theory, assume that all wars are wrong and that they destroy women's culture. While many British women shared this assumption after World War I, many also changed their minds as they recognized that the uniquely horrific consequences of Nazi policies differed from the self-deceived aims, purposeless losses, and uneasy peace that had justified their denunciation of 'the war to end all wars'. These complex and sometimes wildly divergent responses challenge Woolf's metahistorical and pancultural construction of fascism as well as essentialist theories that women are only passive war victims, war protesters, or complicit with the power of a masculinist war machine.

In recent years, rediscoveries of neglected women writers have led to cultural debates about the power of literary texts to be transformative, even revolutionary, about new definitions of modernism, and about extending aesthetic criteria to include didactic or political effects and popular culture. As Carole Snee reminds us, however, even with its inclusionary moves, literary criticism 'from Leavis to Althusser' is wedded to the idea of a canon for its 'self-definition of good art'.⁹ Most significantly for British women writing World War II, whatever canon we privilege – feminist, modernist, realist or postmodern – the writing valued in our time is that which questions or transforms traditional forms or conforms to those currently privileged. When it doesn't fit or if it challenges the new criteria, the writing remains ignored or is reconstructed.¹⁰

British women writing World War II have also suffered from literary study that engages writers' political and social alignments; methods that combine literary and ideological analysis show concern for authors' unconscious or conscious implication in the

dominant ideologies of the day. In the case of the thirties, critics often assume that writers' references to liberalism cohere in a universal definition and voice. As a result, writers are judged, not by their own arguments, but by their attention to liberalism's gendered social construction or debt to collectivity.¹¹ In the case of the forties, women's support of the war can be construed as a conservatism that all too easily aligns them with a masculinist war machine and alienates them from modernist forms.¹² The convergence of a critical debate about ideology and literary aesthetics, about accepting one literary period as political and dismissing another on aesthetic and political grounds, marks a point where we can see each period in the light of the other, discover new discursive terrain, and create more fluid boundaries of literary and political definitions.

In addition to individual differences, as a group, the writers I found in the course of my researches are distinct from canonical writers and categories of the period. Though my study begins with the thirties, only Virginia Woolf claims the modernist camp as her own. And while so many novels experiment formally with political aims, they do not invite new definitions of modernism; instead they invent new literary responses to modernism and to the era's socialist and proletarian fictions. They accomplish this in glossing their literary writing in polemical book reviews, newspaper and magazine letters, in forums on war and peace, and as volunteer war workers on the home front. The corresponding political goals of their writing and actions invite us to rethink the aesthetic criteria implicated in our ongoing concerns with the ideological and genre boundaries of literature.

My assumption in constructing this British women's literary tradition has been from the start that our debates would be complicated by integrating additional perspectives. While there is always the danger that readers will reject positions that challenge their own, I have worked within the inclusionary ethos of contemporary feminists. As challenging as women's war writing is to male-centred canonical interests, so is it to today's theories of women and war. For this reason, I felt it was imperative to prepare my responses in relation to debates on women and war over the past 20 years. My strategy, therefore, is to address questions raised by these debates through my analyses of British women writing World War II. In turn, these writers raise issues that enrich the texture of these debates by destabilizing their terms.

It may not be a coincidence that only since the Vietnam War have scholars been exploring war as a gendered discourse and experience. That war, on a home front so far away, invaded western homes only through TV screens, but the nightly show of decimated homes and families and the absence of women in war discourses lent dramatic irony to the simultaneous liberation struggle of western women. Those who served and died were noticed only when women lobbied for a memorial. That attention exposed a wide range of women's war attitudes. Just as public opinion stopped blaming soldiers for the war's problems, so we now understand that women participate in war for reasons other than those canonized as coercion, complicity or resistance.

Current feminist debates on women and war

For more than 20 years, research and theories of women and war have modelled women's representations, roles, and attitudes on cultural and social codes of motherhood. While it is acknowledged that these codes vary across cultures and time, they are usually interpreted as prevailing upon women to internalize and act upon universalized images of caregiving and selflessness, not to mention self-sacrifice. Despite their emphasis on nurturing impulses, these images do not present motherhood as strictly peaceloving. Jean B. Elshtain, a pioneer theorist of women and war, shows how these images may rely on and justify biological imperatives of motherhood, but they inscribe aggression as well.¹³ She argues that because women internalize social and ideological pressures to participate in war, they are neither biologically nor socially constructed as innately pacifist or innocent bystanders. Elshtain, like many feminists, locates the source of these pressures in a romantic discourse that encourages men, figured as 'Just or Beautiful Warriors', to go to war to protect and defend women, who in turn embody virtues that constitute righteous causes ('Women and War', p. 3). As a result women are easily made to justify war's violence.

Recent study shows that this model elides the actual wartime behaviour of men and women. Wartime records of women's behaviour reveal that they are not passive bystanders, but participate and actively fuel war's support. But even here, a problematic maternal model prevails, implying that women justify their war work not only to nurture men, but to rally for their sacrifice.

Despite critiques of polarized 'Good Mothers' and 'Good Soldiers', the 'central, powerful image of the Moral Mother – nurturant, compassionate, and politically correct' has had enormous staying power.¹⁴ But if 'the Moral Mother' image legitimizes women's place in public spheres, it also ties them to domestic ideology and roles. This maternal double bind seems an inevitable outcome to theories that keep women in line with notions of either their innate or constructed natures. Either nature essentializes them or prescribes, as such models do, what women ought to feel and how they ought to act. The prescriptive ordering of these formulations denies women the struggle for self-determination other scholars are gleaning from women's actual histories and self-representations.

Sara Ruddick's concept of 'maternal thinking' revises essentialist concepts by viewing women's war responses historically. But because that history is only about pacifism, even women's struggle against violation is seen as a 'maternal principle of reconciliation, resistance and refusal to injure', the only alternative being 'failure'.¹⁵ Because Ruddick's revision is based on a universal idea of 'warism', she sees 'the cruel realities of war engraved' with the same intent and result, and therefore can find no justification for women's support of any war (See note 15 above, p. 113).

Women's war experiences have been further polarized from men's by viewing both through the prism of literary images. In their compendious study of women writers over the two world wars, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar expose an internecine battle of the sexes. Pitting women's writing against men's, they argue that their separate spheres of suffering drove them to project their victimization onto each other in a war of words. Most recently, the collection, *Gendering War Talk*, focuses on both the historical moment and the symbolic representation of gender as it is constructed in and through war. Here again, however, because the aim is peace and reconciliation, its contributors see warlike values as a universal force overwhelming the historical contingencies that shape different origins and aims of wars. While the writers complicate the impact on gender by locating the pressures of warlike values in both men's and women's behaviour, the values of peace and war are themselves polarized. As a result, so are men and women, who are made to seem so susceptible to either peace or war values that they cannot see each in the other's light, much less question or revise them.

In response to the pitfalls of such polarized models, feminist scholars have called for analysing war culture and ideology through devising more categories. In order to demonstrate a wider range of women's wartime roles and representations, women's 'material reality' must be considered in terms of historical and present 'relations between gender and militarism', including women's military service and work in military production, and the effect of militarism on women's daily lives (Leonardo, p. 603).¹⁶ Jane Marcus argues for the place of imperialism and race in the story of women and war, while Claire Tylee, on World War I, includes class and age distinctions.¹⁷ Marcus criticizes any analytical model that ignores the historical context. If we foreground 'the metaphorical war between the sexes', argues Lynne Hanley, we lose 'sight of the real wars, of the massive, global human slaughter actually going on in the world outside these duels of the pen'.¹⁸ Without understanding how the shifting grounds of wars and different players vex dualistic categories, we cannot understand the complex attitudes that support various kinds of war resistance and participation.

War, gender and the historical moment

It is my contention that British women writers interpret their World War II experiences in ways that unsettle our conceptions of political differences, social change and gender. As they show again and again, even as 'the discourse of wartime social policy worked to limit gender disruption', their own literary discourse very often resisted traditional gender relations and expressed a yearning for social change (*Behind the Lines*, p. 8). Their acute sense of the particular historical moment links their critique of dualistic gender relations to the geo-political shifts that marked changing constructions of ally and enemy. We see this dramatically in their diverse and complex responses to the enthusiastic participation, complicity and victimization of women living under the Nazis.

By considering wars as specific historical events, each with its own destabilizing battlegrounds, we can see that to identify women as pro- or anti-war or, to use the old labels, conservative and liberal, prevents us from noticing the nuanced questions women writers asked of their own politics and participation. Moreover, while many women writers use language generally attributed to

conservative, socialist or leftist platforms, they challenge their precepts as well as our own use of political labels, especially as they remained sceptical about any tradition or reform schemes. Identifying their concerns allows us to see that their choices, while pressured by prevailing ideologies and what has been called 'the Man's House of militarist social organization', also involve questioning those ideologies as the material conditions of specific wars shape social parameters¹⁹

British women question the aims and direction of World War II through a range of literary forms that interpret the moral and political implications of actual events; theirs is not a war of the sexes or of literary or symbolic images involving only the production and history of literature. Thus, though women responded to wartime changes through the lenses of 'existing cultural resources', they also became agents of cultural change, analysing actual domestic and foreign policies that were perpetrated by and affected the lives of both men and women. And instead of feeling victimized or discouraged by being labelled 'selfish, divisive, or even treasonous', they often took great relish in their revisionary representations (*Behind the Lines*, p. 7).

Attending to a historicized range of women's self-representation also shows how changes in war and society do not, as so often claimed, always polarize men and women but provide ways of seeing how their responses intersect and are often interdependent. Jana Thompson and Scharf and Woollacott argue that the historical perspective shows how social changes, however fleeting or lasting during wartime, both alter and reinforce conceptions of masculinity and femininity.²⁰ An example of this would be how women's independence and self-esteem were spurred by wartime paid work but also undercut by prevailing domestic ideology.²¹ Widening our perspective even more is to see how gender constructions are complicated by seeing the military discourse of this particular war in relation to other cultural texts and symbolic icons of the era, and not as solely determining in itself.²² In interactions between women's self-portrayal and their consciousness of propaganda and social codes deployed in broadcasts, newspapers and women's magazines, we can see how women do not merely ingest images of victimization or power, but act, react, and represent themselves in both roles, sometimes all at once. So themes of 'women's complicity and and resistance to war' are not discrete, but overlap (Cooper *et al.*, p. XV; note 8,

above). If we consider how literature and other cultural artifacts are implicated in both war and gender systems, we will see how war changes imagistic and linguistic meanings of categories such as gender, and how women debate and challenge those meanings. In literary representation, as Cooper *et al.* (p. 82) observe, war, narration, and characterization work together so that gender roles not only reflect prevailing social codes, but question and revise them.

Literature and other cultural artifacts are implicated in war, not as universal themes, but as expressions of particular historic conflicts working in tandem with the historical memories, concerns, and ideologies, not only of writers, but of readers at different times. So our readings of the specific past of World War II must be shaped by our positions in our present. In the case of current theories of women and war, while categories expand to include women of different class, ethnic, ideological, age, and religious identities, there has been no attempt to see war except as a universal category of aggression, bellicosity, terror and violation. My hunch is that because our theories of war are so invested in memories and constructions of the tragic wastes of World War I and the Vietnam War, World War II must either be ignored, dismissed as an exception, or integrated as one more debilitating experience for women. As Pierson (p. 85; note 22, above) argues, however,

[T]he term "war" is, of course, an abstraction under which we subsume a bewildering variety of activities, only some of which could rightly be viewed as "gendering." For instance, in extreme situations, such as running for cover from aerial bombardment or seeing one's loved ones led off to a gas chamber, the social category of sex/gender would undoubtedly shrink to insignificance.

In light of these World War II examples, the proposition that meanings of war and gender shift according to their discourses should expand the reasons women choose to fight for their country and unite with the very forces they hold responsible for war's terrors.

I argue in this book that those British women writers who construct World War II as a unique onslaught find their own reasons to participate in or resist the war effort, reasons that develop out of their experiences in domestic and public spheres.

These reasons, moreover, do not accord with the manipulative messages of government propaganda, popular media, or with their traditional gender roles. The cumulative effect of reading British women's writing about fascism and World War II is to see that they took no meanings for granted or as global. Writers such as Betty Miller, Elizabeth Taylor, Lettice Cooper, and Margaret Kennedy drew upon their liminal position as women in an unoccupied but embattled England to question the aims and costs of war. I maintain that it is from within the complex and ambiguous conditions of middle class privilege, the blitzing of middle class private life, and their marginalized political and literary lives that many British women writers constructed their responses to the war.

Though they often respond in the language of caregivers and protectors, the safe haven they imagine for their children reflects an idea of home and homeland that does not comply with official war aims or prevailing domestic ideologies. Those who unite with the war effort create narrative voices which define their country, their homes, and family on different grounds. And in their vocation as writers, as part of the sacrifices this difference moves them to, they demand a greater public role and recognition by the state, not 'to prove themselves worthy' and therefore patriotic in any conventional sense, but to redefine patriotism as an emotional and political commitment to a nation and to social roles they would change (Thompson, p. 66; note 20). For these writers, the myth of a People's War must be revised to become the truths of women's home front realities.²³ These realities, moreover, would reflect a different truth about the emotional resonances of nationhood. Just as the People's War was now a woman's war, so women demonstrated that national identity was gendered.

The proliferating dichotomies of gender and war only prove how powerful and determining are those images dividing women into passive and innocent victims or complicit with the 'military state', either in their war work or in 'bearing the children that will replace the Nation's fallen manhood'.²⁴ Such dualities undermine the challenges of feminist and cultural critics to the hierarchies contained in binary categories. But it is also difficult to escape such images when the model of analysis for women and war continues to be World War I, with its haunting archetypal resonances of self-defeating loss. If we invoke a historically discrete approach for the study of war's literary representation, we discover

not only that women write from 'every conceivable ideological position', but that they invest wars, both continuous and discrete, of different times and places, with different meanings (Marcus, p. 50; note 17). We can therefore see women's changing attitudes towards world war primarily as an evolving and recursive cast of mind, a moral philosophy and world view, especially in terms of understanding history and the processes of social and political change which had begun but not ended with World War I.

The painful separation of World Wars I and II

Differences are clarified when we examine responses to World Wars I and II. Vera Brittain, Virginia Woolf, Ethel Mannin, and other women became lifelong pacifists as a result of the tragedies of World War I, and viewed World War II as a continuation of its horrors, with dress rehearsals in the Spanish Civil War. Others, whose careers also span the two world wars, changed their minds; in so doing, they 'destabilize' what Jane Marcus calls 'the standard plot of the literature of World War I' ('Antaeus', p. 50). If we follow women's varied and changing views, we see that they responded in language that marked the policies, propaganda, events, and symbols of a history of change even as some complained of stagnation. To globalize or abstract these responses by fusing them with their responses to World War I would betray their struggles to publicize their revisionary political and moral consciousness.

It is unclear how much the regeneration of domestic ideology which marked the post World War I backlash against women affected the attitudes of British women writers towards another world war. At the same time that the interwar years produced economic and political crises, domestic ideology and women's traditional roles were regenerated.²⁵ As women's fiction of the twenties and thirties reveals, the English middle classes retreated to traditional attitudes that celebrated the domestic sphere and its relations, and this produced the effect of putting 'women and the home . . . at the centre of national life'.²⁶ By the time fascism was taking hold in Europe, with its emphasis on women's childbearing and caring roles, many British women writers came to fear that its radical conservatism accorded only too well with traditional attitudes at home. Vera Brittain's 1936 novel, *Honourable Estate*, intended as a feminist drama of women's 'private destinies'

in the interwar period, reflects her 'painful awareness that the rise of fascism and the return of militarism marked a reaction in politics' that 'revived hostility to feminism'.²⁷ Women's writing about fascism shows that many imagined it exploding into another war, but that this time, home and battleground would become one, ruled by a combined ethos of militarism and misogyny.²⁸ It is this imaginative coalition that makes their dystopic fictions of the thirties part of British women's literature of World War II.

Naomi Mitchison worried that British liberalism, always subject to internal dissent and lack of cohesive popular support, would dissolve if conservatives yielded to a fascist takeover. Her fears, however, merged with her belief that whatever polity prevailed and oppressed them, women would survive a fascist war only if they continued to fight for equality as well as for expression of their differences. Her fiction and non-fiction of the thirties and forties represents women as both victims and agents for change. In her 1934 dystopia, *We Have Been Warned*, women are brutalized by a British fascist takeover that could easily have been inspired by Oswald Mosley's fascist emphasis on women's maternal and domestic prerogatives. His split statement, 'We want men who are men and women who are women', reflected the backlash feminists feared and resisted as well as their division about valorizing sexual difference or equality (Kent, pp. 141, 142; note 28, above). Feminists like Eleanor Rathbone argued that women benefited more from valuing their sexual difference and wanted special economic assistance for women's family responsibilities. Rathbone's apprehension about another world war was allayed in part by her belief that if women were paid for domestic work, they could offer the home as 'an effective antidote to the anxiety created by the threat of war, even to the fact of war itself' (Kent, p. 142; note 28, above).

If women writers of this era connected their views of women's domestic roles to issues about war aims, they did not do so with any symmetry. Whether they saw the domestic sphere as a site of regeneration or resistance did not lead them to support or protest the war. As their depiction of the British home front reveals, both home and street, whether bombed or intact, are imagined as places where women can just as easily be victimized, be self-determining or implement social change. Just as women's wartime roles were as constraining as they were liberating, so their reactions

were mixed. Even as they were conscripted into agricultural and factory work, they were also subject to government policies that denied them equal economic compensation or adequate childcare. And yet, as so many have reported, women found these work experiences liberating. While such reactions reflect similarities to World War I, feeling liberated into new spheres as well as abused by primitive working conditions and persistent misogyny, their writing reveals important departures.

The structure of this book reflects the myriad views and forms of the writers I consider. What began as a survey of attitudes towards a second world war came to reflect women's changing definitions of war and pacifism as peace turned to crisis in the thirties. It is because of this transformation that there are so few women writers who declare themselves pacifists. Most never stopped feeling that war is loathsome but many also found that they must give up their pacifist principles. Learning about Hitler's victims, many concluded that not only could pacifism not help, but that it coincided with what they felt was the cruel indifference of Britain's appeasement and war policies. In their passionate reaction against the conservative political culture Storm Jameson labelled 'old Park Lane', pacifism itself appeared bound to the same romanticized past to which reactionary forces aligned themselves.²⁹

The tension between a revolt from the past and present and fears for the future produced a radical form of writing examined in two chapters following a survey of war attitudes. These are the dystopias that envision apocalyptic ends to the reactionary past and stagnant present. In the thirties, which saw a proliferation of politically engaged fiction, women's dystopias grapple with political and social unease in radically nonrealistic forms. Although speculative fiction was already an established genre by the mid-thirties, what distinguishes these dystopias is the conjunction of a gendered political analysis, the historical moment, and imagined experience. Together, they form a feminist political polemic that represents a rejection of the technologically bound dystopias of H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley. Women's dystopias remain earthbound, where evil forces have evolved, not in test tubes, outer space or under a rock, but in Parliamentary halls. Their imagined fusion of political and social disorder and war relates women's prescribed biological destinies in the past to a projected horrific future. As female characters are portrayed both individually and collectively, they embody and question the myths that shape

political culture. For Naomi Mitchison and Storm Jameson, the political becomes personal as they imagine traditional values translated into state policy with fascist takeovers. Written two and four years before Virginia Woolf theorized the origins of fascism in *Three Guineas*, the dystopias of Mitchison and Jameson dramatize the catastrophic consequences of fascism, but with differences that mark their political and literary inquiries as a reaction against modernism as well. Recoiling from modernism's search for mythic wholeness at the expense of *realpolitik*, these dystopias dramatize the historical moment as disrupting a trans-historical continuum.

The linkage in women's dystopias of political and literary analysis and polemic follows the war years in imagining a world dominated by Hitler and Tojo. It is here that my chronological sequence assumes the projective shape of these fictions, for one of the most powerful dystopias about the protracted desolation of the war's outcome was written in 1937. Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* takes us into the 700th year of the Reich while delving into the past that represents the historic reality of so many women writers' fears. That past is in fact the present of the 1938 *Three Guineas*, Mitchison's 1934 *We Have Been Warned*, and Jameson's 1936 *In the Second Year*. A far cry from the domestic conservatism of Britain's interwar period, the future in *Swastika Night* and Jameson's 1942 *Then We Shall Hear Singing* is orchestrated by imagining its most radical consequences as they spill over from the home into the disorder of communal life and international politics.

Because so many women writers view the home as consolidating the political, social, and cultural concerns of the home front, my next two chapters consider domestic fictions of the war. With their wartime settings, these novels represent the ground on which interwar and wartime imperatives meet domestic ideology. For writers such as Betty Miller, Lettice Cooper, Marguerite Steen and Elizabeth Bowen, however, this is not a fiction that promises to soothe the aching wartime soul. Despite many rural settings, these novels do not promote a sense of 'living in a green world of the past', as Rushdie claimed. The domestic quietude of middle and upper class life cannot be retained in wartime, even if its doyennes so wished. Amidst the pressures of shortages, evacuation, and maintaining the stability to which these classes were committed, all staples of their lives are dashed. Gone is the solidity of the manor, the quaint village, or urban neighbourhood, with their self-contained, reserved, and decent populace. Its heirs

are disoriented and decentred by wartime conditions, the sum of which blasts all containment, reserve, and decency into social and psychological shrapnel. Even as oppositions of masculinity and femininity are maintained, even exacerbated by home front conditions, this does not guarantee social stability or confidence in the social order. The exposure of domestic disorder in these fictions allows us to explore how the end of self-confidence and the quotidian invites new definitions of community and empowerment among women. As the grammar of social life becomes political, these domestic novels also reveal new perspectives on the genre.

My study of English home front novels moves to the European scene in the chapters that follow. In a sense they follow the political trajectory of many British women writers who lived and travelled in Central Europe between the wars. For Ann Bridge and Olivia Manning, Europe is no longer an exotic site of romantic adventure, but one in which to recognize a new world disorder. The result radicalizes the conventions of genre-fiction to deploy a political critique that links British foreign policy and domestic ideology to the fates of aliens and women. On the foreign grounds of these texts, British national identity is both gendered and racialized, bearing critical weight in its relation to the Nazi enemy.

In the light of these revisions of gender and national identity, my book can be seen as a celebration not only of many neglected women writers of a submerged literary site, but of their moral and political courage which evolved in what Henry Louis Gates Jr calls 'the politics of identification'. This position contrasts sharply with identity politics, which 'starts with the assertion of a collective allegiance' and being

... about the priority of difference... is – by itself – dangerously inadequate. A politics of identification starts not with the possession of identity, but with the capacity to identify with. It asks what we have in common with others, while acknowledging the diversity among ourselves. It is about the promise of a shared humanity.³⁰

British women writers who lived through and looked back at World War II wrestled with a politics of identification in response to the identity politics of the liberal tradition they inherited. This tradition, despite shifts in emphasis over time, continued to

combine an ideal of freedom with 'the imperatives of achieving decency and achieving order'.³¹ Within this purview, liberalism had also produced social codes which kept women from being as influential as they would have wished. 'The image of decent traditional English folk' did not include Storm Jameson or Eleanor Rathbone refusing to accept a polite 'no' from officials and notables they pressed to rescue Hitler's victims (D. Smith, p. 256; see note 31 above). In one sense, women's behaviour travestied a hallmark of British decency – restraint. Compounding their bad form was the cause for which women were stretching the bounds of propriety. Rescuing aliens defied a cohesive identity politics on which 'the management of a decent communal life' depended (D. Smith, p. 256; see note 31 above). The refugees looked to England to fulfil its 'promise of a shared humanity', but as the nation rallied around feelings of national unity in the emergency of war, it rejected those who represented difference, and either refused them entry or interned them as potential threats (D. Smith, p. 256; see note 31 above).

It was their identification with these Others that drove so many women writers to redefine patriotism, with its emphasis on national identity and denigration of women's rights and needs as 'selfish and divisive'. Government and popular rejection of refugees reminded these women writers of their own marginality, a position that drew ironic attention to the idea of national solidarity. In the sense that women and refugees were granted a kind of alien status, they could not be considered integral to that part of national identity which stands united. In wartime, when the nation defined itself as an island – England, fighting a defensive war alone against a colonizing enemy, women and refugees represent its ironic opposite: a colony of Others representing the nation as the empire – Great Britain.

What happened, British women writers asked their Janus-faced nation, to the liberal ideal of individual freedom in harmony with 'a decent, rational, and ordered community?' (D. Smith, p. 256; see note 31 above). What they saw were signs of civil tensions that did not bode well either for Britain's war aims or its projected plans for peace. If women and refugees were seen as alien Others, threatening the myth of a united nation, then also threatened was the propaganda that there was a united front to beat back the enemy and build a liberal society. Parallel to the condition of interned refugees, women's political writing and activism were

contested and opposed. The oppositional status granted women and aliens suggested a nation at war with itself.

And yet despite their alienation, many British women writers forged a detente with the nation which was 'interfering now with their liberty', as Virginia Woolf noted.³² But instead of remaining 'shut up' and 'shut out', many women writers represented this condition in their debates about the war (*TG*, p. 103). From their unrelenting writing, we learn that women's engagements with internal crisis and world war affected their consciousness and identities permanently. Having politicized and publicized their identities and writing, many remained aggressive proponents of political and social causes for the rest of their lives.

What I have come to value as the heroic lives and writing of so many British women of this era could easily fuel nostalgia. As so many have testified since, especially during its 50th anniversary, World War II was a time when so many boundaries did dissolve that the effect was liberatory for many women, regardless of government constraints. But any possibility for nostalgia is undercut by tensions that define these writers' identification with their nation, 'a kettle on the boil', as Betty Miller put it.³³ It is because the issue of English and British identity plays such an important part in women's war debates that I also decided not to include writers like H.D. (the nom de plume of the poet, Hilda Doolittle), who wrote movingly about her wartime experiences in Britain, but did not assume its identity. As home front and battleground merged, meanings of the nation at war expand for many British women beyond the factory and home, beyond the borders of national interest and 'existing cultural resources' to redefine nation, homeland, self and other. As women writers either acknowledge openly or embed, their ambivalent identification with alien Others shifted the meaning of this war.

The writers I consider created various narrative forms in response to their ambivalences about the nation and the Other. In all cases, however, they represent nation and Other as a relationship between the outbreak of a new and foreign tyranny and a very old style of oppression at home. This portrayal was founded on the place of women's experience and attitudes in the political culture of total war that monitored and censored their voices. In a mirroring effect, British women writers depict this multilayered experience as their ambivalent identification with representations of self and Other. That these writers recognize both similarities

and unassimilable differences between themselves and Others such as evacuees or refugees and victims, adds even more moral complexity to their polemical fictions. Whether they write from a prewar, wartime, or postwar position, their moral template remains the same: how women's responses to the presence or absent but haunting presence of the Other offers criteria for their determining the moral aims of the war.

Although the concept of the Other is threatened by overuse, the work of Emmanuel Levinas sheds particular light on the moral complexity in women's responses to those they cast in that role. Describing the Other as 'a face looking at me as absolutely foreign', Levinas establishes that 'the absolutely other is the Other. . . . The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity'.³⁴ As so many British women writers realized, with varying responses, despite their own status of Other, the absolute foreignness of Others meant that not only was the state of difference between them immutable and absolutely constant, but that any bridge between self and other would still keep them separate, both at the level of experience and identity.

The moral gauge used by Levinas and with which British women writers grapple is located in a relationship of responsibility, where the Other might appeal for help but 'resists possession, resists my powers' (*T&I*, p. 197; see note 34 above). The struggle results because the Other will always demand both separateness and empathy, and '[t]o welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom' (*T&I*, p. 85; see note 34 above). Levinas claims that his concepts of the Other and moral responsibility transcend historical experience; his persistent references to the Holocaust invoke a sense of timelessness as a 'drama of Sacred History'.³⁵ And yet, as Theodore De Boer has noted, the reason why Levinas is so concerned with such social institutions as 'the political order of citizens in a state' is because 'In the years 1933-1945 we experienced concretely what it means when institutions forsake justice. Man was left to the guidance of his own conscience. This was the predicament of the Jews.'³⁶ Pinpointing 'an explicitly Jewish moment', Levinas extrapolates a moral question profoundly rooted in both sacred and profane history: 'The essential problem is: can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?'³⁷

Many British women writers speak of the morality of a second world war as a relationship to Others threatened by a holocaust they fear and whose reality they ponder long afterward. They ponder the absolute commandment of not killing as they dramatize the absolute alterity of both the Nazi enemy and the Jewish victim. In its dramatic form, their ambivalent identification with Others is played out as problematic relationships between women whose sense of self is prescribed by government and social policy and men and women marked as unassimilable aliens. Women's depictions of these ambivalent relationships provide a distinctive cultural key to the social and literary contexts and concerns of women's wartime writing. Constantly facing rejection of their own social platforms, some writers recreated their experience in fictional Others who become victims of an oppressive politics of identification. Instead of expressing empathy for those who have also been subject to an ongoing history of persecution and marginality, this writing recapitulates and reinforces that history even as it pleads for the rescue of aliens and refugees.

The ambivalence that drives this writing produces rhetorical effects that are equally ambiguous. On the one hand, caricatures of alien Others often act out a rejection of the marginalized self. Typical of a kind of self-loathing in which rejection is internalized, in constructing these stereotypes, the rejected also acts out her identification with the oppressor. And yet in most cases, these caricatures play alongside polemical pleas for sympathy and support for the Other. The multifarious ways in which these ambivalences play out in many texts create moral and aesthetic complexities that challenge our own constructions of the past. They do so by enriching our understanding of the relationship between British women writers, the historic moment in which they wrote, and their construction of it.

In view of our own contemporary critical concerns with representation, rationality, and the truth of historicism, we would have to consider these narrative depictions in and through their changing permutations. This does not relegate these writers' fictions to a falsely polarized position of subjective, partial, ideological, or even irrational responses to history. As Paul Ricoeur argues, while 'traditional dichotomies between historical and fictional writing' problematize our ability to find 'a truth claim' in each, there is a stronger relationship between historical and fictional writing than supposed:

Just as narrative fiction does not lack reference, the reference proper to history is not unrelated to the "productive" reference of fictional narrative. Not that the past is unreal: but past reality is, in the strict sense of the word, unverifiable. Insofar as it no longer exists, the discourse of history can seek to grasp it only indirectly. It is here that the relationship with fiction shows itself as crucial. The reconstruction of the past . . . is the work of the imagination. The historian, too, by virtue of the links . . . between history and narrative, shapes the plots that the documents may authorize or forbid but that they never contain in themselves. History, in this sense, combines narrative coherence with conformity with the documents. This complex tie characterizes the status of history as interpretation.³⁸

I contend that British women writers of World War II create historical fiction that performs the act of historical interpretation through the lens of the social documents that shaped their experience. These 'documents' include the wartime situations and policies that drove them from their homes into evacuation or war work, that called for refugee internment, and that both liberated and constrained their sense of self and Other. In their ambivalent constructions of the fates of many Others, these writers not only reconstruct and verify the past, they interpret it as part of their discovery of new meanings in their own lives. In order to give credence to these writings my analysis will not problematize their representations of World War II to the point where they are in danger of disappearing once again, only this time, in a theoretical debate. Emphasizing writers' changing perceptions, ambivalences, and figuration does not mean that we can only speak of them primarily in terms of destabilizing or demythicizing discourses. To do so has produced the effect of merging the experiences of different wars into one experience or plot. As experiences of different wars are discussed as having been decentred by the exigencies of language and competing discourses of war, it has been all too easy for the former to disappear into the story of the latter.

My perspective on the particular historical events that comprised the British and European home fronts for British women writers not only distinguishes their experience of World War II, but also questions the relation between my literary analyses and historical inquiry. The literary and critical representation of lived experience

become matters of historicity and its shaping into a narrative.³⁹ For example, there are obvious differences between writing that is recorded during the war's events and that which represents them in retrospect. Like historians who make sense of the past by reconstructing it into narrative and then subjecting that reconstruction to analysis that might include the present and even the future, literary writers, as Alison Light reminds us about interwar British women writers, feel not only the pressure of their own 'heterogeneous present' (p. 2; note 26, above). They also respond to their sense of the future as it positions them to read 'into the entrails of the present signs of what was to come, and how far they were moved by the forms of the past, aware of it as loss, as comfort, or as an invisible force in their lives'.

I would therefore agree with Alison Light that

... to read literature as history would be to invite the reader inside a culture, and yet to insist on listening to its own heart beat. . . . Because novels not only speak from their cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems, exposing . . . its confusions, conflicts and . . . desires, the study of fiction is an especially inviting and demanding way into the past.

This book explores a past that is very much with us even as it recedes with the deaths of its survivors and their memories. Debates about the 50th anniversary of World War II have challenged those memories, striking painful chords in both survivors and heirs. Those who fought for the Allies and many of the defeated and their heirs, as well as those whose loved ones were brutalized or killed under Nazi and Japanese occupation, celebrate the Allies' victory at all costs. Others, as we saw with the Smithsonian's *Enola Gay* exhibition, find the costs of victory's strategies prohibitive. By returning to British women's writing of the war we can begin to construct a cultural history that raises significant questions about our own responses to that era and its relationship to waging any war. To consider the complex range of women's voices and experiences as individual sets of political and social identities as well as products of historical constructions and local culture leads to a method that 'shows women choosing war . . . and writing from every conceivable ideological position from the patriotic to the pacifist' (Marcus, p. 55; note 17 above).

I maintain that in representing and bearing witness to this war as distinctly horrific, these writers create disturbances in our ethical, ideological, and emotional understanding of any war and our attitudes towards its other players. Analyzing the complex ambivalences of these writers did not, therefore, lead me to neatly divide them into opposed camps, taxonomies of women's war literature, or into extant categories of women's wartime roles and responses to World War II. In my view, these British women writers and the fictional women they portray cannot be considered as either consenting to or resisting war in terms that contemporary debate criticizes or celebrates. Indeed, they assert over and over again that while they are aware of themselves as gendered subjects, as women writers, their identities are just as bound up with the contingencies of the larger history of both men and women on both sides of the war. It is therefore my goal in this book to suggest the need to review this writing of World War II as identifying more complex frameworks and forms of written expression in which to discuss women's responses to war.

All together, their writing represents an epic of moral clarification, working as a self-reflexive document that transverses human experience, memory, and history. In its relationship between individual consciousness and historical event, this writing gives us access to a past that for these writers must remain imprinted on the collective consciousness of future generations. To do this, these British women writers construct its meaning in a combination of political, historical, and fictional discourses to produce a literature that reaches beyond pleasing forms to shape an ethical/political aesthetic.