Forever England

Femininity, literature and conservatism between the wars

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Introduction

I

Introductions are usually written last of all and this one is no exception. Their outlook, despite appearances, is retrospective, for whilst they hope to give the reader a taste of what is to come, they are necessarily written with hindsight: they belong to that familiar form of story-telling which starts with 'once upon a time', the sort we can rely on to end. To suggest to readers what they might like to know in order to begin, the author needs already to have covered the ground in advance. Which is why, for the writer of a book like this one, so much of the material for introductions and conclusions seems to be interchangeable; decisions as to what to use as 'signposts' for the reader (an introduction) and which to leave as the clearly marked features of the landscape (the conclusion) involve the same kind of cognitive mapping. Both depend on the artificiality of ordering what was originally discovered or explored only as amorphous possibility. The old teaching adage – 'tell them what you are going to do, tell them when you are doing it, then tell them what you did' – depends on the same reflex which makes a significant sequence out of the random, one which is historical in impulse since it makes a chronology and it gives duration – beginning, middle and end – to what otherwise would be unwritable and unthinkable – an endless present.

Where you decide to start from will itself limit the possibilities of other stories, and other endings, and finding a point of settlement from which to begin ('are you sitting comfortably?' BBC radio used to ask its child-listeners) is always a matter of position. The place from which one writes, but also from which one understands the past, is a matter of perspective and will alter the focus of what can be grasped near to hand, what can only be glimpsed on the horizon. The questions which writing even the humblest introduction raise are therefore not just about the exigencies of literary conventions or even about the process of writing itself, but also about all historical inquiry. They raise in miniature the problems of historicity, of periodisation and its relation to 'lived experience', of positionality,

for writer and reader, and of the demands of form, which are themselves a kind of placing.

We are perhaps most used to those historical accounts which make what was actually a mess of immediacy into a narrative; they give us the illusion of being *in medias res*, of experiencing or knowing a culture first hand whilst actually shaping it into a form, a generality, a knowability which depends on a pre-given sense of ending. 'History', in the sense of *all* that went on, is always in excess of the descriptions we make of it, and if historians are typically obsessed by the sheer material superabundance of the past, they are equally aware of its contingency. All historians tell stories where before, for the people living in those times, *then*, like our *now*, there was a heterogeneous present. How much people felt what we now know to be their future pressing upon them, how far they lived in expectation or in suspense, reading in 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, are questions which modern historians ask themselves.

This tension between the retrospective ordering of the past and an attempt imaginatively to re-enter the moment as it was lived, before, as it were, we made it history, is central to all historical projects but it is also at the heart of the novelistic imagination and its excitement. Novels seem at one and the same time to be always in the thick of things and yet to hold the world at arm's length; to invite the reader inside a culture, and yet to insist on listening to its own heart beat. Such a self-examination can take many forms and need not involve what we might think of as an authorial diagnosis. All novels, whether they mean to or not, give us a medley of different voices, languages and positions, and none can sustain a single 'argument' with the reader. Novels, as Salman Rushdie has written,[1] quarrel with themselves, and it is this quarrelling which seems to take us right inside a time and place even as it gives us a breathing space in which to be distant and to reflect. Because novels not only speak from their cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems, exposing, albeit by accident as well as by design, its confusions, conflicts and irrepressible desires, the study of fiction is an especially inviting and demanding way into the past.

II

> Shall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed? Certainly it was a shock (to women in particular with their illusions about education, and so on) to see the faces of our rulers in the light of shell-fire. So ugly they looked – German, English, French – so stupid. But lay the blame where one will,

> the illusion which inspired Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to sing so passionately about the coming of their loves is far rarer now than then. One has only to read, to look, to listen, to remember. But why say 'blame'? Why, if it was an illusion, not praise the catastrophe, whatever it was, that destroyed illusion and put truth in its place? For truth . . . those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham. Yes indeed, which was truth and which was illusion? I asked myself.
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> (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929)

On the road to her imaginary Fernham (in 'Oxbridge' where, if anywhere, secure knowledge might presumably be found), Virginia Woolf's narrator takes a literary event for an historical one: it strikes her as she hums a verse or two that the lyric voice of Victorian poetry is dead – no more Rossetti, no more joy, no more romance, she says, in her world. Should she explain such a shift by an event, by History with a capital 'h': the war? Surely this was the cause, and the death of romance the effect? But then, she muses, if with this disappearance went too the illusions that men and women had about each other, the false sentiments in which the sexes had disguised and prettified themselves, and that self-deceptive subjective life on which such poetry throve, didn't the event produce more truth? If this unveiling of each other was a revelation of the realities of power, of stark nationalisms, of brute masculinity and of feminine wiles, why feel it was a catastrophe at all? Wasn't the war, that cataclysm universally mourned, from the point of view of male–female relations at least, a good thing?

At this point Woolf's argument from cause and effect breaks down; she carefully loses her way and the thought, which ought to have been a conclusion, disappears into a dotted line. Her refusal to arrive at a final historical judgement, which is also a moral one about the superiority of her own times, is salutary. Once we introduce, as she does, the question of subjectivity, of how the world was lived on the inside, how can we say with confidence that *their* vision of the world was illusion and our own the truth? It was what they lived by, after all, just as we live by our own fictions. However much we might want history to ratify our sense of change, to put *their* present firmly behind *us* and guarantee our own advance into the light, such surety, Woolf suggests by disturbing her own progress, is itself an illusion. It need not stop us arguing for our own beliefs but when we think we have once and for all arrived at the ultimate position of judgement, that is when we have lost our way. History cannot shore up the present and make it safe for us; the past cannot be kept at bay.

Woolf's sense of loss in the poetic feeling of the culture into which she was born, of a literary, liberal class no longer in love with itself, is double-

edged: though it might seem that she is exposing their dreams to the harsh light of day, her diffidence betokens at the same time a call for a more capacious and more generous retrospective. It suggests the need for a history which gives due place to these illusions and idealisms, and that an understanding of events which has no room for the romantic and the imaginative is no understanding at all. And once you ask, as Woolf did, about men and women facing each other over the guns of August, you ask about what (or who) makes up the narratives we call history, what matters and is made to matter. Taking the literary into account and making a space for subjectivity is more than just a case of adding feeling or fantasy into a narrative of things and events, cabbages and kings: it must call in question what is seen as history in the first place. In so doing it attacks that opposition of the private and the public which structures and determines the organisation of disciplines and categories of knowledge and which slices them up into manageable portions of fiction and fact, dream and reality, subject and object.

Such a perception has its own history. Even without knowing that this passage was written in the late 1920s we would call it modern. Woolf's journey into history takes her inward; her path is one which leads on to increasingly unsure ground. Her awareness that a history of subjectivity is not simply consonant with external accounts, that wars reach into personal depths as well as public coffers but that the private experience and the public records do not always match; her reticence about moral judgements which repose upon a sense of the rightness of one's own way of being; her ironic deferrals and whimsical understatements – these are all part of the making of a modernity for which the writing finds the appropriate form. Woolf is of her time in citing the war as marking the moment from which it no longer seemed possible to divorce the dramas of the interior life from the mainstream of history: it was what drew her to look for historical truth in other literary forms – biography, real and fictional, elegy, memoir, as well as novels, ways of writing history which could accommodate, amongst other things, the woman's point of view.

For it is not coincidental that the path which takes Virginia Woolf into modernity is a rhetorical search in *A Room of One's Own* for what a feminine relationship to knowledge and the past might be. Her carefully contrived reflections are part of a deliberate ramble around male property: the Oxbridge college where she has just been shooed off the grass is an image in miniature of masculine defensiveness about the territory of learning and also of history itself. Woolf's essay has its polemical edge and it is one which places her as part of a generation of women who saw themselves as trespassing on these male preserves. Woolf's anger at exclusion is none the less tempered by a scepticism about the desirability of petitioning for election to full membership of this society. Her feminism leads her to doubt whether the institutions and the orders of knowledge

as they stand are themselves worthy of female admission. On what terms, we might see her as asking, should modern women seek to enter the historical narrative? Now that there was a chance of writing it for themselves, might they not want a different plot altogether?

The search for her own room, for a place which could be both domestic and public, private and professional, suggests how much the act of writing has itself had special meanings for women given their situation both in the house and in history. No one has lived more on the inside than women: indeed, the role of history's insiders might serve as a definition of what we mean by 'bourgeois' when we apply it to the female sex. I shall argue in this book that between the wars a sense of that other history, a history from inside, gained new significance, that the place of private life and what it represented became the subject of new kinds of national and public interest and found new literary forms. To move towards such a history we need to step over the threshold into the most ordinary of houses and least remarkable of lives. Charlotte Mew's poem of 1916, which prefaces this volume, suggests something of what we might find there. In her shifts between the lyrical and the vernacular, her fierce reversal of romantic imagery ('a rose can stab you across the street'), she fashions, like many writers of her generation, a language for the collapse of late-Victorian idealism. But here it is the most purely domestic and familiar world, the only one in which the speaker has a place, the sum of her existence, which is evoked as murderous: family ties, respect for elders, the notion of womanly sacrifice, of home sweet home – Mew writes about a violence being done to an older model of bourgeois propriety as total and as obliterating as that which was taking place on that other Front. Like so many of her male peers, she is a casualty of the end of an era; for her, too, 'everything has burned, and not quite through'. What vision of the future, what hopes for the present rose from the ashes of this past? Whatever we discover when we venture inside that quiet house, we will not be ignoring the history of England but deepening our knowledge of it.

Forever England makes a preliminary inquiry as to what the past might look like once we begin to make histories of the emotions, of the economies which organise what is felt and lived as a personal life but which is always inescapably a social life. If such histories are not divorced from public and collective activity and associations, they cannot be reduced to them: how nearly they are bound up in these other kinds of change and continuity, how much at odds with them, are paths we need to track. I see this work as part of the writing of a feminist history but one which, if we follow in Woolf's footsteps, must sometimes go roundabout. Better to leave ourselves some spaces open, some sentences unfinished and some routes unmapped, than to imagine that it is our job to dot all the 'i's and cross all the 't's in our writing of the past.

III

It was one of the starting-points of this project, therefore, that an understanding of any period might have new things to yield if it acknowledged other perspectives and positions in the culture. However unsatisfactory the idea of 'women's writing' or 'women's history' (for they both have their limits and their pieties), it seemed a reasonable enough way of signalling a desire for something more as well as something other, for a less complacent history, one made on disagreements and disturbances rather than homogeneity and unity. I believed too that this might take us further into the relatively unexamined mainstream of English cultural life amongst the middle classes at home between the wars: a grouping which has been singularly immune to serious inquiry and whose attitudes and practices have so often been taken for granted.

The largest gaps in our histories of British life this century are still those which the careless masculinity of its writers continue to create. It is extraordinary how much the literary history of 'the inter-war years', for example, has been rendered almost exclusively in male terms: whether it be the doings of right-wing aesthetes or the radicalism of the 'Thirties poets', the dying moments of English liberalism, the late flowerings of high modernism, or the making of social documentary and social realism – it has been male authors who are taken to represent the nation as well as those who are disaffiliated from it. This has been at least as true of commentators on the left as on the right: Eliot, Forster, Joyce, Auden, may be supplemented by Lawrence, Orwell, or more daringly by an Edward Upward or an Evelyn Waugh, but in most cases the reading habits of the majority of British people, let alone the women among them, are rarely mentioned.[2]

Indeed 'home' itself, any attachment to indigenous cultures in Britain between the wars, to feelings of belonging rather than exile, are likely to be conspicuously absent in literary histories. It is a legacy of 'modernism' (and its domination of university English), that it turns the gaze elsewhere, to the writings of those for whom marginality was the only desirable place. Paul Fussell, for example, in *Abroad*, gives a riveting account of the rejection of home by male writers and satellites drawn from across the social spectrum but from within a notional high culture, a rejection which he argues took place in Britain between the wars. 'I hate it here', he believes, best summarises their feelings toward a Britain 'safe and smug' and apparently dead from the neck up (if not the waist down). Vividly tracking back to the experience of the frozen miseries of the trenches, Fussell shows these disaffected and disillusioned literati seeking solace and sunshine in exotic experiences or in the challenge of 'abroad'. Against a photograph of Cannes, he sets one of Salford back-to-backs; against the favoured oranges and palm trees, a litany of hate-objects: gasworks, indus-

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It is easy to read here (though Fussell, who for all his urbane ironisation is largely at one with his spokesmen, resists this line of thought), the hysteria of the dispossessed, the fears of increasing egalitarianism, a reaction to the march of labour and working-class activism imagined as the onslaught of 'barbarians' and vandals. What is striking too – and even less acknowledged than the overtly political dimension of these phobias – is the sense of wounded masculine pride which emanates from these writers. Driven into exile, many modernist prophets and minor *cognoscenti* lament both the proletarianisation and the domestication of national life. Since war, whatever its horrors, is manly, there is something both lower-class and effeminate about peacetime. Whether we encounter it in the fury of a Lawrence (who had suffered bitterly from the xenophobia and class-hatred of his compatriots) and his lambasting of suburban housing as 'little red rat-traps',[4] in Louis MacNeice's condemnation in his *Autumn Journal* of those who make 'the world my sofa'; in Orwell's George Bowling and his fulminations against 'the wife', or in Evelyn Waugh's fulsome praise of Mussolini's heroic achievements,[5] Britain is the place where it is no longer possible to be properly male – a country gelded, as Lawrence might have said, and emasculated by the aftermath of war. Domestic life, the emphasis on the world of home and family activity brings down some of the most virulent torrents of abuse: the British Sunday, British cooking, and frequently, British women (foreign maidens are far preferable to awkward English virgins) – these are the outrages which make the British Isles, but especially and usually England, a home unfit for heroes. Indeed Fussell's soldierly imagination is quite right in suggesting that heroes are by definition incapable of domesticity.

The sexual politics of such an account are no less interesting for being familiar. Once one realises just how much sexual prejudice may lurk behind the image of Britain as smothering and defensive, rather than homely and protective, a different kind of assessment is called for. For Fussell, whatever abroad represented, it apparently held no charms for the female sex since 'one' went abroad for 'wine, women and song', if not to escape women altogether and form other kinds of temporary attachment. Abroad was culture, romance and sensuality; home was philistine, prosaic and frigid. 'Home' was also the place where women were, after 1919, in the majority and where women writers were coming into their own. Fussell's account is one of many which suggests in how many different ways aesthetic judgements are intertwined with those about gender. Just as for him truly literary culture and the masculine are inseparable, so the feminine is implicitly associated with the 'middlebrow', a term always bordering on contempt. Thus Freya Stark, Storm Jameson, Rebecca West, all major travel writers of the period, are given short shrift; they fail to

conform to, or be interested in, the notions of style which Fussell sees as literary. And most discussions of the period are nowhere near as broad-minded as Fussell's.

Abroad was Fussell's logical sequel to his earlier account, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a book which for all its generosity of understanding gauges the trauma of war in terms only of the men who fought and suffered and has little to say about the population at home. Reading that book was a key moment in my own research, however, for what it suggested about the paralysis which struck at the very basis of masculinity and which shook to the core former definitions of sexual difference. Fussell's own later, more romantic search for nomadic heroes, like the outpourings of virulent misogyny in the inter-war years, signals an implicit anxiety about the treacherous instability of former models of masculine power. The decimation of the British male population coincided with (and no doubt contributed to), increased female emancipation, politically, socially, sexually. The flapper and the neurasthenic can be read as shocking reversals of earlier norms and expectations of what women (or rather ladies) and men might be, but these were only the most visible examples of a continual alarm over the meaning of gender differences after the war which found expression in places as apparently disconnected as modern 'sexology' and the desert romance.

I argue in this book that those disturbances on the level of the emotional and ideological understandings of sexuality were more than just a local or minor kind of change. The strongly anti-heroic mood which commentators like Fussell identify as characterising the aftermath of war made a lasting and deep impression right across cultural life and idioms at home. It is my own view that in these years between 1920 and 1940, a revolt against, embarrassment about, and distaste for the romantic languages of national pride produced a realignment of sexual identities which was part of a redefinition of Englishness. What had formerly been held as the virtues of the private sphere of middle-class life take on a new public and national significance. I maintain that the 1920s and '30s saw a move away from formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny and from a dynamic and missionary view of the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes in 'Great Britain' to an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and, in terms of pre-war standards, more 'feminine'. In the ubiquitous appeal of civilian virtues and pleasures, from the picture of 'the little man', the suburban husband pottering in his herbaceous borders, to that of Britain itself as a sporting little country batting away against the Great Dictators, we can discover a considerable sea-change in ideas of the national temperament. A very profound shift of self-image as well as of militarism takes place in the course of these in-between years: the First World War belonged to

Tommy Atkins but the true heroics of the Second were to be found in the actions of 'ordinary people' on 'the Home Front'.

Such changes were potentially democratising in their move away from an aping of the upper classes, and from imperial rhetoric, but they were differently limiting in increasing what might be called the privatisation of national life. The usual view of the middle class in the inter-war period is that it was simply politically and socially conservative – isolationist, inward-looking, indulging in 'the last look round' or 'the long weekend' before the war.[6] For right-wing commentators the 1930s echo the prelapsarian days before the Great War in a kind of dying fall; those on the left are more likely to be impatient for the changes in social mobility which only the late 1950s would bring. The accent on home-ownership and house-building, on domestic consumerism and on the small family would seem to reinforce this picture. It is part of my purpose here to suggest that this is only half the story of the inter-war years; we also need a way of reading forwards into the 1930s from the 1890s, into what was also the continuing process of modernisation.

Nowhere does this become more crucial than when we attempt to write about the experience of women in the period. If Fussell's work prompted me to ask what different kind of topography of the nation we might map if we considered those who stayed at home, this pointed again to the problem of periodisation. Clearly women's history, lived, as it were, in a different place, need not run parallel to that of men, might follow connected but different paths. As the nomenclature suggests, the 'inter-war' years are easily seen, from the masculine point of view, as a kind of hiatus in history, an interval sandwiched between more dramatic, and more historically significant acts. Ironically, feminist studies of the period, with their perspective shaped by the battles for suffrage, have also tended to confirm that view. In the outline of women's history this century, the inter-war years have so far been sketched in as primarily one of feminism's deepest troughs, the era as a whole assumed as having an 'anti-progressive and reactionary character'.[7]

Yet it is hard to reconcile this sombre and depressing depiction of the inter-war years as a slough of feminine despond with the buoyant sense of excitement and release which animates so many of the more broadly cultural activities which different groups of women enjoyed in the period. What new kinds of social and personal opportunity, for example, were offered by the changing cultures of sport and entertainment, from tennis clubs to cinema-going, by new forms of spending which hire-purchase and accessible mortgages made possible, by new patterns of domestic life which included the introduction of the daily servant rather than the live-in maid, new forms of household appliance, new attitudes to housework?[8] How can we write about the idea of female freedom without considering the changing relationship to the female body which surely dominates the

post-war years: perhaps the disposable sanitary napkin was in its own way as powerful an event as increasing female education or shifts in the employment market? In other words, we have still much to learn about the modernisation of women's lives, the realignment of public and private behaviours and values, of the norms and expectations of the pre-war years (which could make chaperonage seem antiquated and long hair undesirable), and we need a history which can encompass this kind of narrative as well as the more conventional and self-consciously political forms of emancipation. Compared with the elaborate coiffure of the 1890s, even the softest and least bohemian shingle of 1935 was a species of radical change.

One of my aims in this book is to suggest the need to review these years as marking for many women their entry into modernity, a modernity which was felt and lived in the most interior and private of places. If we assume the inter-war years were in many ways a period of reaction, we have also to make sense of it as a time when older forms of relationship and intimate behaviour were being recast and when even the most traditional of attitudes took new form. If the English middle classes found themselves in retreat after 1919, and the idea of private life received a new enhancement, nevertheless it was not the same old private life – the sphere of domestic relations, and all which it encompassed, had also changed. And even if a new commercial culture of 'home-making' was conservative in assuming this to be a female sphere, it nevertheless put woman and the home, and a whole panoply of connected issues, at the centre of national life.

Indeed, the more I read of writing by women in the post-war years the more I was struck by the sense of something radically other to, and rebelling against, the domestic world pre–1918 which at the same time was quite compatible with deeply defensive urges. If masculinity and ideas of the nation were being 'feminised', one can discover an equally powerful reaction on the part of many women against the ideologies of home and womanliness which belonged to the virtues and ideals of the pre-war world, ideals which had proved so lethal. Even those who would by no means call themselves feminists (and this is true of all the authors I discuss) were linked by a resistance to 'the feminine' as it had been thought of in late-Victorian or Edwardian times. In other words, by exploring the writing of middle-class women at home in the period (a far from stable category in itself) we can go straight to the centre of a contradictory and determining tension in English social life in the period which I have called a conservative modernity: Janus-faced, it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before. It is the women of an expanding middle class between the wars who were best

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The argument of this book is cumulative; though the chapters may seem to follow different avenues, they nevertheless converge upon that idea of a conservative embracing of modernity, shaped by the experience of dislocation after the First World War and fuelled by essentially pacific rather than aggressive urges. They all try, in different ways, to capture something of the flavour of a cultural compromise with the new and to isolate what I see as the dominant mood between the wars, one which could be conservative in effect and yet was often modern in form; a conservatism itself in revolt against the past, trying to make room for the present. The book thus begins with that revolt against Victorianism, which became so much the hallmark of the modern, as played out in the life and the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett. Compton-Burnett's fiction reminds us that so many of her generation, however much they hated the past, had been reluctantly and forcibly propelled into new ways of living after the war, and that it is this traumatised relation to modernity which produced new kinds of conservative as well as radical response.

This concentration upon what I have called a conservative modernism does not take us into the familiar reaches of an overtly politicised high Toryism with its appeals to ancestral tradition and the superiority of the upper classes, deference to the Church, army and State, or the kind of supremacist glorification of nationhood which had inspired the imperialist endeavour in the late nineteenth century. Rather it asks us to plumb the depths of a more intimate and everyday species of conservatism which caught the public imagination between the wars and could itself recast the imperial, as well as the national idea of Englishness. The readers of Agatha Christie's detective fiction in the period, for example, were invited to identify with a more inward-looking notion of the English as a nice, decent, essentially private people. This was an idiom more about self-effacement and retreat than bombast and expansion, one which could lie both at the heart of a class formation and reach across the classes; it allowed for new kinds of consensus, confidence and power as well as new forms of enjoyment and pleasure. It takes us further toward understanding the meaning of what used to be called a middlebrow culture in the period, one whose apparent artlessness and insistence on its own ordinariness has made it peculiarly resistant to analysis.

In many ways the central chapter of this book, though at the time it seemed a marginal piece of research, is that which explores the journalism of Jan Struther. Struther is not well known but her columns describing the fictional life of 'Mrs. Miniver' in *The Times* became a bestseller and

were later transformed by Hollywood into a sentimental film to help the war effort. My instinct (or rather my literary training) prompted me in the first place to see 'Mrs. Miniver's' homespun wisdom as merely unctuous and platitudinous, the most ephemeral and lightweight of writing, too personal and internal to be historically revealing. Gradually I came to reverse that judgement: *Mrs. Miniver* turned out to be the most historically fruitful of all. Above all, Struther's emphasis upon the quiet life, on a celebration of the known and the familiar, brings us up against conservatism in its broadest sense and in its closest relations to the ideas of domesticity in the period: though her writing might seem to occupy the most personal and subjective of spaces, it takes us simultaneously into the most national and public territories of being English between wars.

If the pleasures of home life were at the centre of the national stage in the inter-war years, women writers were amongst the most enthusiastic exponents, as well as critics, of a culture of privacy, and many of them made no bones about preferring the kind of personal life which their own circles of respectability offered even if they felt limited and contained by them. The stress which a writer like Struther laid upon reticence and verbal self-control could also, paradoxically, suggest new positions of power and privilege, new ways of being in charge. Indeed part of the successful appeal of Struther's vision of the ideal domestic life depends upon the emphasis she gives to the idea of the literary itself, to having a writer's mentality and sensitivity, however tiny one's literary empire might be. Most frequently the value attached to the literary was the clearest way of distancing oneself from the experience offered by forms of 'mass' entertainment and leisure. Like those of Daphne du Maurier's readers who were aware of reading a better class of romance when they picked up her novels rather than Barbara Cartland's, the Mrs. Minivers of this world knew themselves to be different from the lower orders because of their rich inner life and literary sensibility.

We cannot assume, however, that what we mean by a 'middle-class' identity in the period, and how it could be asserted, were firm anchors in the social life. Rather I have tried to keep in mind in writing this book a sense of the complex and changing nature of class references in the inter-war period, whose insecurities are dramatised as vividly in Agatha Christie's whodunits as they are in Compton-Burnett's genteel families. The 'middle class' was itself undergoing radical revision between the wars and any use of the term must ideally stretch from the typist to the teacher, include the 'beautician' as well as the civil servant, the florist and the lady doctor, the library assistant and the suburban housewife, and the manifold differences between them. Even though Compton-Burnett and Christie were both daughters of late Victorian villadom, the child of an entrepreneurial homeopath from Hove might have little in common with that of a carefree but bankrupt American man of leisure. And what would they

share with Daphne du Maurier, born into a theatrical family of immigrants, or with Jan Struther whose father was a Scottish Liberal MP? I argue that being 'middle-class' in fact depends on an extremely anxious production of endless discriminations between people who are constantly assessing each other's standing. The grocer's wife in Grantham, the female bank clerk in the metropolis, the retired memsahib in Surrey, were far more likely to be aware of their differences than their mutual attitudes. Any study like this has, therefore, to restore the feeling of temporality to class distinctions along with a sense of their fertility.

Just how unquiet the depths were beneath the apparently unruffled surface of sensible and quiescent womanhood in the 1930s can be gauged from the success of Daphne du Maurier's 1938 bestseller, *Rebecca*. The instability of being middle-class, the treacherous and tricky limits to respectability and the awkward insistence of desires which are strictly forbidden, make up the interior landscapes of du Maurier's novels. Her romance with the past uncovers something of the buried passions which always threaten to return and trouble the calm of conservatism's sexual and social economies and suggest at what cost the ideals of femininity and of private life were maintained. Her stories are drawn to depict something of the discontent and restlessness which even the most well-run home cannot outlaw entirely, and are clearly as fascinated as they are repelled by the rebellions on the boundaries of the most secure states. Finally, du Maurier's historical imagination prompts questions too about the connections between a more domestic and isolationist English conservatism between the wars and the more interventionist forms it could eventually take as the nation moved again towards war.

Forever England cannot then be read as a celebration of a literary domestic culture, no matter how cheerfully it has been inhabited by women writers and readers. None of the writers in this book can be made sense of unless we admit that feminist work must deal with the conservative as well as the radical imagination, and that it may have been this which held the hearts and minds of generations of women of all classes and all creeds at different times in the past. Yet until comparatively recently, and until they were confronted by the irony of our first woman Prime Minister belonging to the party which most vociferously opposed woman's suffrage, British feminists have made discussions of conservatism all but anathema. Right-wing women were felt to be another breed, a subject too distasteful or remote to take up time in a movement whose driving energies have been largely spent recovering and reclaiming collective achievements and progressive struggles. Nevertheless anyone who approaches conservatism with feminist sympathies ought to be struck and indeed disturbed by what they have in common.[9]

Above all, the conservative critique of rationalism, its emphasis upon private life and personal feeling, has especial significance for women who

have long been seen as the feeling sex; for feminists, half of the battle with socialism has been with its inability to recognise the demands of home and family, the pulls of psychic as well as social structures, all areas which conservatism certainly takes seriously, and for which it frequently has a language. Often the most philosophically interesting of political tendencies, it welcomes discussions of the existential, the religious, and the subjective, in ways which make it far more appealing than the more rigorously collective-minded outlook of socialisms. The stress which some conservatisms lay upon inner resources and moral strength significantly overlaps with how many women would understand their feminism. For British schoolgirls Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett is as likely to be a model heroine as Brontë's Jane Eyre, and yet few feminists have explicitly wished to acknowledge what Marilyn Butler has called 'a Tory women's tradition, which must also be thought of as proto-feminist'.[10]

On the whole feminists have preferred to believe that feminism and conservatism are mutually exclusive. Ironically, and as proof of how intertwined these relations actually are, while I was completing this work, Virago, the major feminist press in Britain, brought out a new edition of Jane Austen, has republished Struther's *Mrs. Miniver* and has now added the works of Ivy Compton-Burnett to its list without any apparent sense of incongruity. All this suggests that a reconsideration of what has been proto-feminist within conservative philosophies but also what has been and continues to be conservative within feminism is timely.

V

Central to the writing of this book and the determining of its final shape and selection of authors was the realisation, then, that I was writing about conservatism, but that conservatism itself was subject to historical and social metamorphoses and that its forms were not to be taken for granted. It would be fair to say that conservatism has become more rather than less problematic as this work evolved. In the first place anyone who wants to write about conservatism, both in terms of the Tory party in Britain and of something broader and more amorphous which may or may not lead to voting for it, must start from a kind of vacuum.[11] If it is true that the 'Conservative half of society is still largely awaiting its historians',[12] we might go further and assert that conservatism, of the lower-case variety, has been even more unaccounted for; as one of the great unexamined assumptions of British cultural life its history is all but non-existent.

Such conservatism has perhaps been the greatest blind spot in our literary and social histories if only because it is the most obvious feature in the English past. That it wears at all times a cloak of invisibility is part of its influence and attraction and depends on the persuasive nature of Conservative political philosophy itself. Those political Conservatives (and

they have been few) who have taken it upon themselves to write about their beliefs, have frequently stressed that Conservatism refuses the status of an ideology. It has been part and parcel of Conservative political thought to be suspicious of the search for utopian blueprints for society and to denigrate the value of political theorisation in the abstract. Rather they have sought to offer a common-sense, pragmatic definition of the role of politics in people's lives: that it is solely the irksome business of politicians and useful only because it frees the rest of us to get on with our lives with the minimum of interference. This was the view expressed by Quintin Hogg in the well-known passages of *The Case for Conservatism* in 1947: the aim of politics is the good life, and the man who puts politics first 'is not fit to be called a civilised being'.[13]

Lord Hailsham was in part reiterating the views of Lord Hugh Cecil, whose *Conservatism* (1912) was the only major exposition of Conservative philosophy and politics in the first half of this century. Both assume that there is a direct link between the conservative temperament – what Cecil calls 'pure or natural conservatism',[14] a tendency of the human mind – and the forging of Conservative political policy. Yet the investigation of the relation between 'Conservatism' as a party politics and 'conservatism' as a set of attitudes and beliefs, or complex of emotional and intellectual responses, has rarely been pursued. Given their dislike of political ideologising, it is not surprising that Conservatives themselves have not usually seen it as part of their political duty to produce such work: what is more surprising is how little their opponents on the left have cared to understand what they are up against. Left-wingers are as likely to write and act as though conservatism needed no explanation and had remained as monolithic and unchanged in time as Conservatives themselves. Indeed, compared to the shelves of analyses of left-wing thought, the sections in libraries or bookshops on any kind of conservative thinking are sparse. Symptomatically, Raymond Williams, the socialist intellectual and thinker, in his dictionary of *Keywords* published in 1976, for example, included entries on 'Labour' and 'Liberal' but nothing under 'Conservative'.

Compared to the 'most thoroughly tilled field'[15] of Labour history, even political histories of Conservatism are few and far between. Where they do exist the tradition of commentary has usually corroborated the definition of politics as views, policies, ideologies passed down from above. Typically accounts will concentrate upon the writings and speeches of public figures and parliamentarians and the enactment of governmental legislation; they chart different versions of a Tory politics in the forward march of Prime Ministers – Peelite Conservatism, Disraelian, the Conservatism of Salisbury and so on, with an emphasis on internal and foreign policy, whether it be arguments over Irish Home Rule or the economic theories of 'the New Right' in the late 1970s.[16] A broader net might stretch to include key thinkers and intellectuals, cast a brief backward glance at

Hooker, Hobbes, or Hume and take the anti-revolutionary reflections of Edmund Burke as the philosophical basis of modern Conservatism.[17] Rarely is the meaning of a conservatism outside the relation to party given space. What is seen as the hard edge of ideology and of practical politics is usually kept firmly apart from the 'softer' questions of psychology and motivation. Rarely has the notion of a 'lived' conservatism received attention from historians: the idea of a conservative cultural or personal life is still novel territory.

On the other hand, when one turns expectantly to social history where the quality of 'everyday life' is taken seriously, the political climate of the inter-war years, for example, is acknowledged but the levels of high policy and of quotidian activity are still all but severed: accounts of changes in the material conditions of people's lives, the new car, the wireless, the vacuum-cleaner, are usually seen as the effects of economic changes or technological developments but rarely explored in terms of the forms of any more interior life. We do not know how such changes worked to create new attitudes, new forms of aspiration and new desires, and were in turn shaped by them. Amongst scholars and academics it is still a relatively maverick suggestion – likely to come from the more innovatory and less academically respectable fields of design history or cultural studies – to propose that a politics of everyday life could be as easily read from the layout of a suburban semi as from the doings of politicians and their ilk. The traffic, as it were, down from Westminster to the man or woman in the street, continues on the whole to be all one way. Political theory and social history, both tend to keep intact the division between public and private life.

By focusing upon the inter-war years, and on a particular version of Englishness, one of the intentions of this work, therefore, is to begin to identify conservatism's shifting appeals, its imaginative purchase as a fertile source of fantasy, inspiration and pleasure which, though it has its discernible constancies, is also continually finding new forms of expression. It is perhaps not surprising that the volatile and disruptive years of the early twentieth century, which found their apotheosis in the Great War, should produce a crisis in conservatisms of all varieties. Since in looking at the literature of the period we are not only exploring fictions *about* conservative mentalities but creations *of* it, one of the effects of such work is to reveal how much political terminologies are themselves historically relative: radicalisms and conservatisms carry different valencies in relation to each other and across time; we cannot rely on their meaning fixing for us permanent and undivided constituencies.[18] Nor can we assume that conservatisms or radicalisms in the period are always consonant with party-political belongings. How far we may wish to tie together the operations of change on the level of high politics with those other kinds of account which deal in shifts in the structure of feeling is beyond my scope in this

book, but it would surely be a mistake to try to make these different discourses and processes of development dovetail too neatly. My own primary interest lies in the least articulate level of conservatism, conservatism with a small 'c'.

Conservatives would have us believe that this conservatism, the conservatism of the politically unselfconscious, resists analysis because it comes closest to home: that we are unable or even unwilling to analyse or label it because it seems a peculiarly intimate condition of subjectivity. Its emphasis on the taken-for-granted and its invisibility as a 'natural' part of ourselves has made it especially difficult to give a history to; 'conservatism', if it signals anything as a complex of emotional needs and desires, then draws upon such deeps below deeps in subjective life that it is difficult, even distressing, to disturb the waters. Indeed, the argument might run, such analysis defeats its purpose since conservatism ceases to have the character of hidden resistance, which is partly what we mean by its description, once it is laid bare. Once you prod what lies at the bottom of the pool it is no longer secret and inert.

Yet Conservatives have also been the first to acknowledge (however disingenuously) that conservatism is best understood dialectically: not as a force which is simply 'anti-change' so much as a species of restraint or 'brake' (Lord Cecil's intensely modern analogy comparing the Parliamentary process to the motor-car), holding progress back on the leash of caution but allowing it none the less to advance.[19] The viability of gradualism, the ideal of 'peaceful, smooth and painless'[20] changes, of harmonious or organic changes as opposed to violent revolution or disseverance, is the central intellectual and emotional paradox for Conservatives. But it is one which they themselves have seen as expressing a unity of dialectical opposites. Edmund Burke made plain his own sense of this relationship when he wrote that 'a state without the means of change is without the means of conservatism';[21] this is captured in Cecil's own formulation, 'the two sentiments of desire to advance and fear of the dangers of moving, apparently contradictory, are in fact complementary and mutually necessary', and with characteristic aplomb Quintin Hogg took the thought to its logical limit – if Conservatism meant "no change", clearly the only truly Conservative organism would be a dead one'.[22]

Though we might wish to agree that what constitutes the conservative, or rather what 'conservative' signifies, psychologically, emotionally, personally, has finally to remain hidden, that does not mean that we cannot discover its presence and gauge its power in the dynamics of change as a whole. Its effects can be felt and known, they show through the social fabric and are part of what determines the particular historical forms of change. Although conservatism may itself signal something inarticulate, its unspoken desires are nevertheless articulated in the forms of social and economic production, in the limits of what can be said and written, done

or left undone in a culture. The identification of common ideological concerns and transhistorical preoccupations which mark out the boundaries of what we call conservative, sometimes highly politicised, sometimes not – a commitment to family life, to the idea of nationhood, to the notion of necessary authority and so forth – is only the beginning of historical and political analysis as I understand it: the challenge lies in seeing how the expression of these beliefs constantly changes, the capacity of conservatism to alter its shape whilst remaining recognisably the same animal. Not one of its ideological or conceptual anchors has been the property of the Tories alone nor have they been *per se* notions which have always worked against change.

It is bound to be one of my starting-points, therefore, that conservative mentalities, whatever they might be, are not sealed off or separate from other ideological strains or existing apart from other, quite conflicting, even contradictory desires and beliefs. Not only the Tories are conservative but even they themselves suffer from internal contradictions, from the hopes and fears and doubts which leave open that space in which human beings remake themselves and their societies. Those needs which we call conservative must first be recognised and respected if they are to be addressed by new forms of social or political organisation. The political message of this book is therefore, I hope, consistent: unless we understand better the relation between conservatism and Conservatism we are not in a strong position to argue for or against change. Neither can we hope to prevent the worst excesses of a Tory politics – authoritarianism, dogmatic nationalisms, hard and fast prescriptions for sexual relations – from making their appearance under different political rubrics. In my view, those who believe themselves to be partisans drawn to very different political philosophies have a special responsibility to discover not where conservatism seems to us most strange, but, which is harder, to find out where it touches us most nearly – how best to understand the Tory in us all.

'Between the wars' is a convenient and workable fiction but it has its limits. Clearly many of the changes which I discuss, and especially the revolt against Victorianism, can be found much earlier: in fact that revolt is born in the same moment as Victorianism itself. But what we look for as historians and critics when we look for change is something on a much broader scale of cultural self-consciousness which we can see as a generic shift right across society and as – eventually – the making of a new common sense. It seems that the effects of the First World War made visible and precipitated further into the mainstream of English life what might otherwise have remained eccentric, sporadic and minority protests. Thus by the 1930s it was no longer simply bohemians and suffragists who argued for equality in marriage: the idea of 'the companionate partnership' had become a matter of course. Naturally the point at which the formerly

radical is adopted into the everyday idiom is also the point at which it loses its urgency and its capacity to disrupt: it becomes conventional.

That dialectic between old and new, between past and present, between holding on and letting go, between conserving and moving on, is a constant one and it is differently felt at different places in the culture. It takes a particularly exciting and intense form in the period between the wars in Britain but it is one of the aims of this study to suggest that given the deep conservatism of British culture the full working out of modernity was bound to be deferred. If we were to place 'between the wars' inside a larger concentric circle, one which we label 1914 – 1956, we can recognise how we might reread that history as one of a single interrupted war. At the same time, it would appear to be a narrative of conservatism constantly revising itself. Placed inside another even larger circle embracing the 1890s to the present day, events between the wars suggest to us that if the 1960s were the truly modernising moment in Britain, that modernisation may now be drawing to its close.

Certainly, as the writing began to take shape, I noticed how prevalent was a farewell tone, and I must wonder why. Is it because we are really at the end of that Englishness, that voice and grammar which drew so much on histories of imperialism and whose modern transformations, which carried such authority between the wars, are now finally exhausted? Is indeed the very idea of an English nationality – of something which, in Rupert Brooke's words, could be for ever England – inevitably tinged with the elegaic? Is it because we are watching the collapse of so many of the sodalities and solidarities which this century has created, and of the epistemological frameworks which gave us collective forms of belonging and belief, that even a history of conservatism must become an epitaph? No doubt, like all historical feelings, it is also personal. I grew up in a city fortified against foreigners; as a child I learnt the names of battles from the war memorials which overshadowed all our sea-front strolls. As someone who once played on bombsites and listened avidly to stories of the Blitz and of 'our finest hour', maybe my own sadness has seeped into the writing: a sort of melancholy recognition that those ways of being English, foolish and even vicious as they often were, were a form of identity and community in which I too was brought up, and whose disappearance, however welcome, is also bound to hurt . . . . But these thoughts are perhaps more fitting to a peroration than a prologue.