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**“Impudent Scribblers”:  
Place and the unlikely heroines of the  
interwar years**

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**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy**

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## ABSTRACT

The central focus of this thesis is the storytelling of place and the place of storytelling. These elements comprise the *geoliterary terrains* of narrative, the cultural matrix in which texts are sited, produced and received, including the lifeworld of the author. The texts under scrutiny in this research have been written by women during the interwar years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Britain and Australia. One of the primary aims of the thesis is to explore the geoliterary terrains (including the space known as the middlebrow) of these texts in light of their relative neglect by contemporary critics in comparison with the prominence given to works written by men during this period. Analysis of the texts through the lens of *locational feminism* (Friedman, 1998, p.5) provides the framework for an interdisciplinary inquiry that draws on geography, feminist literary criticism and new historicism.

The examination of the first of the texts, *Hostages to Fortune* (1933), is centred on the politics of the domestic space and the main character, Catherine's experiences of domestic life. The chapter dealing with the second novel, *A Charmed Circle* (1929), while still engaging with the politics of domesticity and the everyday, also pursues the more psychological space of individual and family life as well as locating the interior spaces of the author's lifeworld. The inquiry broadens out into spiritual and regional landscapes in the probing of *The Nine Tailors* (1934) which is set in the Fens of East Anglia. Expanding still further into empire, nation and identity, the fourth of the novels, *The Invaluable Mystery*, set in Australia, is explored in terms of the politics of place. More discussion of these sub-themes ensues as the therapeutic landscape of *High Rising* (1933) located in an imagined setting, is investigated and the links between the author and the writing of the novel are under scrutiny.

The substantive themes of domesticity, home and nation are found to be embedded in these works and in the lifeworlds of their authors. The critical neglect of the texts is located within a set of cultural and material practices that marginalised women writers during this period. This marginalisation is in turn located within a longer historical practice of attempting to silence women's narratives. Operating beside/against these practices are the imperative of storytelling and women's 'will to be known' through narrative.

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I declare that except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

**Signature** .....

**Printed Name**      **Geraldine Perriam**

I have no idea what will happen in this book. It is a mere abstraction at the moment, something that's popped out of the ground like the rounded snout of a crocus on a cold lawn. I've stumbled up against this idea in my clumsy manner, and now the urge for it won't go away. This will be a book about lost children, about goodness, and going home and being happy and trying to keep the poison of the printed page in perspective. I'm desperate to know how the story will turn out. (Shields, 2002, p.16)

## INTRODUCTION

I was in no mood to write; it seemed impossible. Yet when I had finished three pages, they were all right. This is proof (never to be too often proved) that once one has thought out a story nothing remains but the labour. (Mansfield, 2006, fp.1927, p.243)

Everything always depends on who is telling the tale. And who is reading it. (Swift, 2008, p.215)

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. (Light, 1991, p.1)

The reader can rely on this story to reach a conclusion but it does not end. Nor does it begin with 'once upon a time'. It begins with a woman telling a story and ends with a woman telling a story. In between are many women telling stories and many stories of women. This work could be thought of as an open-ended anthology. It is my intention to leave the ending open, a fringe knotted in places, awaiting nimbler fingers than mine to continue weaving the strands into recognisable shapes at a later date. Then I too can listen, as the tale continues.

The king listened when Shahrazad (Scheherazade) began to tell her stories. With her sister, Dinarzad, under the bed, Shahrazad narrated for her life. The king, having felt himself to be betrayed by his first wife, wrought vengeance on other women by marrying them and executing them at dawn. Shahrazad kept her head by telling the king stories that failed to end with the dawn. He kept her alive one night more and one more, so that he could hear the rest of the tale. Shahrazad gave birth, ate, drank and continued to tell her stories, which Western translators later called *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. As other Westerners have appropriated Shahrazad, so I, too, lay claim to her. The woman who told her story in private under the cover of darkness (Gauch, 2007, p.81) has also become an icon, a public figure who is the story as much as she is the storyteller:

This story has everything a tale should have. Sex, death, treachery, vengeance, magic, humour, warmth, with surprise and a happy ending. It appears to be a story

against women, but leads to the appearance of one of the strongest and cleverest heroines in world literature, who triumphs because she is endlessly inventive and keeps her head. The *Thousand and One Nights* are stories about storytelling - without ever ceasing to be stories about love and life and death and money and food and other human necessities. We are all, like Scheherezade, under sentence of death, and we all think of our lives as narratives, with beginnings middles and ends. Storytelling in general and the *Thousand and One Nights* in particular, consoles us for endings with endless new beginnings. (Byatt, 2000, p.166)

This work has as its focus the place of storytelling and the storytelling of place. That is not a facetious play on words, nor is it a clumsy attempt at a clever little epigram as summary. The place of storytelling incorporates the setting and the context of the narrative. Domestic fiction written by women, for example, is set in a domestic context and the fiction itself is sited within a network of situations and practices, generally overlapping and intertwined.

The storytelling of place involves the process of siting and narrating a particular place. It also comprises the production and reception of place within a “cultural matrix” (Veesser, 1989, p.xi) over time. There is a building of layers that forms a particular location through storytelling and the production and reception of stories. The moors of Wuthering Heights (Brontë, 1847) are a place that, for those who have encountered English culture, produce images and meaning by as little as a mention of the title of the novel or the name Heathcliff.<sup>1</sup> Through countless narrations of Wuthering Heights as a play, a film, comedy sketches and a musical, it is not even necessary to have read the novel in order to recognise its setting, however bowdlerised and satirised the original text may be.<sup>2</sup>

These two elements (the place of storytelling and the storytelling of place) comprise what I have termed the *geoliterary terrains* of narrative. A novel is not merely set in a place. It has a setting, one that is also sited in a number of contexts and practices within the cultural matrix, the “complex network of energies” that is present in what a woman writes, “in the story she imagines, the

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<sup>1</sup> It is significant that the most memorable character in Wuthering Heights is not the heroine, Cathy, but the male protagonist, Heathcliff. The novel is a rape fantasy and it is the potential rapist rather than his victim who is associated with both the setting and the plot.

<sup>2</sup> The musical, *Heathcliff*, when first produced (1996), starred Cliff Richard in the title role.

characters she invents” (Evans, 1987, p.3). The contexts operate at many levels alongside a network of cultural practices. There is the “lifeworld” (Buttimer, 1976) of the author: her personal narrative as a writer and as a woman. There are also political, cultural, religious and social contexts in which both text and author are suspended. In tandem with these contexts are the practices that shape the text and its production and reception. Texts and authors do not operate in isolation (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000; Rooney, 2006). For the texts under scrutiny here, the geoliterary terrains mirror the lifeworlds of their authors: messy, tangled, contradictory, layered and difficult to map. There are gaps in navigation and subsequent lacunae in the charted territories.

In order to negotiate the gaps, it is necessary to explore at least some of them for meaning and/or explanation. In this case, women writing between the wars, there is a muted voice, there is silence and silencing. But these collective silences or mutings are different in many ways from the silencing and muting of the voices of, for example, medieval women. The changes between the two periods highlight differing levels of access to literacy and the printed word; differing attitudes to the production of texts by women and differences in reproductive and working practice, not to mention domestic life (I write here of women writing in the Western European tradition). And yet there are similarities: the denial of women’s writing as having merit, the paucity of recognition for women as writers, and the difficulties for women in negotiating both a space in which to write and the “will to be known” (I.Klepfisz, 1982, in S. Friedman, 1998, p.242) through narrative. One cannot call these silences and/or mutings absences; rather, they denote the exclusion of women from literature and its practice (Evans, 1987, p.13). They can be regarded as “negative inclusion ... a trivialised and distorted presence” (p.13). Even the term ‘woman writer’ is, as Evans points out, a “mongrel construction, recalling endless sniggering that greets women when they want to be taken seriously” (1987, p.14). Negotiating the gaps involves a negotiation of cultural politics as well.

Cultural politics do not exist separately from culture, as an “optional extra” (Wolff, 1990, p.1). They are part of a network of practices that excludes women from participating fully in the modern world.<sup>3</sup> This exclusion occurred in medieval

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<sup>3</sup> The modern world in this context meaning from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the present.

times, in the early modern period, during the interwar years and it continues at present and for the foreseeable future (Mackenzie, 2010). In the period during which the key texts discussed in this thesis were written, women were excluded from much of the political, cultural and publicly social life of Britain and Australia, despite certain gains, such as the right to vote and the right to stand for democratic election (Pugh, 2000). So the muteness and silence that envelopes these particular geoliterary terrains operates within a broader context than the moment of production and/or reception of the texts in question (let alone their reception at present). As Wolff argues, “the study of literature must be *both* at the level of texts *and* at the level of institutions and social process” (Wolff, 1990, p.110). The terrains of the text are immersed in the social process and its institutions.

As I argue in this thesis, the study of texts must also be at a more personal level. The geoliterary terrain of a text must encompass the lifeworld of its author. How that particular space is negotiated is open to debate. So much of life-writing and the interpretation of texts in light of the author’s personal experiences involve second-guessing (Lee, 2005a). While it is impossible totally to exclude this in moving between text, author and lifeworld, this thesis cautions against over-use of such techniques and advocates some articulation of the interpreter’s own lifeworld, intent and motivation. This chapter provides a chance to do that. In addition, some rationale for the overall project is required.

This chapter is a ‘setting out’, the starting point of a story (or several) and also the laying out of ideas, intentions and perspectives. First, the practices of reading and writing are discussed in light of the whole thesis. More particularly, the spaces of those practices are outlined, including the construction of ideas and boundaries such as ‘middlebrow’ and ‘literary canon’ and their implications for the writing of fiction by women in the interwar period of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Second, the links between women, text (both fiction and non-fiction), expressive acts and material culture are explored, followed by an outline of the ways in which place will be examined and how it is understood. A guide to the choices made for the texts and authors under discussion is included in this outline.

The context of production and reception of texts, including the broad, socio-historical context of the interwar years in Britain and its imperial outpost, Australia, is framed in light of further exploration in the thesis of the cultural matrix within which texts are produced and received. Finally, the “cognitive mapping” (Light, 1991, p.1) of the thesis, its structure and signposts, will be profiled.

At this point it is pertinent to explore the persistent tension between the general and the specific regarding the place of women within the history of text, its production and reception. While exploring the cultural matrix of the texts under scrutiny, I make claims of a general kind, substantially borne out by feminist literature on the subject, about women’s place in relation to writing. The scope of this work precludes extensive discussion of other periods, although I do occasionally draw on these to illustrate particular points. In other times and places, the exclusion of women from text, from the written word, from publication and from other spaces has taken on different forms, some of which will be discussed later. There are, however, some general threads that do run through these times and places, such as the definition of women as ‘other’. The concept of writing, who has access to the written word and is ‘allowed’ to claim it, whose authority is stamped on works and which works have merit are present across place and time as issues that are and have been problematic for women (and often for others deemed to be ‘other’).

The tension between the general and the specific derives from the framework of the thesis and its conceptual underpinnings. By selecting this period and those specific texts, it is intended that the focus narrows to offer a thick description of the texts in question. That focus is embedded within a framework that draws on a wider literature across disciplines. While I argue that the specific is essential in dealing with these texts, I also adhere to broader claims by other writers regarding text, women and place. This is one of the dilemmas of the cultural matrix: it is a jostling space, crowded with artefacts that are at once unique and yet suspended within the repeated practice of the everyday, in political manoeuvres and in the exchange between culture and power. The geoliterary terrains of each of the texts are permeated by the tension between the general

and the specific. The specific texts that are the focus of the thesis have jostled their way to the centre, even at the stage of setting out.

Prior to the above 'setting out' is another: the place of my own story, my position as the writer, recorder and interpreter of these other stories; the place from which I write (Light, 1991, p.1). As this thesis moves between Britain and Australia, so have I. I grew up in Australia during a period when (as opposed to the present), imperial Britain still resonated with some force. I moved between both places during this time, if not physically, at least in my reading and understanding of cultural politics. It was a period when some Australians (steadily decreasing in number) still referred to Britain as 'home': that "complex and multi-layered concept" (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p.2). My own geographical concept of home moved between my family home, my paternal grandmother's house, later, adult homes in the city where I was born (Sydney), the city in which I spent many years of adulthood (Melbourne), briefly the south of France, Edinburgh and then Glasgow. These, then, were and are home: a "place/site, a set of feelings/cultural meanings, and relations between the two" (Blunt & Dowling, 2006, p.2).

'Home' is an ambivalent space, one that is relational, particularly in the imperial Australian context during and after the Great War. My great-uncles, listed as British in their military papers (see Figure 1.1) fought (and, in the case of some, died) for 'King and country' or more realistically, for their countries - the sites of power and identity being both Britain and Australia.<sup>4</sup> My parents and the extended family of their generation, born in the interwar period, were less citizens of both countries, more Australians with an imperial heritage but nonetheless people who possessed views that were culturally informed by notions (often unfavourable) of empire. My own generation came steadily under another imperial influence while still entangled with the former British imperial power: that of the United States.

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<sup>4</sup> I write here of white, Anglo-Celtic Australians. While my mother's history is bounded by family interaction with Aboriginal people (one of my grandfather's close friends was Aboriginal - quite unusual for the 1920s and 1930s in rural Western New South Wales, particularly for a police officer), my family's story is predominantly white, occupying that space between indigenous Australians and white Britain. In addition, for the women of the family, there was a contradictory space of nation and home (Ferrier, 1985, p.7), which shall be explored more fully in later chapters.

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167 AUSTRALIAN



MILITARY FORCES.

# AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

## Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad.

No. 717

Name Valentine John Madden

Unit 1st Bn. 6th Inf. Brigade

Joined on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1914

### Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation.

1. What is your Name? ... Valentine John Madden
2. In the Parish of ... in or near the Town of Wellington in the County of NSWales
3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalized British Subject? (N.B.—If the latter, papers to be shown.) ... British
4. What is your age? ... 31 yrs
5. What is your trade or calling? ... Railway Fitter
6. Are you, or have you been, an Apprentice? If so, where, to whom, and for what period? ... No
7. Are you married? ... No
8. Who is your next of kin? (Address to be stated) ... Father James Madden, Railway Station, Wellington
9. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power? ... No
10. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Forces, with Ignominy, or as Incorrigible and Worthless, or on account of Conviction of Felony, or of a Sentence of Penal Servitude, or have you been dismissed with Disgrace from the Navy? ... No
11. Do you now belong to, or have you ever served in, His Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Territorial Force, Royal Navy, or Colonial Forces? If so, state which, and if not now serving, state cause of discharge ... 3rd Infantry Reg. 3rd Mrs. [unclear]
12. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service? ... Yes
13. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds? ... No
14. (For married men and widowers with children)—Do you understand that no Separation Allowance will be issued to you either before or after embarkation during your term of service? ... No

I, Valentine John Madden do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and I am willing and hereby voluntarily agree to serve in the Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Australia within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth.

I further agree to allot not less than two fifths of the pay payable to me from time to time during my service for the support of my wife and children.\*

Date 27/8/14 Signature Valentine John Madden  
Signature of person enlisted.

D.577/2.14.—G.10250. \*This clause should be struck out in the case of unmarried men or widowers without children under 18 years of age.

Figure 1.1. The war record of my great-uncle, Valentine Madden. His nationality is listed as 'British'.

My generation, raised during the Vietnam War, became less immersed in the colonial ties of our grandparents and parents but were nevertheless children of the empire. Our national anthem was *God Save the Queen* during our childhood and the Australian flag bore (and continues to bear) a Union Jack in one of its quarters. Our school readers flitted between Britain and Australia in their content and at a later stage of education, the set texts for our English literature studies were both British and Australian (and occasionally, North American). I still have my Sixth Form poetry text (Allsopp & Hunt, 1970) and its content is illuminating. The book contains selections of poetry from the following poets: Geoffrey Chaucer, John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot and Judith Wright, who is the *only* Australian and the *only* woman poet included.

It was in this context that I learned to read at an early age. In a family of voracious readers (with a few exceptions), I read almost anything and everything available. My paternal grandmother's choice of reading was similar to my mother's: British women authors of the interwar years. During the period when I began to read these works, I also read my sisters' books (almost exclusively British also) and even my brother's *Biggles* stories (although not for long, it must be admitted). Given my mother's predilection for detective fiction, I read a great deal of the Golden Age novelists' output, written during the interwar period (Mann, 1981), of whom the most prominent writers were, unusually, women. Adult hauntings of public libraries and second-hand bookshops broadened the interest in this period and moved between genres. Although fiction and non-fiction reading has since broadened considerably, I have continued to read fiction written by women authors during the interwar years.<sup>5</sup>

It is impossible, at this distance, to interpret my steady and steadfast devotion to women's fiction of the interwar period. Apart from its ready availability during childhood and adolescence, this particular fiction, which was spread across genres, held immense appeal, I believe, because it incorporated historical detail from the period during which my mother grew into adulthood and in which my paternal grandmother was a youngish woman. As both were storytellers, I heard a great deal about their lives and experiences and perhaps this left me with an

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<sup>5</sup> Reading Antonia Fraser's *The Weaker Vessel* (1984) in 1985 had a profound effect on my choice of non-fiction material as did a fascination with the Tudor period, begun at age 13 and continued ever since.

enduring fascination for the period and for women's lives. Mantel seems to come close to an explanation: "Possibly it's something women do: spend time imagining what it's like to be each other." (Mantel, 2009, p.44)

Possibly, also, this thesis is a distillation of my reading career: fiction, feminism, history, geography and biography, for all of these elements are present. Add to that the influence of a father with a passion for politics and a fondness for poetry, and one has the sum of its parts - almost. Another important ingredient is pleasure: the pleasure of reading and of being a reader, from stolen childhood hours in the fork of a tree on a summer's day, to reading far into the night, gripped by a story so compelling that even the prospect of an early alarm call is not strong enough counsel for putting it down. It can be easy to forget, when doing work of this sort, that for most readers, fiction is a source of pleasure and that novels are more for enjoyment than for "scholar dogs to roll on" (Porter, 2009, p.36).<sup>6</sup> I owe a great deal to many authors for hours of reading pleasure and I owe much to those "impudent scribblers" (Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2000, p.10), the unlikely heroines of the interwar years.

### *Pleasure, pain and place*

The pleasure of reading led me to inhabit the interwar world of women writers via their storytelling, but the pleasure does not obscure or ignore the more difficult aspects of women's work during this period. Emotional engagement with text involves more than a love of storytelling. Women, then as now, find themselves in a cultural hinterland: neither flesh, nor fowl nor good red herring, as my grandmother was wont to say. During this period, apart from the work of a few "securely canonical" (Gray, 1997, p.xxix) writers such as Virginia Woolf, women's writing operated on the borders of literary production; very little of what women wrote was regarded with any esteem (Humble, 2001). Then, as before and, sadly, as now (Mackenzie, 2010), women wrote from the edge. A writer might be economically successful, even feted in some quarters but she was not accorded a place within the canon, nor was she treated with any serious intentions by critics (Bloom, 1993). Women writers, Trodd (1998, p.37) asserts, had an uncertain identification with institutions associated with literary professionalism. Women

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<sup>6</sup> From Porter's poem, *Detoxing Dante*, referring to *L'Inferno* by Dante, which was translated by Dorothy L. Sayers in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

were not “natural members” of the world of “institutional respectability”. The structures that were designed to enhance the respectability and standing of male writers meant that the “literary committee rooms” (Trodd, 1998, p.37) were generally closed to women, or, if not closed, their doors were only open a fraction. An exception was Storm Jameson, who became the British president of PEN, an international association devoted to the promotion of literature and freedom of expression.

Threaded through the quest and the need for a space to write is the requirement for a space for recognition of one’s work not only as a writer but as a professional craftsperson/artist. Working in the hinterland of one’s profession is not confined to women writers (McDowell, 1999; Spain, 1992; Adam, 2000); there is a broader geographical and gendered exclusion in operation where women are concerned. For women writing between the wars, both their stories and their work resonated with readers and continue to do so because the hinterland is often recognised by the reader and shared with the writer.<sup>7</sup> As Evans (1987) explains: “[l]iving on the borders, living as a border is not easy ...” but the sometimes shared sense of living on and as a border, can establish a connection between reader and writer. “It is there,” explains Evans, “in that specifically imagined space, that we as readers can move toward them, each in the difference of our own desire, drawing our borders with them” (Evans, 1987, p.35). The possibility of connection, not always a given, also explains, in part, my own connection with the texts under discussion in this thesis:

If, standing next to something as the reader does to the text, inevitably creates relationship and the possibility of community, it creates at the same time the unpredictable, uncontrollable chanciness of change. But while the modes of community may mutate from text to text and from reader to reader, the possibility of transformation remains the same, the possibility of trading places. (Evans, 1987, p.228)

The “possibility of trading places” allows an exchange between reader and writer that blurs the borders between the practices of reading and writing. There are, however, other transformative possibilities that may not involve much in the way of resonance nor, necessarily, a trading of place. The critique

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<sup>7</sup> The success of the publishing house Persephone, reproducing out of print works written during this period (and others) and the response of readers to these works indicates this to a striking degree (see various issues of the Persephone journal, *Persephone Biannually*, in which readers comment on the works in question).

of many aspects of Western, white feminism has been that it does not speak to, or for, other women. Hooks (1982) articulated this in her writings on the feminist movement of the 1970s. For black American women, white women's feminism had little to do with them and was, in fact, oppressive. That said, writing by women that is not mainstream, or writing that articulates different values and experiences, may allow an exchange that could not otherwise happen in situations where mobility, institutional censorship and religious prohibition restrict direct interaction.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, exchange between writer and reader can occur across time as well as space. Margaret Paston, writing to her absent husband in the 1450s, sent letters that are a mixture of business, domestic and family concerns, affection and subservience. We read the words of a woman living in Norfolk during the Wars of the Roses and a picture of her domestic and business life emerges, a picture that is all the more vivid for being written at first hand.<sup>9</sup> We have at least a partial account of some women's lives during this period through the letters (noting, of course, the complexities of the correspondent's intentions and the intended recipient's relationship with the writer). Writing from the private sphere, Margaret Paston traversed, at least in her writing, the private domain and the public.

Margaret Paston's letters form part of the continuum on which women's writing is sited. Not only is there a possibility of trading places on the continuum but also a place for acknowledging the continuing efforts of women to be heard, the will to be known against the odds, against the barriers stacked against them. On that continuum are women's lives, the heterotopic and imagined spaces they and their works inhabit. I cannot stress enough how important it is to bear the continuum in mind. It may seem out of place to discuss the material practices of women's writing and lifeworlds centuries before the interwar years. It is,

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<sup>8</sup> Riverbend's blog ([riverbendblog.blogspot.com](http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com)) and subsequent books (2006a, 2006b) on life in Iraq during the invasion and afterwards allow non-Iraqi women to read about the life experiences of the author and her family and friends during and after a time when mobility was restricted for the author. While her experiences are emphatically *not* those of many of the women who read her work, there is a possibility for transformation through engaging with her work. In this case, nobody is speaking *for* the author, nor is the author speaking for all Iraqi women or all women.

<sup>9</sup> The Pastons' correspondence (Greenwood, 1920), preserved by the family over generations, was rediscovered in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Their lives are (partially) told through their letters and give an account of merchant/political class family life during this period.

however, vital to remember that the focus here on those works produced by women during that time are part of a broader cultural matrix, not a ghetto. It may be a borderland but it is not a closed space, nor is it one confined to an elite. It is, or should be, a space in which women's lives and work are open to view. There is *no* cut-off point or date. Women's writing during this period sits alongside women's texts from other periods and cultures, their public thoughts and ideas, their private thoughts (letters, diaries) and their private lives

A significant proportion of work by women during the interwar period explored women's lives, often in the private sphere. However engaged by the narrative and however 'happy' the story, readers are also given forensic detail of exclusion, entrapment, containment, unhappiness and loss in addition to contextual details of women's material lives. Light romances, such as those written by D.E. Stevenson, in which women characters achieve status and happiness through marriage, nevertheless highlight what were either in fact or in perception seen as the limited choices facing women, both materially and socially, when they remained single. The author, herself successful and prolific, attempts to 'sell' the idea that being single, even when successful and financially secure (as her writer character, Miss Buncle, eventually is), can only partially provide fulfilment - what women really need, is love, marriage and the status it brings to one's public standing (Stevenson, 1934).

Other works were more exploratory than prescriptive. Cooper's *The New House* (1936) and Kavan's *A Charmed Circle* (1929) are two of many novels of the period which draw on the containment of single daughters in the family home, either as unpaid companions/servants or because of lack of educational and employment opportunities. Holtby's *South Riding* (1936) provides a tragic illustration of a young woman's blighted hopes of an education and escape from poverty and deprivation. Still others demonstrate containment within marriage (Sackville-West, 1931; Cambridge, 1933; Stead, 1936; Brittain, 1923; Whipple, 1939; Jameson, 1936). And while other narratives feature more positive, enabling models of women's lives (Allingham, 1938; Sayers, 1930, 1934; Bottome, 1934), much of the fiction produced by women during this period challenged or resisted the status quo, the 'givens' that contained women, and quested for a broader, more diverse space in which women had some choice and more mobility (Spender,

1992; Lawrence, 1937). Hall (1928) dared to explore the hinterland specifically occupied by some lesbian women, attracting, of course, censure, but also recognition (Lawrence, 1937) and support from writers such as Brittain and Woolf (Buck, 1994, Section H - no page numbers). The diversity seemed, however, to have a central theme: a questioning of, and a resistance to, the sphere that had been defined for women; one that was seen as 'natural' both biologically and temperamentally.

According to one contemporary critic:

the second and third decades of the twentieth Century have produced a body of fiction by women which seems to regard the historic position of men in the race as being decidedly over-estimated. It is interesting because so far as we know to the contrary, this opinion is being set down for the first time in history. The point is - is it an innate opinion of women - or is it a period opinion? (Lawrence, 1937, p.263)

Although it was not the first time in history that such an opinion was being articulated, it was the first time that women wrote and were published in such numbers and to such a wide readership (Bloom, 1993). Writers such as Woolf searched for a female artistic tradition (1935). The continued search for a tradition in writing for women highlights the contradictory nature of the practice of writing as it relates to women. The search for a 'women's tradition' engages with the very practices that consigned that tradition (if it existed) to the hinterland in the first place. The attempt to define a 'female' canon falls "prey to the practice it exposes" (Veeser, 1989, p.xi). In seeking to promote the work of women and to resist some of the material practices of silence and muting, the search for a tradition raises with it problems of exclusion. "One of the problems of a female tradition," writes, Robbins (2000):

is its insistent recuperation of family resemblance: it behaves as if Jane Austen had Fanny Burney's eyes, Charlotte Brontë had inherited Ann Radcliffe's freckles, or Virginia Woolf was 'just like' her grandmother, George Eliot, in character if not in looks. The search for female likenesses in a tradition of women's writing conceals differences ... just like the male Great Tradition, it tends to bastardise some of the female children, and disinherits some branches of the female family, just as patriarchy has always done. (2000, p.95)

Robbins offers the possibility of not one tradition but many in order to avoid exclusion.

Although I do look for threads of continuity and similarity between different periods, I must make plain here that I am emphatically *not* looking for either similarity or continuity that impels women and their writing to be confined to a narrow, bounded tradition. The texts under discussion in this thesis move across the borders of a few traditions and several genres. The authors may all be white women but their class, nationality, politics and cultural, material worlds are varied: sometimes meeting at various points and sometimes, literally, worlds apart while sharing a common heritage in imperial terms. What is common to all of the texts is that they were written by women in English during the interwar years. Literary histories of the period tend to sideline or simply to ignore work by women (Light, 1991; Ebbatson, 2005; Karl & Magalaner, 1959).<sup>10</sup> Often, ‘women’s’ writing is confined to the borderland of the ‘middlebrow’ a curious place where detective fiction sits alongside chick lit, romantic fiction, some action thrillers, sagas and domestic narrative. It often seems as if the middlebrow is a place where anything that is not defined as High Art by the custodians of the literary canon can be offloaded safely. “Call them stars but not the sun” (Donne, 1608/9, p.164): it may not be lowbrow but Art it ain’t!

Not only was (and is) women’s work during this period corralled into the invented space of the middlebrow, it is also sandwiched between two wars, which had/has implications for the way in which women’s writing was/is received. Men had fought in the Great War and writing about it, whether combatant or not, seemed of more importance than women’s concerns, whether related to the war or not. Vera Brittain, writing graphically of her work as a V.A.D. nurse in France during the Great War received some recognition for her text, *Testament of Youth* (1935), but for other women writing fiction (and indeed for Brittain’s own fictional account) that related to or touched on the experience or aftermath of war (Boake, 1917; Delafield, 1920; Rathbone, 1932)

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<sup>10</sup> Ebbatson’s (2005) and Karl’s & Magalaner’s (1959) work are two of many examples where women are sidelined in literary historical accounts. Even more inclusive accounts, such as Cunningham’s (1988), reinforce the mainstream account of the period as one of canonical, masculine achievement. Light supports this, adding that, while the work is a “more generous” account than others, it nonetheless “reinstates the ‘Auden generation’”, (1991, p. 224) of Auden, Isherwood and Spender, as well as Orwell, Lawrence, Eliot, Forster and Waugh.

little or no recognition was forthcoming. The publication of Enid Bagnold's personal account of her experiences, *A Diary without Dates* (1917) based on her work as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse caused Bagnold's dismissal from her VAD duties (Marcus, 1989, p.149). The consequences of the Great War had an impact on the entire population - perhaps an obvious observation but one that bears repeating: the *entire* population suffered the consequences of the war. From the women in the East End of London who starved slowly to death while their men fought and died in the trenches and while they were 'put to work' for a pittance, making gas masks (Tylee, 1990, p.193), to the wealthy industrialists who profited from the government's demand for arms manufacturing on a massive scale, each person was affected by the Great War.

The lack of recognition for and, in some cases, silencing of women's reaction to the war, reflects the idea proposed by both Woolf (1935) and Kristeva (1991) of women being 'foreigners' in their native lands. This is a problematic notion, given both British women's activity within the Empire, and for some, their identification with "the materiality of whiteness", which is discussed elsewhere in this thesis (Garrity, 2003, p.26). The anomalous position of being foreign and yet not, of being a writer and yet not one, of being a professional and yet seen as an amateur, all contributed to the siting of women writers in a hinterland, a sort of Tom Tiddler's Ground where they might dare to encroach the boundary so long as they knew their place; they could write, they could be published and they could even be successful, so long as they accepted their allotted place within the hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> And that place was always contained and constrained by expectations and assumptions that identified women as 'other'. And yet, to be heard, women who wrote had to (and still have to) negotiate the boundaries set by others. As Evans explains:

In order to assert their authority to write, their claim to be taken seriously, women writers must somehow extricate themselves from this sticky web of belittlement glued to the act of writing. Furthermore, the very language, indeed the only respected literary language they have to rebut these debased and debasing images is itself the principal instrument used to construct and transmit those images.

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Tiddler's Ground is a traditional English game in which 'Tom' stands inside a circle with his back to the other players, turning around at intervals. Other players try to broach the circle without being seen by 'Tom'. Those who are caught stepping over the boundary are 'captured' by Tom.

Women writers find themselves, therefore in the precarious, emotionally damaging and logically impossible position of having to find a way of expressing themselves by means of the very instrument that codifies their oppression. (1987, p.15)

One is always fighting one's way both out of and into Tom Tiddler's ground.

The challenging and resisting of boundaries involves mobility, physical and figurative, a continual negotiation. The expressive acts that constituted their writing during this period enmeshed women in a network of material practices (Veese, 1989, p.xi) in which they had always existed but which increased the complications and contradictions of their 'place' within that network. Their writing of place is sited within a network of places, most of which were difficult to negotiate, from finding space on the kitchen table (and finding the time in which to use it, as I am currently doing) to acknowledgement and acceptance of their achievements in the public sphere. The texts in question and their geoliterary terrains traverse these spaces in their writing of place.

### *Texts and terrains*

The choice of texts for the thesis (see Appendix 1) involved singling out a few from a greater number (see Appendix 1). Apart from the date when it was written, each text was considered for the range of geoliterary terrains to be found within the narrative. It was not simply considered because, for example, it had an urban or a rural setting. Due to the depth to which each text and each author would be under scrutiny, the range was narrowed to five texts from a possible twenty to enable a thick description of each text. More discussion of the choice of texts occurs in Chapter Three but it is worth observing here that the aim was to provide a range of terrains and texts that could be examined.

The only relatively well-known authors among those originally considered were Dorothy L. Sayers, Storm Jameson and Vera Brittain. In each case, the texts by these authors were often less well-known than another work but in the case of Sayers, it was not the text that merited examination in terms of its silencing (although the text merited examination for other reasons) but the author herself. Her work as a detective novelist, as a theologian and as a playwright

came in for criticism for a number of reasons, which will be discussed in a later chapter. It is important that any discussion of silencing encompasses the lifeworld of the author. In the case of Sayers, her fiction was well-published and lucrative enough to enable her, eventually, to write full time. So although her work at various points was the subject of attempts at silencing, the author herself was also implicated. Harford's novel (1987) was the only work of hers that was not published in her lifetime.

There are, of course, those novels which were never published and the scale of this form of silencing is unknowable. As Cameron (1990, p.7) asserts "[e]ven those women who have had the time and the means to write have faced other barriers ... If women's utterance is not forbidden it is often ignored and if not ignored, received with howls of execration".

Even fairy tales, arising out of the oral tradition, are now best known from the tales and adaptations written by men. The *conteuses*, the female storytellers of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, were literally written out of the genre. The self-validating nature of a literary canon (Harries, 2001), as has already been pointed out, tends to exclude those works and those writers who may pose a threat to its existence. The parallels between the *conteuses* and women writers of the interwar period are of interest because in both instances, women were writing and their work was being read but male authors were (and are still) given more public recognition through time as both writers and as influential cultural figures (Harries, 2001; Light, 1991; Humble, 2001)

There was little sustained critical discussion of the fiction written by women in the interwar years prior to its re-evaluation during the feminist debates that occurred during the 1970s. From that point, scholars, feminist writers and publishers (particularly Virago) re-examined works by women during this period and others (Kaplan, 1975; Showalter, 1977). This thesis builds on the work by these commentators, moving into a slightly different sphere by examining the terrains of the texts, from their writing and their cultural context of production and reception to the lifeworlds of the authors. A "thick description" of each text (Geertz, 1973, quoting Ryle, 1971) is offered, using an interdisciplinary framework that draws on geography, feminism, feminist literary theory and

social history. What follows is a more specific outline of the texts under discussion.

### *From Home to Nation to Empire*

The domestic terrain is brought sharply into focus with the first of the novels, *Hostages to Fortune* (1933) by Elizabeth Cambridge. This text rarely moves from the domestic space occupied by the Catherine, the protagonist, a writer who has married and who, in the course of the novel, bears and rears three children. It is a novel of aftermath: of the Great War, of life after marriage, of the development of a woman contained and often feeling trapped within domestic life. The novel touches on broader themes of nation and national life but it is the domestic lives of women: Catherine, her daughter, her sister and her niece, that remain the focus. This text is the starting point for the other texts as the terrains expand to include the rural, the psychological, the political, the sacred and the therapeutic. That is not to say that the domestic terrain is left behind. Indeed, it remains firmly embedded in each of the texts but is now sited alongside or within other terrains.

The second novel, Anna Kavan's *A Charmed Circle* (1929), is also domestic, revolving around a dysfunctional family living in a house outside of but close to, London that, post-Great War, is gradually being encroached upon by suburban development. Each of the adolescent/adult children in the family tries to escape both house and environment but each of them is contained by it and by her parents. The lack of freedom for women is explored in light of the limited mobility of the young daughters as they attempt to carve out a new life for themselves away from the family. Mobility and domesticity feature strongly in this novel as does the psychological landscape of each of the characters. Their thoughts, reactions and interior exploration of self are clearly expressed. Mental illness is touched upon and a sense of futility pervades the narrative. As one of the earlier works of this writer, it is particularly interesting as an example of Kavan's explorations of the terrains of the mind.

The terrains of the mind are also a feature of Sayers' novel, *The Nine Tailors* (1934), which is set in a small village in the Fens of East Anglia. Sayers'

detective protagonist, Peter Wimsey, wrestles with questions of good and evil while investigating the death of a man in a fenland church. The regional landscape is a representation of nation and home, but Sayers also uses the setting to explore notions of spirituality. This is a spiritual landscape, one that draws on the continuum of works set in the region and the novel is interwoven with allusions to works as diverse as *Through the Looking Glass* (1917) and Eliot's *Little Gidding* (1946).

The final two novels broach empire and broader understandings of home. Lesbia Harford's novel, *The Invaluable Mystery* (1987), written in the early 1920s, is set in Australia during the Great War. It is a domestic novel and a political one, featuring the lifeworld of Sally, a woman whose life is dramatically altered by the war. It is a novel of domestic life on the home front contained within a broader, anti-imperial, pro-socialist sphere. The novel's geoliterary terrains are embedded in the story of its suppression and eventual publication.

The final novel, *High Rising* (1933), written by Angela Thirkell, is a domestic novel that invents a utopian landscape of an English village/county according to Thirkell's imaginings. This nostalgic landscape is the product of Thirkell's mobility as a war bride. Thirkell left England to accompany her soldier husband to Australia after the Great War. Her longing for 'home' influenced her choice of landscape when she embarked on a series of novels set in the reinvented landscape of Trollope's Barsetshire. This novel (and the subsequent novels of this series) is coiled with imaginings of home, nation, class and empire. Certain resonances of the geoliterary terrains of this novel can be found in the other texts under discussion in this thesis. While temperamentally different from the pro-socialist concerns of Harford's narrative, *High Rising* nonetheless carries with it issues about women's place in the world, often contradictory.

Each of the novels was received with differing levels of acclaim. Their production and reception were as varied as each woman's career as a writer. It is not my intention to evaluate the worth of the texts in this thesis which would mean enmeshing myself in the very process that I critique: the privileging of certain texts above others. I do, of course, have personal favourites, those works that I enjoy reading and sometimes re-reading. That does not mean that

my enjoyment is a criterion for selection. Indeed, some of the texts discussed in this thesis are not as appealing to me as a reader as others. To exclude them on the basis of my enjoyment (or lack of it), or indeed on my critical judgement as someone who has read widely in the field, would involve the production of my own 'canon', the works to which I attribute value. Each text is of value, providing insights, stories, social or historical detail and contributing to a wider knowledge of feminist cultural politics. My comments earlier on Stevenson's work as 'light romance' are not intended as a slur. They are, in some ways, pigeon-holing the work but they are also a way of recovering the work within a broader spectrum of fictional works written by women during this period across genres. Light romance and detective fiction jostle with other forms of narrative, poetry, pamphlets, histories, biographies and manuals on motherhood. The circulation of the texts within a wider and often contradictory context merits examination and, to reiterate, the geoliterary terrains of each text are bound up in the context of home, nation, empire and individual concerns.

### *Context and text*

Each of the texts circulated within a broader cultural and political sphere. Within those spheres was a growing readership, one that intersected with various forms of entertainment such as the cinema, wireless broadcasts, theatre and magazines.<sup>12</sup> An increasingly literate population also had access to more leisure than it had in the past. Working hours were generally shorter and, by 1939, over eleven million workers were enjoying paid holidays (Day, 1997, p.15). Standards of living for many (though not all) at the lower end of the wage-earning population increased during the 1930s (Day, 1997). As a result, mobility increased and leisure time often involved travel outside the cities and regions in which the bulk of the working population lived. Hitherto, mobility had been a gendered concept, seen as masculine, in opposition to the domestic space (Parkins, 2009, p.11). The "landscapes and provinces" that were settings for novels (Gindin, 1992, p.15) were now often within easy reach of the cities for both men *and* women.

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<sup>12</sup> Carey (2002) suggests that the growing literacy of the population "impelled intellectuals in the early twentieth Century to produce a mode of culture (modernism) that the masses could not enjoy" (Carey, 2002, p.214).

Readership of illustrated papers, magazines and fiction grew. Bloom (1993) asserts that the increase in literacy led to a flourishing of light, popular adventures and romances that were a feature of illustrated periodicals such as *Peg's Paper* and *The Strand*, but Pugh (2000) intimates that periodicals such as these had been growing in number since before the Great War. The introduction of the paperback by Penguin and the 'Yellow Jacket' by Hodder & Stoughton (Hayes, 1997, p.71) meant that novels were now more affordable than formerly. They were readily available at railway stations, where the reading public could select the latest thriller or romance prior to setting out on a journey (Lewis, 2006, p.90).<sup>13</sup>

The interest in popular forms of entertainment and escapism, is, McCrum believes, directly attributable to the Great War:

The war had blown Edwardian England to pieces. It was a society in shock. The old confidence, certainty and wealth had been replaced by doubt, anxiety and debt. Three quarters of a million men had been killed. Scarcely a family in Britain had not known that awful moment when the War Office telegram announced the death in battle of a husband or brother. In this gloomy, neurotic atmosphere, Wodehouse's light-hearted country house comedies were both a tonic for bereaved and depressed survivors, and a kind of lunatic elegy for a lost world. (McCrum, 2004, p.143)

Popular fiction gained a wide readership and many of the popular stories "took society as their theme", according to one contemporary commentator (Dobrée, 1934, p.12). 'Traditional' values such as manliness in heroes and beauty in the heroines of adventure stories and romances were often espoused alongside more challenging fiction and periodicals such as *Time and Tide*. The popular feminist weekly, founded in 1920, featured articles on international affairs and supported women MPs, in addition to printing articles and fiction by authors such as Brittain, Holtby and E.M.Delafield (Spender, 1992, p.609).

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<sup>13</sup> One of the first Penguins published was Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, which had originally been published by Benn. Sayers' later publisher, Victor Gollancz, refused to release any of the Sayers titles he had published until the 1950s (Lewis, 2006, p.95). Allen Lane felt that he had been quite possessive of Sayers' work - an interesting sidelight to the ways in which texts and authors are subject to the contexts of reception and production.

Circulating with such periodicals from a range of cultural political positions were novels by women whose work began to be published in quantities that were unprecedented, if overlooked, by and large, by critics (Clune, Day & Maguire, 1997,p.57). The number of concerns expressed by women in works of fiction ranged from domestic detail to the right of women to experience both career and motherhood, to lesbian relationships. “Novels,” asserts Light (1991,p.2), “not only speak to 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 context in which each woman wrote her narratives was woven into the fabric of the tale, sometimes deliberately, to enlighten, sometimes as escape and often as comment or protest. The imaginative process of writing fiction was interleaved with ideas and events that were circulating during the writing of that fiction. Other works, such as Marie Stopes’ *Married Love* (1918a) and *Wise Parenthood* (1918b), advocating the use of contraceptives, circulated alongside *Good Housekeeping* magazine and the novels of Daphne Du Maurier, Rebecca West, and Georgette Heyer. The Jarrow marchers were on the road as readers sought diversion for a railway journey. Oswald Moseley was addressing meetings on the benefits of a fascist state while, in the suburbs of Manchester or Melbourne, someone was reading *Love on the Dole* (1933) or *None Turn Back* (1936) and Nancy Cunard with other activists was campaigning for the release of the Scottsboro boys.<sup>14</sup> As the debutantes were being presented to the King and Queen, George Orwell was down and out in Paris and London (1933). As the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was being dedicated in London (Blythe, 1964), *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Agatha Christie’s first detective novel, was published.

Australian women, like their British counterparts, were writing in greater numbers and their concerns often challenged the prevailing cultural-political notions attached to the prominence (near deification, post Great War) of Australian masculinity. The cultural politics of Britain were also a strong influence. Australia looked to British tastes in music, literature and art for guidance. The politics of ‘cultural cringe’, while yet to reach their zenith as

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<sup>14</sup> Both novels are set during the time of the General Strike. The complicated and drawn-out case of the Scottsboro boys had a high profile in Britain. In the United States, a group of young black men were accused and convicted of raping two white women in a railway carriage. Retrials followed with some of the men being pardoned and others sentenced to prison terms. Most of the men spent around six years in jail before being pardoned or sentenced.

they did in 1950s, 60s and 70s Australia, meant that the British aesthetic held greater critical weight than the Australian. The love-hate relationship between the ‘motherland’ and its colonial outpost was one that accepted the norms of British cultural taste, feeling their own to be inferior, while repudiating the condescension of British critics in particular. The Australian opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba, when asked by a British singer what she should sing on a tour of Australia, replied, “Sing ‘em muck”; in other words, “Australians are so culturally ill-educated that it won’t matter what you sing”.<sup>15</sup> The new cultural identity of Australian masculinity, steadily developing its own mythology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, reached new heights after the Great War as stories of the Diggers or ANZACs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) came into circulation. The cult of ‘mateship’ is still very much alive as is the cult of the Anzac or ‘Digger’. Garton (1998) suggests that the propagation of this cult was due, in part, to a desire on the part of Australians to counter Darwinist claims about race fitness. The convict origins of Australians were (and even now occasionally, despite the *cachet* of having a convict ancestor - I, alas, have none!) a sore reminder of the development of European settlement in Australia. The efforts of the Anzacs in the Great War were seen as having dispelled “these concerns about racial fitness and masculine vigour” (Garton, 1998, p.89). The Anzac legend of “mateship, fortitude, larrikinism and anti-authoritarianism may have reflected an older bushman ideal,” writes Garton (1998, p.94), but it “translated ... into something national and hence more readily available for a broad, popular and cross-class audience”. Nonetheless, it was “founded on a pervasive opposition between a noble masculinised world and a lesser feminised world” (Garton, 1998, p.94), at the same time establishing superiority over the indigenous people who had been displaced by European settlement. The result was a twofold ‘proving’ of the Anzac dough: the cult of the Anzac ‘proved’ the racial fitness of the Australian male and ‘proved’ the unfitness of the indigenous population and women.

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<sup>15</sup>This expression still has currency in Australia. That one of Australia’s ‘own’ should express such contempt still rankles in certain quarters. Nellie Melba (Helen Mitchell, who took the name Melba as a form of her native city) was a friend of the novelist Angela Thirkell and attended her *salons* in Melbourne. The story comes from Ponder’s biography of Dame Clara Butt (1928), the opera singer to whom Dame Nellie Melba is said to have made the comment. The *Canberra Times* later printed a telegram from Butt to Melba apologising for telling this story to Ponder (*Canberra Times*, 9 August, 1928).

Australian women, however, began to challenge the quasi-divine status of the 'mates', with varying degrees of success. As will be seen in a later chapter, mateship, the ideal of the rugged, resourceful male and the outback landscape made a lucrative combination and both Australian and British publishers promoted it (Nile & Darby, 1987). It was in this culture that women sought publication, their fiction and their settings not always in accord with it. For Harford, her novel, written in 1922, was in opposition on almost every score. For Thirkell, landing as a war bride in Melbourne in 1919, it was an incredible culture shock and it contributed to her departure ten years later. Bassett (1998), writing the introduction to her anthology of Australian women's writing on war, complains that as late as 1984, an anthology of Australian poetry written about war contains contributions from only two women in a volume of works by over seventy writers (p.x). Women's views on war, it seems, were and are of less importance than men's.

Saïd (1984, p.169), while conceding the lack of attention to the "historical dimension" in the study of fiction, also comments that most studies do not consider "that all intellectual or cultural work occurs ... on some very precisely mapped-out and permissible terrain, which is ultimately contained by the State". This is a substantial claim and one that has merit. It does not account wholly for resistance to the state, however state-controlled that resistance might be. Not all terrains are "precisely mapped-out" even if they are subject to control. It must, nevertheless, be conceded that state power, post Great War, operated against women's interests, attempting to confine them to particular paths though the operation of the Marriage Bar in Britain (Beddoe, 1989), the withholding of benefit for women who refused to undertake domestic service and the transference of manufacturing work, undertaken by women during the war, back to men only (D'Cruze, 1997). In Australia it operated through the lack of recognition of women's contribution to the war effort, their deprivation through rationing and other lacks, including the sidelining of their employment once the soldiers returned. Women who enlisted were treated far less generously than were their male counterparts, as shall be discussed later in the thesis.

The period between the wars, was, like all other periods of human history, one of contradiction. “Complacency and crisis” (Bloom, 1993, p.7) were a feature of the period. While others enjoyed greater leisure and improved living standards, the urban and the rural poor were very poor, living in slums and hovels. Lifelong communist activist, Jessica Mitford, recalled visiting the rural poor as a child with her mother:

Their poverty worried me and filled me with uneasiness. They lived in ancient, tiny cottages, pathetically decorated with pictures of the Royal Family and little china ornaments. The smell of centuries of overcooked cabbage and strong tea lurked in the very walls. The women were old, and usually toothless, at thirty. Many had goitres, wens and crooked backs and other deformities associated with poverty. (1960, p.23)<sup>16</sup>

Orwell recalled watching the unemployed of Wigan during the Great Depression collecting waste coal from slag heaps, the “dumpy, shawled women, with their sacking aprons and their heavy black clogs, kneeling in the cindery mud and the bitter wind, searching eagerly for tiny chips of coal” (1963, p.92). Orwell found the custom of ‘scrambling for the coal’ as it was known as “worth seeing... Indeed I rather wonder that it has not been filmed” (p.91).<sup>17</sup>

My mother grew up during the Great Depression in the rural areas of western New South Wales. She vividly recalls the deprivation suffered by the itinerant unemployed, who called at the police station. My grandfather, at this time, was a police sergeant in charge of the local station and he would, when possible, give these men a bed in the cells and meals made from the produce of the family smallholding. According to my mother, they were from all walks of life. Local men (my mother remembers no women) who were unemployed had to file into the police station at allotted times to collect their dole. My mother has said that her father loathed this practice as he felt it treated the men like criminals. According

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<sup>16</sup> A slightly patronising comment perhaps but Mitford, who later moved to the U.S and worked lifelong for the Civil Rights Movement, felt that this and other, similar, early experiences led her to her later political allegiance.

<sup>17</sup> Orwell’s contradictory position also includes nutritional advice. While he deplores the “Society dames” who have the “cheek” to give “shopping lessons to the wives of the unemployed” (1963, p.90), he then writes about the unemployed as one would a species of exotic but feckless bird. Orwell says that while the unemployment allowance is meagre, it is framed “to suit a population with very high standards and not much notion of economy” (p.90). They need to learn to be “better managers” (p.90).

to the 1933 Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, almost a quarter of the Australian workforce was unemployed (Scott, 1998, p.80).

Writers such as Storm Jameson and Winifred Holtby drew on crisis and deprivation for their work. Jameson's *None Turn Back* (1936) describes London during the General Strike of 1926, the strong feelings of those who are supportive of the strike and those who are not. The novel, like Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), reflects not only the crisis at this time but also includes the paradoxes of the time for women, with both emancipation and containment for women, their mobility and their restrictions, their acceptance and rejection.

Emancipation came in the form of enfranchisement (which came in stages for British women but had already been granted prior to the Great War for Australian women), but also looser and less restrictive clothing. Contraception and the availability of the sanitary napkin (for those who could afford these commodities) allowed for greater mobility and better health. Although Pugh (2007) points out that there was a growing trend across classes to limit and to plan the size of the family by various means, the use of contraception meant that for some women, at least, there was a choice and one that led to improved health and improved career prospects, the Marriage Bar notwithstanding.<sup>18</sup> According to Holtby, one firm of contraceptive manufacturers produced 8,500,00 per year, while another made 72,000 per week (1935, p. 137). Unfortunately, this did not translate into a revolution for women as far as maternal mortality was concerned. While other rates of death dropped during the interwar years, including infant mortality, maternal mortality remained high (Holtby, 1935). Between 1920 and 1930, over 39,000 women died in childbirth in England and Wales (1935, p.141). A government Commission on Maternal Mortality in 1932, found that 47% of annual deaths (averaging 3,000) in childbirth were preventable (Holtby, 1935, p.139). While other areas of national health were addressed, this particular issue lagged behind. Holtby was to fictionalise this matter in her novel, *South Riding* (1936), where a woman whose health has suffered from frequent childbearing eventually dies in childbirth, with equally tragic consequences for her teenage daughter,

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<sup>18</sup> According to Pugh (2007), the working classes increasingly employed various forms of contraception, including *coitus interruptus*, but such evidence is generally anecdotal. If this were indeed the case, then aside from economic considerations, women perhaps had more control over their bodies than previously.

whose chance of a career is blighted by the expectation that she will leave school and care for the family.

Improved career prospects for women were predicated on a slow but steady revolution in domestic service. In 1931, the national conference of Labour women proposed that a charter for domestic workers be set up (Light, 2008, p.240). Although it did not come to fruition, it indicates that there was some will to organise a workforce that had largely been localised and dependent. Between the wars, domestic service and its eventual decline, despite a slight increase during the Depression (Pugh, 2000), were part of the lifeworld of every woman, from those who sought other means of employment that allowed for shorter working hours and better conditions, to the women of every class who had traditionally relied on some help in the home. Books such as *Labour Saving Hints and Ideas for the Home* (Pryor, 1998, fp.1924) were produced and the presence, absence or difficulty in retaining domestic help was a feature of writing during this period. Women's lifeworlds, whether servant or employer, were tied up with the change in domestic arrangements. Harford, alone among the writers in this thesis, worked as a domestic servant. As will be discussed in greater depth later, each of the texts is interwoven with this sub-theme of the domestic space.

The bodily space was subject to change and not just in the area of biological and reproductive function. Shorter hair became fashionable and women were dispensing with restrictive underwear such as stays and began to wear looser underclothes. Hems rose higher and clothes allowed greater freedom of movement. Less time was needed on dressing hair and body (Black, Garland & Kennett, 1982), not to mention the amount of washing and ironing that went along with the earlier, Edwardian wardrobe. These changes formed alongside modifications in domestic conditions, such as fewer servants and differences in house design, mobility and leisure.

Increased leisure, already developing through other means such as employment conditions, meant that some women had more time to read. In conjunction with this came the increase in circulation of magazines related to what were (and often still are) regarded as women's concerns: the home, child-rearing, fashion and personal care.

# Good Housekeeping

JANUARY 1937 ONE SHILLING



CARDINAL SECRETS OF SUCCESS *by*  
CANON "DICK" SHEPPARD

*A. J. Cronin • James Hilton • Margaret Lane  
Frank Swinnerton • S. P. B. Moir*

Figure 1.2 The cover of *Good Housekeeping*, January, 1937. Several of the contributors for this issue are men.

Magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* (first issue, 1920), *Woman's Weekly* (1911) and *Woman* (1937) portrayed the domestic sphere as a place where women could aspire to new levels of domestic expertise and perfection. Generally aimed at a target readership of urban women and characterising women as proficient household managers, these magazines promoted domestic material culture. They did, however, expose the contradictory nature of domestic life, much of which involves dull repetition and physical labour of one form or another and the generally accepted aspiration to unattainable perfection - in short, the 'domestic goddess': household manager, mother, wife, cook, nurse, interior decorator, craftswoman, home economist and well-read hostess; all of which is, as Blunt and Dowling (2006, p.52) maintain, "inherently unstable". The undomestic goddess, the Provincial Lady, created by Delafield, first appeared in the pages of *Time and Tide* and was a riposte to the image of the ideal woman presented in other periodicals (see Box 1.1). It became a bestseller and has remained in print ever since.

For women writers, the magazine market also meant more opportunities to write fiction and other material for these publications, although, according to Dancyger (1978), many men were also writing for magazines that were aimed specifically at women (see Figure 1.2). Many of the women writing during this period were earning an income from writing magazine pieces. Writing fiction for magazines required (and continues to require) highly structured modes of narration and plotting. Writers usually could not simply write any story. Fowler (1984, p.104) found from her survey of magazine stories during the 1930s that the following elements were present in most fictional magazine stories: "luck, the centrality of the happy ending, the individualising of evil and the solution of problems by moralising or magic". For Fowler, the narrow confines of the stories "indirectly" provide a form of social control.<sup>19</sup> For Thirkell, living in Australia at the time, her magazine articles kept the family fed and clothed although her son maintained that the pay was a pittance (McInnes, 1965).

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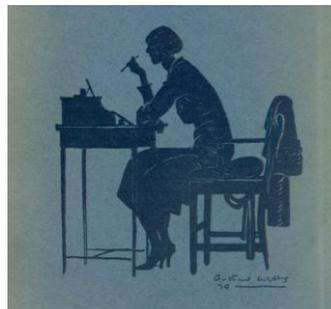
<sup>19</sup> The current guidelines for Harlequin, Mills and Boon romances (full length novels but following the style of the old *Woman's Weekly* romances) follow such a format. Despite the company publishing a variety of romance stories (from chaste to erotic), certain conditions prevail: a happy ending, the hero and the heroine truly love each other (happily ever after) and come together at the end of the story, after misunderstanding or other circumstances that keep them from declaring their love for each other at an earlier stage; the hero is strong and rarely, if ever, vulnerable and the heroine must, even if spirited and proactive, be, eventually, in some way subject to the hero. The company is successful and sub-genres flourish. See <http://www.millsandboon.co.uk/aspiringauthors.asp>

### Box 1.1

The *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) by Delafield, centres on the undomestic goddess. The Provincial Lady's life is peppered with her perceived failings as a mother, wife, householder, writer and intellectual. While being amusingly self-deprecating, she nonetheless manages to paint wry portraits of her family, friends and acquaintances. Her descriptions of domestic life, while amusing, also convey the instability of the image of the perfect woman portrayed in women's magazines.

"April 20<sup>th</sup> - Vicky [daughter] develops unmistakable measles, and doctor says that Robin [son] may follow suit any day ... Extraordinary and nightmare-like state of affairs sets in, and I alternate between making lemonade for Vicky and telling her the story of *Frederick and the Picnic* upstairs, and bathing Robin's pink-eye with boracic lotion and reading *The Coral Island* to him downstairs... Robert [husband], in this crisis, is less helpful than I could wish, and takes up characteristically masculine attitude that We are All Making a Great Fuss about Very Little and the whole thing has been got up for the express purpose of putting him to inconvenience." (1930, p.149)

After her own illness, the Provincial Lady reflects on her convalescence: "This sort of thing so very unlike picturesque convalescence in novel, when heroine is gladdened by sight of spring flowers, sunshine, and what not. No mention ever made of Rates, or anything like them." (1930, p.154)



Detail of cover from the 1934 reprint

The provincial lady also feels inadequate intellectually, despite being a published writer:

"Conversation very, very literary and academic, my own part in it being mostly confined to saying that I haven't yet read it, and, it's down on my library list, but hasn't come, so far. After what feels like some hours of this, Miss P. becomes personal, and says that I strike her as being a woman who has never known fulfilment. Have often thought exactly the same thing myself but this does not prevent me from feeling entirely furious with Miss P. for saying so. She either does not perceive, or is indifferent to, my fury, as she goes on to ask accusingly whether I realise that I have no *right* to let myself become a domestic beast of burden, with no interests beyond the nursery and the kitchen. What, for instance, she demands rousingly, have I read within the last two years? To this I reply weakly that I have read *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which is the only thing I seem able to remember." (1930, pp. 245, 246)

Her pieces were written for both Australian and British periodicals. Throughout her life, Sayers wrote for magazines but rarely for those aimed specifically at women. Kavan's articles were mostly for *Horizon* but for many other women, their first work as writers of fiction were for magazines.

For women readers, the domestic space, already a site of material consumption, also became the focus of their reading matter, with various magazines in Britain and Australia being founded during this time.<sup>20</sup> Men were reading these magazines as well and Scott (1998, pp.76,77) makes the point that several readers of Australian magazines during this period commented on a male readership in their households and certainly, men contributed to readers' pages.

As professionals, women were able to continue with their work from home. As is the case now, writing was an uncertain profession, with very few writers able to live solely from their income as a writer. Sayers, whose novels were bestsellers, worked for some years as a copywriter with Benson's advertising agency, while Kavan worked as an interior decorator and property developer as well as an artist. As professionals, women writers were often trapped in the borderland where other working women were found but their work was generally not as well paid as their male counterparts.

Sara Paretsky (see Figure 1.3), a late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century writer found this to be the case and in response, founded Sisters in Crime:

Female crime writers, [Paretsky] discovered, were *seven times less likely* [my italics] to have their work reviewed than male crime writers. Libraries and bookshops, too, would barely give them a look-in. (Phipps, 2006, p.4).

As with women writing during the interwar years, Paretsky and her colleagues found that they had to assert their right to be accorded equal status with male crime writers. Women crime writers were the bestsellers of their day in the

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<sup>20</sup> *The Australian Women's Weekly* was founded in 1933 (Scott, 1998) and the *British Woman's Weekly* in 1911 (Dancyger, 1978). Australian women were readers of both British and Australian Magazines. My mother subscribed to the *British Woman's Weekly*. Its pink masthead is a strong memory from childhood. Magazines such as *Woman's Weekly* were another form of the network of material practices of reading, writing, production and consumption that crossed the empire.

interwar period, more widely read, generally, than their male counterparts (Mann, 1981) but their work was taken less seriously than that written by men and generally received less critical acclaim.



**Figure 1.3.** Sara Paretsky at the University Women’s Club, London, May, 2004. “...maybe men write twice as well as women but not seven times.” The photograph to the left is of Margery Allingham, an interwar novelist much-admired by Paretsky.

Agatha Christie’s work, despite its modernist outlook (Light, 1991), continues to be denigrated and yet, as a professional, Christie’s output was second to none.<sup>21</sup> Sayers was treated with contempt by literary critics (as is discussed at some

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<sup>21</sup> Light (1991p.61- 62) makes the case that Christie was both conservative and modernist as a writer:

“Christie ... offers a modern sense of the unstable limits of respectability; ... she portrays a society of strangers whose social exchanges have become theatrical and dis severed from a sense of place”. Christie’s work has a “modernist irony”.

length later in the thesis) and Thirkell's prodigious professional production is barely acknowledged.

### *Outline of thesis*

The early chapters of the thesis are designed to flesh out and to give background to the later, empirical chapters, where the focus narrows to the five texts and their authors. This first chapter, as well as being an introduction, is designed to provide a backdrop for all of the later chapters, without, in good storytelling tradition, giving the story/stories 'away'. It is intended as a guide to the rest of the thesis.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of the research undertaken, I offer, in *Chapter Two*, instead of a comprehensive literature review, one that has as its focus the engagement of geography with literature. The chapter is a history and commentary on the work of geographers in this area, spanning the early work of British and Italian geographers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the present day. I draw on the work most closely connected with literature and geography, but also examine geographical notions of space, home and place, offering my own position within this matrix of material practice and geographical thought. A more comprehensive literature review would necessarily encompass a broader terrain. The aim of this chapter is deliberately to narrow the focus to a discussion which subsequently leads into the broader methodological and interdisciplinary concerns of *Chapter Three*.

*Chapter Three*, while drawing an outline of theoretical and methodological considerations, also draws on literature from other disciplines such as literary criticism and history. In this chapter, I discuss the importance of feminist literary criticism, new historicism, landscape and social history for my own work, drawing together a framework for the thesis with its strong focus on five texts and their respective but interrelated cultural matrices. This chapter discusses, in depth, the approach I taken for the five texts in question and the broader issues regarding narrative, texts by women and the continuum of silencing and displacement that is a feature of the production and reception of women's writing in the Western European tradition.

*Chapter Four* is the first of the ‘empirical’ chapters, giving a thick description of the geoliterary terrains of the novel *Hostages to Fortune* (1933) by Cambridge. This chapter, while keeping the text within close focus also explores broader themes of domestic fiction including a discussion of domestic space and conceptions of ‘home’. The relationship between author and text is also discussed along these lines, as is the context of the novel’s production and reception. This chapter further discusses the place of domestic fiction during this period, when women began to examine and critique their domestic lives through fiction in greater detail than previously.

*Chapter Five* explores the geoliterary terrains of Kavan’s *A Charmed Circle* (1929) and its provincial domestic setting, but beyond the setting are the psychological terrains of the novel and the relationship between the author’s lifeworld and her fiction. Kavan’s work spanned some decades and her early work is often overlooked in favour of her more surreal, post-World War II fiction. In the chapter, I give prominence to this early work and to Kavan’s exploration of the terrains of the mind and emotions. I also examine the relationship between fiction and the writer’s life. Of the five novelists, it is perhaps Kavan whose work has been most picked over and related directly to her life, for her biographers have been assiduous in finding ‘fact’ in her fiction. I argue that the threads that are drawn between writer and work are far more complex and open to interpretation than are usually depicted, while acknowledging the fascination that this orientation holds for those who work between fiction and lifeworld.

*Chapter Six* is devoted to Sayers’ novel, *The Nine Tailors*, a detective novel set in the Fens of East Anglia. This is the best known of the five novels under focus but it is an interesting example of the detective genre in that there is no murder. In fact, the author called the work a “poetic romance”. Central to the novel is its exploration of the spiritual landscape, the wrestling with moral questions within a setting that goes beyond being merely a plot device for a mystery. Sayers uses the landscape and the material presence of the church (a central focus of the novel) to explore questions of moral and spiritual significance. Another interesting aspect of this novel is that it was seen as pretentious by certain literary critics of the day. Sayers was condemned by

them for not knowing 'her place', which was as a middlebrow detective writer. A few years after the production of this novel, Sayers stopped writing fiction and instead wrote as a religious playwright, lay theologian and translator.

*Chapter Seven*, while staying with the theme of the domestic space, explores the complex metaphor of the 'Home Front' during the Great War, moving from Britain to Australia. The novel, *The Invaluable Mystery* (1922) by Harford, written in 1922, is set during the Great War. It is the most urban of all the novels and yet its geographical location is never straightforward, the geoliterary terrains ranging from the imperial through urban isolation to domestic immobility. Tangled within these geoliterary terrains are the suppression of the novel, its author's political position and her resistance to convention at the time of writing. This is the most overtly political of the novels, its controversial themes as relevant today as they were in 1922.

*Chapter Eight* also crosses the imperial cultural network. *High Rising* (1933), written from the other end of the political spectrum by Thirkell, idealises England and English provincial life. Her time in Melbourne and her homesickness for England, as well as other events in her life, led Thirkell to create a therapeutic landscape that was, in her own words, an 'escape'. The domestic nature of the novel is twined with the portrait of a working single mother, a character who would reappear in many of Thirkell's novels set in the fictional Bassetshire. This chapter, using the novel as its starting point, examines the life of the professional woman novelist of the interwar years, the occupation of this borderland being heavily populated for a number of reasons by the time war broke out in 1939.

The final chapter draws together the themes of the thesis by way of conclusion, offering a summary of findings from close examination of the five novels under focus, including the lifeworlds of their authors. This chapter also offers a more personal understanding of my own position and engagement with these texts.

At this point it is worth making comment on some structural aspects of the thesis. For each of the empirical chapters (*Four to Eight*), a series of text boxes has been added. The plot and themes of each novel are summarised, a brief

biography of each author is outlined (including other works by the author and their date of publication). Some contextual detail is also given, noting cultural and political events for the year of publication for each novel (with the exception of Harford's novel, the year of its writing being substituted, as the novel was published in 1987). The choice of material for contextual information is necessarily subjective but each of the events listed provides a few pieces of the social historical jigsaw of each novel's cultural matrix.

Writing in the early 1990s, Light (1991, p.16) suggested that it was "still a maverick suggestion" among academics 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". Light argued for a less rigid division between public and private life. In academic work, this has certainly happened. Geographers have carried out forensic examinations of material and cultural practices, their focus on the spatial informing the need for contextualising and situating the everyday within the cultural matrix. This thesis is a contribution to those examinations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Geography, Narrative and Place

Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode. (Carter, 1997, p. 36)

I must here, once for all, inform you that all this will be more exactly delineated and explained in a map, now in the hands of the engraver, which, with many other pieces and developments to this work, will be added to the end of the twentieth volume - not to swell the work - I detest the thought of such a thing; - but by way of commentary, scholium, illustration, and key to such passages, incidents or innuendos as shall be thought to be either of private interpretation, or of dark or doubtful meaning after my life and my opinions shall have been read over (now don't forget the meaning of the word) by all the *world*; (Sterne, 1975, p.64; fp. 1759)

Geography is a theoretically synthetic and constantly evolving discipline. (Hubbard, Kitchen, et al., 2002, p.238)

As I work on this chapter, I am sitting in an apartment in Vienna from which I can see the *Reisenrad*, the giant ferris wheel that dominates the skyline of the city as much as the *Stephansdom* (Cathedral). It is a useful landmark to orientate myself when I walk about the city. It is also a cultural landmark for the area, as well as a cinematic 'moment', conjuring up images of Orson Welles and the sound of *The Harry Lime Theme* from the film, *The Third Man*, an adaptation of the novel by Graham Greene (1951)<sup>22</sup>. All of which is an unintentionally pretentious way of introducing this chapter, this map of the work. Just as the *Reisenrad* provides orientation, memory, readings of the landscape and cultural links, it is the aim of this chapter to provide an orientation for the work, a reading of 'Big G' Geography as well as my own cultural links and reading of the map.

Despite my arguing for an interdisciplinary approach to geoliterary terrains elsewhere in this work, this chapter devotes itself to geography and the engagement with narrative by geographers, exploring this in relation to place and other, related facets of geography. Although there is an element of critique in the review of the literature, there is also an acknowledgement of the work that has gone before; an affectionate family portrait springs to mind. There are

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<sup>22</sup> The book was published after the release of the film (1949).

gaps in the literature, to be sure and there have been approaches that have left questions unanswered in the history of geography and its approach to literary sources. That does not mean, however, that what I advocate is the definitive approach. Nor is it the whole answer. Rather it is new wine in old bottles, the remnants of the old extant within. I also endeavour in this chapter to provide a new reading of the old geographic texts, bearing in mind that my own map to this point is significantly different from that of many of the geographers whose work is under review. Which is, as Tristram Shandy would say, as good a place to start as any other.

In this chapter I outline my own route to academic geography by way of introducing the history of geography's concern with imaginative literature. In exploring the work of geographers in previous decades, I also trace my map and the map of this work. As well as the history of Geography's concern with Literature, I discuss the influence of Geography and work by other geographers on my own work. This is, in many ways, not a guide book but a travelogue, and, since no kind Boswell is there to recount my travels for me, I trawl my memory for specific points of encounter. More pertinently, one could think of this journey as a series of rides on the *Reisenrad*, each time sitting in a different compartment, each time seeing something different on the ground while incorporating into that image what has been seen before. Many of the key thinkers alluded to in this thesis have climbed aboard at some point. Imagine a ferris wheel with Darby, Pocock, Massey, Gregory, Kristeva, Greenblatt, Gallagher, Schama, Sharp, Derrida, Foucault, Philo, Barthes, Duncan, Cresswell, Matless, McDowell and Rose all clambering on board at various stages. By the time I encountered Darby, however, Kristeva, Foucault and Derrida were already on board, having started the ride in another context. So there is no linear, historical trajectory for my journey but a haphazard one; one of which I am trying to make some sense and order in this chapter. Just as Tristram Shandy cannot describe a simple journey of mounting the stairs without numerous divagations, nor can I, but academic rigour obliges me to be less picnic-minded than Shandy.

The first section of this chapter discusses the three basic approaches taken by academic geographers in their exploration of the relationship between

geography and imaginative literature. This section also follows my own encounters with work by geographers. This includes: regional geography, humanistic geography and the ‘cultural turn’. The second section is devoted to particular, substantive themes that are present in the work of academic geographers, ones that are central to the work in this thesis. These are: home, nation, spirituality and therapeutics. Some of these themes are also linked to work by geographers that specifically addresses material, cultural, political and religious aspects of interwar Britain. The third section of the chapter explores conceptual inquiry into the nature of texts, context, literary consumption and production. These are linked to broader conceptual explorations of the nature of space, gender and power, particularly work by Massey, McDowell and Friedman. The final section moves on to advocate my own position with regard to geographical inquiry, which in turn leads to the next chapter that is devoted to the interdisciplinary nature of this work.

### Geography and approaches to narrative

#### *Regional Geography, Darby and the Fens*

Regional geography often engaged with literature in an attempt to add dimension to descriptions of regions and particular places. For Hudson (1982), the interest of regional geographers in literature was twofold: a concern with imaginative writing and its description of landscapes or the achievement of “regional synthesis” (p.365); and the usefulness of regional information contained within imaginative works. Beyond that, Hudson also suggests that the more important role that literature plays in geographical inquiry is as an “aid to the geographical imagination”, one that complements regional studies. Gilbert (1972) suggested that the work of regional geographers and regional novelists was similar because the regional geographer’s aim was to “integrate the multitude of seemingly disconnected facts about nature and man [sic] in the region he [sic] is describing” (p.124). Drawing on texts by regional novelists of both genders, Gilbert privileged the insights of novelists (describing them variously as pioneers and prophets) above those of geographers, finding that the novelists “display many merits that geographers can recognise and envy” (p.124).

Darby also drew on imaginative texts in his regional inquiries, writing first about Hardy's Wessex (1948). Darby's paper on Hardy's Wessex is frequently cited but it is worth investigating Darby's work on the Fens as well. His work on this regional geography (1971, 1983) drew on literary sources as well as archives and other non-fictional sources. Darby's extensive research and writing about the Fens (1940, 1971, and 1983) borrowed from literary accounts, oral history, poetry and songs as situated sources for the history of the Fens. For instance, when evoking the medieval Fens, he engages with the *Life of St Guthlac*, a "semi-fictitious" (Philo 2002, p.29) account of the life of a fenland hermit from the Dark Ages, written by a monk named Felix. As Philo comments:

[q]uoting from Felix's *Life of St Guthlac*, which Darby transparently positioned as a work of literature, an 'incredible' tale, the effect was to give the reader a heightened feeling for the landscape in question, in both its physical and human guises, and thus to enliven what was otherwise quite a 'dry' historical regional construction. Darby betrayed some unease about using such a source, however, dismissing the more imaginative glosses of Felix's *Life* ... as 'irrelevant to the argument' and he preferred instead to suggest that these glosses pointed to an underlying 'spirit'... which must have informed how contemporaries perceived Crowland and the surrounding fenlands (p.30)

Philo goes on to comment that "what much of this early geographical endeavour *really* accomplished was not the recovery of realistic landscapes from novels and poems but rather the teasing out of what might be termed 'evocative landscapes'. I will return to evocative and therapeutic landscapes later in this chapter but it is interesting to note here that in his work, Darby quotes poems to demonstrate the resistance of some fenlanders to the drainage of the Fens in 1619 (Darby, 1983, p.60). In this instance, he tries to provide contemporary opinion on the new drainage scheme, adding contextual, literary accounts of the landscape's history. This is not the rifling of a storehouse of appropriate quotations to embellish an academic landscape history but rather it is intended as additional information for the reader in literary form. The use of poetry is also part of the representation of what Philo calls "evocative landscapes", landscapes that move beyond descriptive detail and the relation of 'facts'. Although some early work in Geography (Sharp, 2000) tended to view novels and

poetry as coffers full of geographical gems, the work of Darby shows that alternate approaches to geographical interpretations of imaginative writing were possible. Darby's work was among the first pieces of geographical literature I encountered and it struck me that his work on Hardy's Wessex, interesting as it is, if for nothing else than as a milestone in the history of geography and literature, is of less importance in this context than his work on the Fens. Darby's discussion of Hardy's Wessex is largely descriptive and topographical, written from the perspective of the regional geographer and in an attempt to describe the terrains and locales of Hardy's Wessex. His work on the Fens is much more nuanced and draws on a number of sources.



**Figure 2.1.** Harvesting with a boat at Ramsey, August, 1912. (Darby, 1983, p. 211)<sup>23</sup>

For the writer Doreen Wallace, Darby's work on the Fens inspired her fictional text set in the region, *Land from the Waters* (1944). Wallace explained that she was indebted to Darby for the help he gave her in her researches and acknowledged his work, *The Draining of the Fens* (1940) as the basis of the more factual accounts in her novel (Baker, 1997, p.269).<sup>24</sup> Darby's work, drawing as it

<sup>23</sup> The poetry quoted by Darby as part of his description of the topography and economic activity is a child's rhyme from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century:

Kyme, God knows  
Where no corn grows,  
Nothing but a little hay;  
And the water comes,  
And takes it all away. (1983, p.142)

<sup>24</sup> Coincidentally, Wallace was a contemporary of Sayers at Somerville College, Oxford (see Leonardi, 1989). Wallace married a farmer and the farming life in which she was involved often prevented her from writing (although this is not apparent from the list of titles she produced in her lifetime). An activist, Wallace also campaigned for social and rural justice throughout her life. Sayers was later to draw on Wallace's life in her novel, *Gaudy Night* (1934), in which Sayers scrutinises women and work, one of her recurrent themes. (See Simeone & Perriam, 2004)

does on fictional accounts and poetry, is beyond mere topographic description. It is the regional geography of the Fens as written by Darby that opens up possibilities for the use of imaginative literature *alongside* 'factual' archival accounts and sources.

Jay (1975) also draws on regional geography to explore the fictional works of Francis Brett Young, a series of novels set in the Black Country. The author draws parallels between economic and demographic change, their development in the region and Brett Young's works. It would be mischievous to say that Jay 'mines' the novels for their regional character as the interpretation is more nuanced than that. There is, however, an acceptance of the novels as mirroring society and the paper lacks the finer brush strokes of Darby, which draws on a network of material practices within the region. Jay's concern about the neglect of the author privileges geographers and "men [sic] of literature" (1975, p.71) above others as being the commentators best able to examine the works. This began to change with the advent of humanistic geography, when the framework for investigating imaginative works was given added depth and breadth.

### *Pocock and Humanistic Geography*

My next encounter with this type of work was that of D.C.D Pocock. Unaware as yet, of the interesting advent of humanistic geography and its impact on my work, I was attracted by Pocock's breadth of engagement with literary sources. This led me to look more closely at the development of humanistic geography. The work of humanistic geographers was significant in opening the discipline to the relationships between people and places, human subjectivity and spatiality. Porteous (1985) argued for an approach that explored fiction and other imaginative works beyond region, examining binaries of inside/outside, home/away.

That human subjectivity, society and space were often mediated in cultural terms, was something that humanistic geographers began to explore (Buttimer, 1980; Tuan, 1978). The development of humanistic geography in the late 1970s, its understandings and interpretations of landscape, people and place and its

“catholic approach to method” (Ley & Samuels, 1978, p.14), meant that imaginative texts were examined in more complex ways than before. Readers were regarded, in the humanistic approach, as creative beings capable of interpreting what they read, rather than as “neutral” receivers (Pocock, 1981, p.11). As humanistic geographers turned increasingly to people as interpreters of their own spaces, so they also turned to place (Salter, 1981; Tuan, 1978) as it was depicted in imaginative texts, particularly fiction. Geographers as humanistic researchers looked closely at the depiction of landscapes in fiction as a means of understanding and knowledge, as part of the “general learning process whereby values, attitudes and aspirations are acquired” (Pocock, 1981, p.13).

Pocock has had a ‘bad press’ (Brosseau, 1995, Sharp, 2000, Hubbard, Kitchen et al., 2002) in recent times. His conception of the transcendence of literature notwithstanding, Pocock sought to broaden out the response of geographers to literature.<sup>25</sup> His work added dimension to the ways in which geographers engaged with imaginative sources. Novels, for example, were not merely sources of regional description but indicators of other social and political contexts within which works were produced, and the response of readers to these works was also considered. Pocock’s (1981) examination of place in novels sought to “enrich” human experience and to offer an “understanding of the human condition” (1981, p.337).

Identifying a series of binary concepts of place in contemporary humanistic approaches, Pocock (1981, p.345) explained that:

imaginative literature thus offers the geographer a valuable storehouse in which to explore his [sic] central theme of man-environment relationship ... it is a source of wide interest to current humanistic approaches where experience has been conceptualized in terms of insidedness-outsidedness, lived reciprocity, or as a dialectic between rest and movement.

Pocock’s (1979) work on the depiction of the North (broadly speaking, the North of England) in literature brings together literary imaginings and geographical

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<sup>25</sup> By transcendence, I mean the placing of literature as an art form that is somehow above the everyday, an aesthetic endeavour that produces high Art and whose practitioners have insights and understandings that are beyond the scope of others’ imaginings. Writers are seen, in this context, as having access to a higher plane, transcending the ‘ordinary’.

understanding (1979). His thesis was that the “image-geography” (1979, p.73) of the North was a false one and that authors of fiction had been consistent in presenting a particular image of the North in their work. Industrialisation and climate, according to Pocock, have been persistently portrayed in fiction as a means of conveying the harshness of the landscape. Smoke, “depressing” townscapes and “disfigurement” of the environment by mining and industrialisation were used by various authors to portray the North as a “place from which to escape” (1979, p.67) This claim echoes his earlier work on environmental perception (Pocock & Hudson, 1978). Pocock questioned the environmental determinism of Victorian writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens, who have brought forth from the imagined harsh landscape, equally harsh characters, devoid of sentiment. He asserted that his examination of the literature of the North “reveal[s] a consistency in projection which may be recognized as a key contributor to the total image-geography of the North, which in many ways is now a false or alien geography”; and he attributed its persistence to “the very nature and resilience of the mind... fed by the unequivocal presentation of literature, disseminated in the first instance ... through formal channels of education.” (p.73). He hinted at a complex process of perpetuation and repetition, in which the landscape of the North is depicted and received in a particular way that comes to be understood in popular conception as a form of ‘reality’ and the expression “it’s grim up North” draws on this particular conception.

Pocock’s research, while perhaps tending toward a general-humanity, applicable-to-all interpretation, nevertheless opened up the field of inquiry into the relationship between literature and geography that offered more complex interpretations. The body of work produced in this area by Pocock and others explored a more complex relationship between humans and their environment. Foreshadowing the concerns of Massey about the geography of power and the conceptualising of space in social terms, humanistic geography and the work of Pocock in particular laid the foundations for a more divergent approach to literature and imaginative writing, already hinting at perplexing and problematic socio-cultural concerns.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Massey, a Mancunian (she says so in the broadcast and yes, she is a Liverpool FC supporter), echoes Pocock’s concerns about the image-geography of the North, mentioning the divide between London/the South-East and “the rest of the country” (2006). “The very fact of that

All of which is an attempt at recovery of the voice of humanistic research. Old wine as it may seem now it was, even so, very new wine at the time. Having gleaned most of my geography from the reading of novels and of history (the gap between formal reading in Geography, last experienced at age 11, having spanned some decades), I turned to this work with interest and imagined the significance of the impact of this work upon geography. I am particularly interested in the idea of Pocock's "image-geography": the ways in which we perceive landscapes and environments and the subsequent identities we project onto these places and their inhabitants. It is not a straightforward process, nor is the influence exerted by the relationship between the cultural, the topographic and the imaginative.<sup>27</sup>

The spread of inquiry for humanistic geographers included the bodily space, inequality and place-making, drawing on imaginative works and other texts as sources. In his foreword to a collection of work on humanistic geography (1980), Hägerstrand tackles the subject of nostalgic longing for the "green valleys we remember". The longing or the evoking of the green valleys is often implicit and/or explicit in earlier work by geographers in their examination of 19<sup>th</sup> Century novels and novelists. Even Pocock occasionally draws out a *nostalgie de la boue* when discussing the novels set in the industrial North. Hägerstrand evokes the "poverty and harsh social pecking-order" of the longed-for, bygone age as the last thing that is needed for "decent human existence" (1980, ii). The collection of works on which the author is commenting was written in response to concerns among humanistic geographers that humanistic endeavours were evolving into "jargonizing and manipulative tokenism" (Buttimer, 1980, p.17). The authors in the collection, among them, Buttimer, Seamon and Wilson, attempted to develop a language for inquiry that "might permit a more sensitive relationship" (p.17) between humans and their social world. This was a feature of emerging geographical inquiry into many areas of geography,

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divide, of that geographical variation, has an impact on how the country works" (2006). See also, Davidson (2005).

<sup>27</sup> My 'image-geography' gleaned mostly from non-geographic sources projects Orson Welles onto the image of the *Reisenrad*, inseparable in many ways from the ferris wheel as visual orientation and even, how I feel about the city of Vienna. There is a relationship between the topography and the cultural landscape that informs those feelings and, more importantly, my perceptions.

including the exploration of imaginative literature and paved the way for what came to be known as 'the cultural turn'.

### *The 'Cultural Turn'*

The cultural turn continued the trend towards qualitative research in geography. Its focus was the agency and the production of culture from a more critical perspective. It was a "reorientation of human geography's interdisciplinary concerns toward ... cultural studies" (Barnett, 2002, p.379). Matley recognised the complexity of the relationship between topography and literary imaginings, commenting that literary geography involves "a totality of influences, physical, cultural, social, and economic, which a person absorbs by living in a particular place at a particular time" (1987, p.130). The recognition of a more intricate understanding of the relationship between Geography and literature evolved with the 'cultural turn' in the early 1990s, which broadened the sphere with which geographers engaged, the "cultural stuff" of human existence (Philo, 2000, p.28). Seeing 'landscape as text' involved more than simply analysing the relationship between author and landscape. It also embraced the political sphere (Cresswell, 1993), discourse analysis, postcolonial and feminist readings of texts (McDowell, 1996). The more cadenced understandings of regional and national identity were explored by cultural geographers in the symbolic landscapes of literary fiction (Daniels & Rycroft, 1993). As "culture serves to encourage the development of symbols" (Muir, 1999, p.289) literature and dominant discourses, it also encourages a sense of cultural identity through legend and myth-making associated with place, the shared narratives that "bear the imprint of the individual yet are more important windows into ... shared world views" (Bird, 2002). Geographers promoting the new cultural geography also argued that "by largely ignoring culture as the fundamental process in shaping societies, geographers had created sterile accounts of what were rich and complex human landscapes" (Hubbard et al., 2002, p.58).

My own research has been influenced by these understandings of the perplexing and often contradictory 'witch's brew' that is an amalgam of cultural processes. The cultural turn argued for research into literature and imaginative sources that examined the role of culture in shaping and reflecting the richness and

diversity of the human landscape. In addition, the role of literature expanded to incorporate not just rural or supposedly 'natural' landscapes, but was also concerned with the urban landscape (Daniels & Rycroft, 1993; Duncan, 1990) and the complications of the rural (Halfacree, 2003). Building on the earlier work of geographers, cultural geography concerned itself with yet more complex perceptions and outcomes in its interpretation of the cultural process. Claval (2004) comments that the cultural turn became a "broadening of the discipline" (p.328) and that it offered the means "to grasp human beings simultaneously in what they do and what they dream and try to transform into tangible reality" (p.328). Although the notion of 'reality' is open to many permutations and interpretations, the idea of a connection between people, culture and everyday life is a powerful one. Light's (1991) earlier plea for the exploration of the everyday was answered by cultural geographers who embraced the intricacies of cultural and social life in their inquiries.

Research into the cultural process threw up some concerns that did not go unnoticed by geographers. There was disquiet, expressed by Philo (2000) and others (Hubbard et al, 2002, p.62), that the cultural turn led to areas such as political and economic geography "making too many accommodations with a cultural orientation" (Philo, 2000, p.28). There was a danger, according to Philo of marginalising "the stuff of everyday social practices, relations and struggles which underpin social group formation" (Philo, 2000, p.37). Shapiro (2004, p.23) too, points out that some cultural interpretations of texts mean that "landscape is susceptible of being idealized in such a way that we occlude the real connection of land with human activity", which would, in turn, mean a divorce between landscape and social worlds. The complexity of social worlds and their depictions in imaginative texts is echoed in Philo's recommendation that geographers patiently excavate the "grain of component social lives, social worlds and social spaces" (Philo, 2000, p.37). These words are constantly before me in this work, along with others, as a reminder that, however caught up one may be with theoretical interpretation and personal viewpoint, the contextual, material worlds of the texts and authors under scrutiny merit that patient excavation. In fact, the core of my theoretical interpretation aims to recover

and contextualise the “grain of component lives, social worlds and social spaces” comprised in the study of these authors and these texts.<sup>28</sup>

Cultural geographers also looked to gender and its role in the construction and representation of culture (Cosgrove, 1989). Cosgrove cites Avery’s work (1988) on the literature of the Canadian prairie to illustrate the different constructions placed by women on “nature and human relations with the earth” (p.569) that are quite different from the masculinist interpretations of frontier life. Osborne echoes this in his work on “texts of place” (1996). Despite the author’s insistence on the “power of the authorial imagination” being privileged (p.29), he explores a more intricate web of meaning for texts, both their intertextuality and what he terms their ‘extratextuality’, the context of both writer and reader (p.29). Osborne also argues against the notion of the death of the author (explored in some depth in the following chapter) and against the idea of texts being merely mirrors. In addition, he examines the relationship between reader and writer as one where authors provide “a lexicon and syntax” for the reader’s “engagement with place” (p.38).

Later work by Jacobs and Nash (2003) investigated the ‘death’ of, or move away from, cultural geography and the implications of this for feminist geography. In the paper, the authors argue that instead of “entombing cultural geography” (2003, p.268) they “assume that culture is something that circulates ... in an inventive field of social practices” (p.268); that culture should remain central to feminist inquiry.<sup>29</sup> McDowell and Rose also view questions of gender through a cultural lens. There may be slight variances of view at times, but the

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<sup>28</sup> Lando’s survey of geography and literature (1996), pays homage to the Italian geographers such as Mori, who, as long ago as the 1920s, were drawing on imaginative sources for their work. This comprehensive survey straddles both humanistic endeavours and the later work of cultural geographers. While a useful paper for bringing together the endeavours of many in this area, there is a lack of engagement with feminist inquiry (Lando discusses “man/environment” concerns on page 10).

<sup>29</sup> Some of the concerns raised in this paper by Jacobs and Nash regarding disciplinary exclusion are raised by Lorimer in his paper on cultural geography (2007). Lorimer’s concerns stem from the possibility of a dominant strand of geographers adhering to non-representational theory (NRT) excluding others (in a number of ways) and a concern about “increased intellectual fragmentation” (p.97). More eloquently than I can, Lorimer worries over the “lack of connective wiring that taps into existing circuit-board of geographical issues and concerns” (2007, p.97). My intention in this chapter is to tap into the existing circuit-board of Geography and to add continuity to cultural/feminist inquiry, without, at the same time, appearing to use an ad hoc, ‘pick and mix’ approach that is ungrounded. This and the following chapter, it is hoped, will produce something a little more coherent.

engagement with culture is one that concerns feminist geographers (McEwan, 2001; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Domosh, 1999).<sup>30</sup>

If, on the *Reisenrad*, one has different views from different points as the wheel turns, so one has different views of different social worlds when looking at the materiality of texts.<sup>31</sup> Matless (2000) warns against neglecting the materiality of texts. Others (Brace, 2001; Sharp, 2000; Brosseau, 1995) have argued for consideration of the material processes of production of texts. The material circumstances of production and reception are elements that flesh out and give meaning to the ways in which texts circulate in our lives and the lives of others. In turn, if one is to consider the materiality of texts, the cultural implications of texts and their contexts of production, one must also explore notions of space and place.

What follows are some short reflections on various aspects of geography as they relate to some of the sub-themes of my inquiry. Given the strong focus on the domestic throughout the examination of each of the five novels, this review of geography with a big 'G' would not be complete without some exploration of the geography of home. Linked with this and particularly in view of the permeation of nation and identity in everyday life in the aftermath of war, are understandings of nation, identity and empire and their presence in narratives during this period. Historical geographers have explored these themes in a variety of ways, some of which will be examined. Drawing on notions of identity in relation to place and narrative, spiritual landscapes will be discussed in terms of geographical inquiry by historical geographers and others. Finally, in this section, therapeutic landscapes will be featured, particularly the work of Gesler and Philo in this area. All of these sub-themes are related to the works discussed in later chapters. Polymath geographers, it seems, cast their nets widely.

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<sup>30</sup> The variance of voice can often lead to multiple claims about culture. Surgeoner's (2007) work on the writing of Aritha van Herk conveys confusing messages about gender and intertextuality in Surgeoner's exploration of a "literary cartography of the Canadian North" (p. 641)

<sup>31</sup> The materiality of texts as material objects: books and their circulation within a network of material practices and objects.

## Geography, identity and landscape

### *Geographies of 'home'*

The strong focus on the domestic space in this thesis operates in a broader context of feminist inquiry but also within the work of geographers in this area. Domosh (1998) highlights the richness of the “territory” of the home for understanding “the social and the spatial” (p.281). Narratives of the home involve the materiality of its space as well as the emotional lives of inhabitants and the “everyday practices, lived experiences, social relations [and] memories” (Blunt, 2005, p.506). The “unsettled interplay” between home and culture is a feature of domestic narratives, as is the tension between the public and the private. Drawn into this tension for geographers are the geographies of women over the ‘life course’ (Katz & Monk, 1993), the interplay between home, mobility and the different stages of life for women. In the interwar years, this tension grew as post-Great War, women’s mobility and experiences of home were challenged and changed. And, for many during these years, the design of the home changed, as well as its siting. Orwell’s rows of semi-detached houses (1948, p.12) became more prevalent as suburbs were created and expanded. It is one of the features of the period, explored in novels: the tension between the nostalgia for green space and the spread of the bungalows in the suburbs. Whitehand and Carr (1999), in their investigation of the garden suburbs of the interwar years examine the changes wrought by their development. The authors comment that the expansion of the suburbs occurred with “little or no systematic investigation” (p.483) despite their being controversial (Brace, 1999).

Within the suburbs of Britain, family groupings, leisure and mobility began to change (Matless, 1998). The domestic space itself began to be configured differently as technology improved both plumbing and electricity, as well as domestic appliances (but, as shall be seen later, the benefits to women of the improved technology in terms of a reduction in physical labour were slow in coming). Despite the advance of the suburbs and their bungalows, overcrowding was still widespread (Llewellyn, 2004). The period was one of contradiction and this was a feature of the domestic space. On the one hand, home took on improved material form for many, and on the other, isolation and changes to

communal spaces meant that human interaction, the public and the private life of inhabitants, began to change.

Domestic life was also fragmented by events such as the General Strike of 1926, when, as Sunley points out (1988) poverty and deprivation permeated the domestic space as relief efforts were not enough to sustain families. At this time, the Poor Law authorities had a good deal of power and the Workhouse, where families were segregated, was still a feature of life for the very poor and the infirm or elderly. The Depression also altered the domestic space where men were often to be found at home and women tried to make ends meet by 'going out' to work as cleaners or laundry workers.

This brief overview would not be complete without some discussion of work by Blunt and Dowling (2006).<sup>32</sup> Their book, *Home*, is a comprehensive survey of home, the geographies of home and the work of geographers on home and the domestic space. I have already drawn on this work in some of my introductory remarks and will do so again later. Here, I want to focus on the authors' engagement with the concept of home in fiction. The authors comment on the continuity of focus on the home in fiction written by women. While the fiction tackles differing themes such as nostalgia, "the foreign" (p.49), race, dwelling and mourning, Blunt and Dowling are conscious of the tensions which operate in these writings of home, the domestic narratives that explore often contradictory spatial and emotional understandings of 'home'. What the authors present, explore and discuss is home as a site of multiple and contradictory themes operating on several levels. These themes will be explored in later chapters in relation to the texts under examination.

### *Nation, identity and narrative*

'Home' also encompasses the national and one's sense of identity. "When are you going 'home'?" people often ask me, meaning, "When are you going to Australia?" Having been born *there* and now living *here* (in the UK), home, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a moveable feast. Does this displacement or re-placement mean a confused identity? Sometimes but not always, although

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<sup>32</sup> This work is particularly pertinent to this thesis, traversing as it does, Australia and Britain.

having two passports can be confusing. Tangled up with all of this is the resonance of the imperial legacy, particularly since my imbibing of British fiction gave me a strong grounding in British culture.<sup>33</sup> The imbibing of culture meant that I could even recognise a smell, simply by having read about it. The absorption of culture through imaginative works occurs on several levels, from the overt intentions of the author, to, at a subconscious level, the taken-for-granted acceptance of cultural icons and values that operate between reader and writer. There is an ‘otherness’ to the literature of a foreign land but in the context of the British Empire there is also familiarity, the soil-creep of many images, words and landscapes that pervade books. These books may be read in Sydney, Mumbai or Tuvalu and they convey an intricate set of cultural and ideological signals that are drawn into the lifeworlds of those reading them. As Rushdie (1992) explains:

In common with many Bombay-raised, middle class children of my generation, I grew up with an intimate knowledge of, and even friendship with, a certain kind of England composed of Test Matches at Lords presided over by the voice of John Arlott, at which Freddie Trueman bowled unceasingly and without success at Poly Umrigar; of Enid Blyton and Billy Bunter, in which we were even prepared to smile indulgently at portraits such as ‘Huree Jamset Singh’, the ‘dusky nabob of Bhanipur’. (1992,p.18)

With a few exceptions and perhaps at a later date, this is also a portrait of my own cultural hybridity. My mother, a cricket fanatic, would sit up in bed, ear plug from the transistor firmly entrenched, while she spent the night listening to the cricket from Lord’s. I read or had read to me, Enid Blyton, it seems now, every year of my childhood. Britain was as close as the next Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie, Test Match and *Woman’s Weekly*.

The distances travelled in the interwar years were the same but the pace and the transmission were slower than during my childhood. The values, concerns and social signposts inhabited many spaces across the empire. Christina Stead, an Australian writer who was based in London for a time during the interwar years, wrote about this time (1930s) in Britain in some of her later works and analysed the ambivalence of being both Australian and ‘British’ (as designated

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<sup>33</sup> So strong (no pun intended), in fact, that I recognised the smell of both meadowsweet (*filipendula ulmaria*) and wild garlic (ramsons or *allium ursinum*) the first time I saw them in the wild because I had read about them in novels.

on her passport) during this decade, challenging the “after-myths” of the decade as well as using the parallel between the world of the female writer and the “masculine realm of revolutionary politics” (Hammett, 2003, p.238). National identity for Stead was bound together with gender and her habitation of different and yet similar spaces of nation, identity and narrative.

### *The interwar years*

The following brief discussion examines a few pieces of work by geographers that are, with a few exceptions, focussed on the interwar years. Further discussion of nation, identity and narrative occurs in subsequent chapters, particularly those dealing with Australia. I confine the discussion here mostly to England and national identity between the wars. Matless (1998,p.63) views nation and identity in the interwar years through an examination of the “spaces of rural leisure” that “were transformed in terms of technology, social movement and literary accompaniment”. The author investigates matters of “culture, psychology and geography” (p.100) by drawing out histories of motoring, bodily experience of the outdoors and a broader culture of landscape. He cites Townsend Warner’s novel of 1926, *Lolly Willowes*, in which the character of Laura Willowes moves from London to the Chilterns, uncovering a village in which even the vicar is practising witchcraft. The rural space, then, is both other and familiar and its Englishness works through the opposition of “reason and magic” (p.81). There is a tension between town and country, which, in part, invokes a national identity of Englishness. The English pastoral jostles with suspicion of rural places and the exclusion of the urban-dwelling masses who come sight-seeing.

Landscape, Trudeau decides, is a “method of exclusion” that has an “ability to be a text within which a variety of meanings can be scripted, maintained and even hidden” (2006, p. 437). The variety of meanings can alternate between meaning many things and meaning one thing. As Brace (1999) points out, while landscape is a “powerful idiom for representing national identity” (1999, p.90), it can be played out in this way by the construction of regional identity. The author makes the point that a diverse range of landscapes “were constitutive of the nation” (p.94) and her examination of the Cotswolds in the interwar years

demonstrates that the landscapes of the Cotswolds and their local identity is both bound up with and in turn binding of, “constructions of national identity” (p.106).

Rose’s (1988) examination of citizenship shows that it could become a “radical force” (p.78) during the 1920s when campaigns were under way for pensions and other conditions for ex-servicemen (ex-servicewomen were not so well provided for, nor were the campaigns for their remuneration as widespread). These were often supported by local government. In the aftermath of war, notions of citizenship and identity were both products of and reactions against, the jingoism that had permeated society during the Great War. Similarly, architectural vision embraced a progressive distancing from the horrors of the war, an “ordering of the land” (Matless, 1988, p.117). Entangled with this was also a harking back to a distant past, a rekindling of the romance of the landscape echoing more ancient times and an ancient (mythical) England where purity of quest was enshrined in the identity of King Arthur (Matless, 1988, p.112), perhaps putting old wine into new bottles. In his study of the travel writing of Morton and Cornish, Matless describes the account of their travels as a “pilgrimage” which was, according to Matless, a feature of the travel literature of the period (p.113), investing the quest for the ‘real’ or recovered England with a religious framework and purpose, again echoing more a distant past, where spirituality was tied closely to landscape, social grouping centred on church as a microcosm of the nation.<sup>34</sup>

### *Spiritual Landscapes*

The focus on spiritual landscapes in this thesis rests largely with Sayers’ text, *The Nine Tailors* (1934) but there are broader conceptual underpinnings to this inquiry into spiritual landscapes, spanning several historical periods. Harvey (2002) finds the church pervasive in accounts of saints written in medieval times about an earlier period. In the construction of the landscape in these narratives

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<sup>34</sup> This is also to be found in Priestley’s travel narrative, *English Journey* (1934) in his writing of the English landscape. His encounter with the Boston ‘Stump’ of East Anglia, “an astonishing church tower” (p. 372), one that is characteristic of fenland churches, being around 20 to 30 feet, leads him to comment that the “old Bostonians... weary of the Lincolnshire levels and the flat ocean, made up their minds to build and build into the blue. If God could not give them height, they would give it to him”. (1934, p.372)

or hagiographies, there was, according to Harvey, an attempt to instil local identity “and collective memory with references to an imagined landscape of religious order” (2002, p.231). In addition, the spiritual landscape, as evidenced in these narratives, was one that was not merely determined by a church anxious to guide its members in spiritual development. It is not, for Harvey, a ‘top-down’ regime of oppression. Rather, it is the “result of a dialogue between interest groups” (p.244). The writing and telling of saintly stories and legends show how the landscape played a vital role in “the constitution of social practice and the construction of social life”.

Kong (2001) echoes this claim to some degree, broadening her inquiry into the “politics and poetics of sacred place” (2001, p.212), emphasising “the interconnectedness of politics/poetics, private/public, social/spatial, using the first pair merely as a springboard for discussion of all the cross-cutting relationships”. Kong sees the sacred place (and she is quick to emphasise that sacred places need not necessarily be only the ‘officially’ sacred places such as churches, synagogues, temples and other spaces of formal worship) as a contested space, arguing that if sacredness is not “inherent” then, the process of making a place sacred must be investigated (p.213). Kong argues that geographers must include the sacred or the spiritual place in their investigations of place and space, whether those places be sacred sites or sacred routes (as in pilgrimage routes). Included in geographical inquiry, for Kong, must be the more everyday manifestation of the sacred, religious or spiritual, the author commenting that “domestic Christianity fills everyday life with the Christian spirit” (p.217). Similarly, in Judaism, the domestic and the sacred mingle intentionally and specifically within a domestic setting. The Seder, or Passover, for example, is sited in the family home, around a table and during a meal to emphasise a connectedness with the long ago Jews who celebrated the first Passover in Egypt prior to their journey through the Red Sea.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This is a subject that interests me and post-thesis, is worth pursuing: how, with the advent of Christianity, there was a slow and determined decontextualising of the sacred and the domestic from the Judaic tradition, effectively taking from the home, and the family, the sacred space of the spiritual intertwined with the domestic. There was a placing of both the power to perform these rituals (reinvented as the Eucharist) and their siting, in the hands of male, celibate clergy, thereby wresting the power and the performance from the domestic, family-oriented rituals and traditions and robbing women, in particular, of their role in the performance of the sacred. Power was now garnered in the space of the church, not, as with Judaism, linked between both home/family and synagogue. Even the lighting of the Seder/church candles, the province of the women of the house, was now performed by male

The search for the “immanent and transcendent” (Kong, p.218) often leads to the ascribing of powerful ‘poetics’ and meanings to places, distinguishing them from the everyday and yet, the everyday informs those poetics. For the Amish, the sacredness of the everyday is manifest in the performance of every task as a form of worship. The everyday in the domestic space is also the spiritual (Bender, 1991 & 1997), the spiritual becoming the everyday and vice-versa. This intertwining of the sacred and the everyday is part of a “process of creation” that is “sustained through place-making”, becoming part of one’s self-identity (Kong, p.221) and the politics of community, which can operate on a variety of scales from the global to the individual body (Kong, p. 226).

Operating in tandem with these scales are what Brace et al. (2006) term the “axes of race, class, nationality and gender” (p.28). In their discussion of religion, space and place, the authors point out that the neglect of religion as an axis of inquiry leaves geography in a “weak position” (p.29) to “engage with current debates” (p. 29) that are present in other disciplines. Citing the “production of religious narratives” as a “vital” way (p.31) of remembering, the authors explore new ways of studying the “geographies of religion” (p.31). They argue for religion as an “axis of identity formation” (p.38) and indeed understandings of national life, offering the “conceptual apparatus of cultural geography” as an opportunity “to develop geographies of religion that are sensitive to historically contingent processes of identity formation” (p.38). National and spiritual identity traverse each other and, as shall be shown in a later chapter, inform understandings of what it means to be both a member of a religious grouping and a citizen. There is a taken-for-grantedness about the interplay of power and religion as tools of the state quite often without any real exploration of the complexities of individual and collective spirituality, let alone the intricacies of place-making via the sacred or the spiritual. Brace et al. argue for the embedding of geographies of religion within geographical inquiry, as one of the axes through which we examine place and society.

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acolytes. Women were specifically barred in the early church (and, until recently in the Roman Catholic Church) from entering the sanctuary area of the church, the representation of the family table and dining space. Although it must be noted that within the synagogue, Jewish women were (and still are, under Orthodox Judaism) segregated from male worshippers.

There are also finer points to be explored, particularly regarding narrative. An examination of fiction written by Western white women must be decanted through the filters of race, gender and culture but also through an awareness that the women are writing within an implicit, and at times explicit, Judaeo-Christian tradition, one that informs not only place-making and identity but also the morality of everyday life and the hierarchy that operates in a place/places where church and state are not separate. Ideas about class, gender, economics and narrative are all embedded within a Judaeo-Christian perspective. Dowling refers to class in relation to identity politics as an “ever-present position” (2009, p.838). As class intersects with gender, race and other axes of inquiry, so too, does religion. The seasons of the year, punctuated by the seasons of the church (as in *The Nine Tailors*), the moral choices of characters, their views and lifeworlds as well as their habits are all produced through the medium of religion, with which, whether they choose to practise or not, the characters are bound to come into contention. Moral choice, that staple of the novel, derives its perplexities from a religious tradition, one that, in an earlier time, controlled the population but also sustained it. Ideas of salvation, for example, are not common to all religions but they are a feature of Christianity and Judaism, often evidenced in Western narratives. The legend of Faust is an example of choice between salvation and damnation. In other narratives, temporal and tragic events are the result of salvation or redemption through sacrifice.<sup>36</sup>

This guides the moral choices that authors allow their characters to make and, conversely, the authors make moral choices in their determining of plot. As will be seen later, how a novel moves through the course of its narrative is as determined by religious belief (even if not personally followed in any sustained way by the author) as by ‘who wrote the words’, their gender, their race and their overall view of the moral order. Holloway and Valins argue that a religious tradition occupies a place of importance and significance in many people’s lives

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<sup>36</sup> Sydney Carton’s sacrifice in Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, is exemplified in the oft-quoted words, “’Tis a far, far better thing I do, than I have ever done” when Carton substitutes himself at the guillotine for the husband of Lucie Manette, so that Lucie’s happiness will be secured. Carton’s dissolute life is redeemed by his sacrificing his life, leading to his salvation. Similarly, reconciliation and forgiveness are features of *The Mill on the Floss*, when Maggie Tulliver seeks forgiveness from her brother Tom and other characters. Although Maggie’s death in the flood is a plot resolution, it is also one that has biblical overtones: the redemption and forgiveness of Maggie through death. This is echoed in Sayers’ *The Nine Tailors*, as discussed in Chapter Six.

(2002), which in itself, merits the “patient excavation” of its grain components (paraphrasing Philo, 2000, p.37). In order to do this, geographers must look for a deeper understanding of religious/spiritual practice in order to determine its place within society. Further, a sensitive awareness of the pervasiveness of religion and spirituality within social groupings should move between more overt and culturally-specific inquiries (which are necessary and important) by geographers and a consciousness of the place of religion in the everyday, not just of those who can be regarded as ‘believers’ but also of those who live within a larger social grouping in which religious and spiritual practices are maintained.

A common response of those who do not practise religion in any specific way is that they are ‘cultural’ Christians, Jews or Buddhists, meaning that although they may not practise a particular faith, they adhere to the cultural manifestations of that faith, such as Christmas, Purim and Loy Krathong and, less overtly, adhere to the moral underpinnings of that faith. Writers and readers approach narrative along a range of axes (Brace et al., 2006, p.28) one of which is religious/cultural belief systems. For Matless (1991), the taking of such things “as read” (p.282) has been a tendency within Geography. He maintains that “the spiritual and mystical element of modernism has largely been ignored”. Although Matless’s sweep is broader here, moving beyond religion to spirituality and a mystical view of the natural environment, his point is well-made, his argument being that an awareness of spirituality and mysticism should inform “the purpose and practice of a considerable part of the discipline” (p.283). I would add to this that the search for and evoking of, the spiritual through landscape and place-making, could also be deemed to be a therapeutic practice, whereby the search for meaning and spiritual nourishment is tied up with wholeness and wellbeing, as is discussed in the following paragraphs.

### *Gesler, Philo and Therapeutic Landscapes*

Both Gesler (1992, 2003) and Philo (2002) have been concerned with therapeutic and evocative landscapes. Gesler’s earlier (1992, 1995) work had its focus on physical locations considered to be beneficial to healing and well-being in health

settings. Baer & Gesler (2004), move on from this and advocate a broader examination of therapeutic landscapes. The authors maintain that no landscape is perfectly healthy. Furthermore, they argue, there has been “insufficient consideration of the everyday lives of ordinary [sic] people” (p.407). “To explore the concept of therapeutic landscapes,” the authors maintain, “there is a need to extend the concept into more difficult and contestable examples” (p.413). Their focus is on the therapeutic landscapes of J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). The central character, Holden Caulfield, escapes into imaginary landscapes that “he wants to be real” (Baer & Gesler, 2004, p.409). Holden seeks an ‘innocent’ landscape, an “ideal space in which he will not be confronted by anything he deems objectionable”. Holden seeks his therapeutic landscapes to escape from his own precarious mental health and the difficulties of his life. The landscapes are “oversimplified and unrealistic” (Baer & Gesler, 2004, p.404) but the authors are concerned with the possibilities of therapeutic landscapes as “ambivalent, nuanced spaces” (p.404). In a study of fictional, therapeutic landscapes, then, there is the possibility of seeing the problematic nature of fictional places. Authors may certainly wish to escape to these landscapes and in creating fictional, idealised places, also open up ambivalent spaces and ones that may be problematic for the reader as well as for themselves. Philo links the therapeutic with the evocative in his exploration of John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and the “situated” nature of the geoliterary terrains as “evocations bound up intimately with the circumstances of the writer[whose childhood experiences were linked with this landscape], the demands of the genre [in this case, thrillers], the limitations of the production process” and “the expectations of an audience” (2002, p.37). An evocative landscape can also be a problematic one, conveying particular viewpoints, “encoded political messages that may not be apparent” (p.37).<sup>37</sup> This is where the circumstances of the authors’ experiences provide potential insight and context for their choice and depiction of landscapes.

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<sup>37</sup> Geographers, in their exploration of geoliterary terrains, need to be aware of their own motives and viewpoints. Putting new wine into old bottles necessitates careful handling.

## Text, context and conceptual inquiry

### *Author, Reception and Production*

For Sharp (2000), the “figure of the author” is key to the examination of texts, particularly their reception (p.331). Sharp’s critical analysis of literature suggests that the representations produced by authors are “not independent of the author’s location within a variety of social, cultural and economic systems” (p.331). Their work cannot be divorced from the context within which it was conceived, produced and received. Texts cannot be considered independently from their authors and their context. If the aim is to understand the role of literature within social and cultural systems, Sharp advocates engagement with three key aspects: critical reading, context of writing and reception (p.331). Using the example of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Sharp explores the necessity of listening to the ‘voice’ of the author, the way in which that voice “is crafted” (p.331). In so doing, it may be possible to analyse the workings of the text. The context of writing is also key to Sharp’s approach. She insists that “all texts are produced from somewhere and by someone,” and that “it is impossible for anyone to escape these positionings” (p.332). My own research suggests that this is a key consideration and that not only is it impossible to escape these positionings but also that *all* works must be examined in this context. *No* text can be viewed in isolation even if its positioning is considered. The plays of Aphra Behn, the novels of Jane Austen and Elizabeth David’s texts on the nature of food and cooking are not isolated events. They existed alongside texts that may have since been ignored, forgotten or dismissed but the works in question were part of an evolving cultural process where the works of others were produced, read and considered alongside these texts. They were produced in times of war and peace.<sup>38</sup> They had both cultural and socio-political context as did all other texts produced at that time and the reception of their works happened alongside the reception of other texts.

For Sharp, in “any study of the social process or social situation, the question of reception is central” (p.332). Furthermore, it is important, according to Sharp’s analysis, that reception of the text facilitates understanding “the place of any

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<sup>38</sup> In Behn’s case the English Civil War and the Restoration, in Austen’s the Napoleonic wars and subsequent peace and in David’s case post World War II, The Korean and the Vietnam War.

text in the reproduction of knowledge” (p.332). This is no less important for fictional texts than it is for academic works and other works of non-fiction. The difficulty with this exploration of reception, as Sharps points out, is that it is “very difficult to assess how people read books” (p.332). It raises issues about “how the effects and messages of any one text can be separated from other messages and information received by the reader” (pp.332, 333). Similarly, as discussed above, it is important to understand that imaginative works are not read in isolation. They are read before, after and alongside other imaginative texts, between detective novels, experimental literature, poetry, ‘chick lit’, ‘lit lite’, romances and ‘bodice rippers’. While it is impossible to know just how people read books it is nevertheless important to consider in some depth that no text is read in splendid isolation but as part of a continuing or infrequent series of texts by readers.<sup>39</sup>

Sharp’s work offers both broader and deeper opportunities for the analysis of literature by geographers. Moving beyond simplistic notions of place, Sharp moves on the debate about the function of the social and the political worlds of literature and the ways in which geographers can engage critically with these texts.

Brace (2001) tackles publishers and publishing, a neglected area in academic geography. Focussing on writing about the countryside between 1930 and 1950, Brace examines the role of publishers as “cultural agents” (p.287). These largely “invisible” figures in the production and reception of texts, were key players in the understanding of nation and home, regional identity, gender roles, spirituality and the political life of the nation. Material culture and webs of meaning were selectively produced via publishing. As will be seen in a later chapter, publishers advanced notions of landscape, place and society as much by the texts they rejected as the texts they selected. In the case of the portrayal of Australia both within Australia and in the British market, publishers purveyed

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<sup>39</sup> As a sample of one, my bedside table contains no fewer than five books at the moment: an academic treatment of women and storytelling, a travelogue cum personal memoir, a novel pressed upon me (that I simply loathe and grudge the time to read but out of politeness, I persevere), a review copy of a history of the Congress of Vienna and a book on spirituality. All of which I am ‘receiving’ with varying degrees of enthusiasm and difference of purpose. It might be an interesting piece of research to interview readers on the contents of their bedside tables and the reasons for their choices. How many of us read some books because we feel we must for one reason and another and how does this affect our reception of those texts?

an image of the bush as a pioneering frontier where women were invisible or marginal. The stereotype of the Australian masculine 'ideal' placed firmly in this context allowed little room for depictions of suburban life (where the majority of Australians lived and continue to live) and the everyday lives of women. Both British and Australian publishers narrowed the view of Australia through the selection of books that were centred on the bush and European (mostly male) settlers (Nile & Darby, 1987), promoting 'mateship' as a "defining feature of this masculinity and the mechanism by which it was authorised and acknowledged" (Murrie, 1998, p.74) through magazines such as *The Bulletin* and selective production by publishing houses in London and the metropolitan centres of the east coast of Australia. These texts included books for children, such as the 'Norah of Billabong' series (see Figure 2.2). Similarly, notions of Britishness were carried across the seas from the London publishing houses to Commonwealth countries. British ideals of respectability and gender roles were reinforced through the publication, distribution and consumption of texts published in Britain for children (see Figure 2.3) that were then distributed throughout the Commonwealth.

The narratives read as young girls by the authors (Sim, 2009) under discussion in this thesis informed their understandings of empire and nation. This included texts that ensured that middle class girls learned "to be wife and mother to the pioneer and the soldier" (Bratton, 1989, p.196) and also that they were "the depository of the 'home values' and the guarantor of 'higher' feelings" (p.196). Publishers of popular fiction are selective in what they choose to publish but this is not merely driven by profit. The process of selection "confers status on issues, institutions and individuals which regularly appear in a favourable light" (Richards, 1989, p.1). Selection also "legitimises, glamorises and romanticises particular mindsets" (p.1).<sup>40</sup>

There is a complicity in reproducing a vision of nation and nationhood that not only sells but that provides both escape and comfort to readers in *their*

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<sup>40</sup> The novels of Zane Grey localise the myth of the West (Blake, 1995, p.202), making it iconic and the "quintessential" (p.202) vision of the 'wild' West in the U.S. In another context, de St. Exupéry's writing, informed by his love of flying, contains a distinctive "geography from above" that Daley (2009, p.217) finds to be permeated with "powerful visualisations" that legitimate "the imperial expropriation of land" (p.127). Publishers have a stake in promoting a vision that is not only appealing but one that favours the status quo, *their* vision and their "geography from above".

envisioning of nation. The flow between production and reception of texts is porous, stemming from choices made at the initial stages of production (editorial changes, legal requirements), eventual publication (choice of cover, marketing strategies - how the publisher chooses to promote the book, finding a niche for it that will encourage sales), its review and not simply how it is reviewed but *who* reviews it (Mackenzie, 2010) and its reception. It would be too crude to say that publishers are telling readers *how* to receive a text but they are certainly significant players in directing and guiding booksellers and readers in particular ways. And the text or texts from a particular publisher circulate with other texts from other publishers, often marketed aggressively in competition but also reproducing current trends and mindsets in tandem with each other. For the women writing in the interwar years, their own visions of nation, gender, spirituality and cultural politics circulated with and around other texts, other productions and other spaces, their conceptual maps acting as mirrors, constructions and symptoms (Friedman, p.8) of the culture within which they were writing.

*Friedman, Gender & Narrative*<sup>41</sup>

Friedman (1998) concentrates her analysis of narrative largely from a feminist standpoint. The central concern of her “cartographies of feminist debate” is “narrative as a multiplicitous form of meaning making thought” or, put more simply by the author, “identity is literally unthinkable without narrative ... people know who they are by the stories they tell about themselves and others” (p.8). Narrative is, according to Friedman, a “window into, mirror, constructor, and symptom of culture” (p.8). With a focus on a variety of texts, Friedman explores the relationship between feminism and multiculturalism, globalism and poststructuralism, arguing for a “locational feminism” that “requires a kind of geopolitical literacy built out of a recognition of how different times and places produce different and changing gender systems” (p.5).

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<sup>41</sup> Friedman is not a geographer but her work is included here because it is inherently geographical, focussing as it does on the locational and spatial nature of narrative, gender and culture.

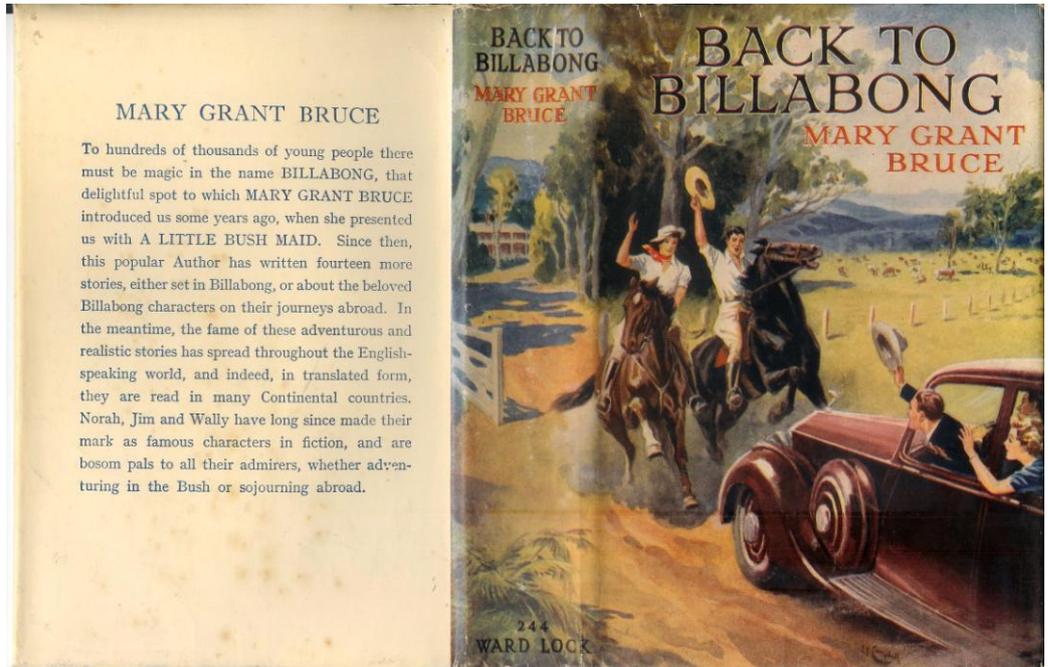


Figure 2.2 The cover of this 'Norah' book, *Back to Billabong* (1955, fp.1919), in which Norah and her family return to their property, 'Billabong' after being in London during the Great War while Norah's brothers were fighting in France. The cover is composed of much that attracted people to stories of the outback of Australia but blended with a hint of the English pastoral.

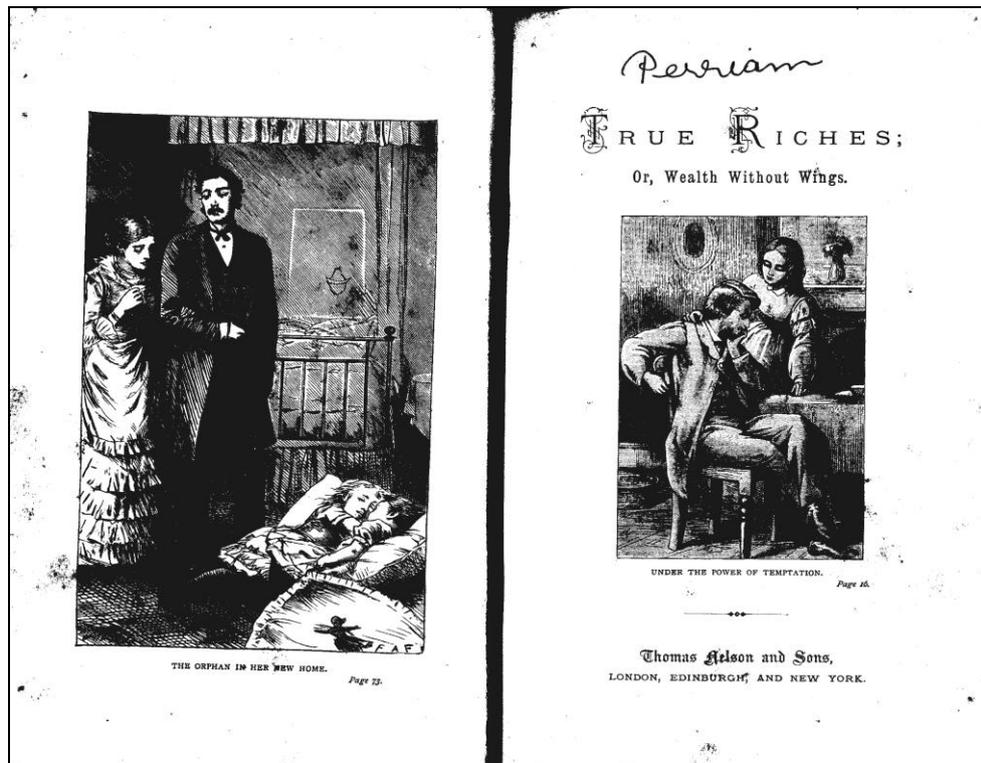


Figure 2.3 The frontispiece of Arthur's (1887) book, *True Riches, or Wealth Without Wings*, a children's book awarded to my great-aunt when she was in primary school. The illustrations depict women and men in poses that reinforce contemporary notions of gender roles.

Friedman is critical of the stance by some Western feminists, in particular poststructuralist feminists, whom Friedman sees as perpetuating previous forms of exclusion by privileging poststructuralist theory as “*the* radical ground of feminist activity” and “policing discursive formations” (p.219). In so doing they are excluding the insistence of many “minority women on the centrality of narrative to command survival” (p.220). Friedman also warns that feminist histories of feminism can “all too easily become a narrative of winners and losers rather than a story of multiple heterogeneous voices” (p.225). This is a comment with which I remind myself as I undertake this research and to which I shall return in the next chapter. In the process of my focussing on the individual and the text at certain points, I must not lose sight of the multiple heterogeneous voices, which are, after all, part of my central argument, echoing the words of Gregory (1995, p.30) in his critique of imaginative geographies of Egypt, that texts (and therefore the voices of the authors) are “complex, scored through with multiple and often contradictory subject positions” in landscapes that are ideological, “fractured and complicated”. This is no mean task, to draw together these complex, contradictory and multiple voices that sound over space and time. And no discussion of space would be complete without some reference to the work of Doreen Massey.

### *Space, Place, Gender and Doreen Massey*

For my research, one of the most significant aspects of Massey’s work is her attempt to “formulate concepts of space and place in terms of social relations” (1994, p.2). And, “since social relations are the bearers of power what is at issue is a geography of power relations in which spatial form is an important element in the constitution of power itself” (p.22). Significantly, Massey’s extensive work on gender relations and the subsequent uneven distribution of power has important implications for this work. For Massey, uneven distribution of power and uneven development occur because the “social relations of space are experienced differently by those holding different positions as part of it” (p.3). Massey argues for a “politics of place beyond place” (2006), ways of understanding the inequalities that have persisted and increased decade after decade. For the study of the women authors in this work, these different positions and inequalities are fundamental to an understanding of their works

and lives as well as the production and reception of their writing. Some of the authors came from what some would term 'privileged' backgrounds but they were nevertheless aware of the inequalities of their positions as women, their experiences of the domestic space (sometimes violent) and the inequalities of space that spanned class as well as gender. All of these experiences informed their work and their lives. Some, appalled by gross inequalities, became socialist activists while others sought escape by creating their own, fictional elysian fields.

The "gendering of space and place", writes Massey, "both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live" (1994, p.186). As part of that process the works of these authors, for the most part bypassed and forgotten in the gendered history of what has come to be understood as a literary canon, have been nevertheless part of the historical process of reflection and effect. The exploration of these processes and their effects forms a part of this study, particularly in relation to gender.

The exclusion of women from the history of written geography is at least as significant as the exclusion of women from the history of literature (or rather, what has been deemed to constitute literature) with a few exceptions. McDowell (1999) explores the ways in which women were excluded from the early writing of geography, where the history of women's travel and movement was ignored. Exploration geography had its focus on the travels and feats of men. That women were often present or were travellers themselves was bypassed in favour of heroic accounts of men conquering uncharted or difficult territory. Both Domosh (1991) and McDowell comment on the exclusion of women from the "philosophies of the discipline" (McDowell, 1999, p.206) and understandings of space. Like Massey (1994), believes that "places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries" (1999, p.4). These boundaries are "both social and spatial" and define exclusion as much as inclusion. Geography as an historical, textual space has excluded women (and others), their experiences and concerns.

In this work, the focus on women is, of course, deliberate. Women's understandings of place and their concerns about place, its meaning and its writing are fundamental to this study and bisect it at a number of disciplinary points, including postcolonialism. All of the writers under review were affected by Britain's imperial concerns. For some, mobility across the Empire had a significant impact on their work. Post-Great War, these authors had direct experiences of the colonial. Their work and the work of other women in this context has largely been ignored until recently. Intercultural narratives, as Friedman calls them (1998, p.137), "invite a strong shift in... reading strategies... to a more spatially oriented framework" (p.137) which in turn invites recognition of the "multiple locuses of identity" (p.142). In the case of this work, both the reading of geography and the readings of the specific texts are intersected by several "locuses" of identity for both the writers and their texts. In putting new wine into old bottles, the new wine that is a blend of gender, postcolonialism, socio-spatial concerns as well as a drop or two of old wine, spirituality and religion, and the newer wine of production and reception, there is a danger that the bottle may explode, being full of ever more complex aspects of readings of place. What follows are some concluding remarks: the taster's notes.

### Geography & Literature

'Tis a point settled, – and I mention it for the comfort of Confucius, who is apt to get entangled in the telling of a plain story – that provided he keeps along the line of his story, - he may go backwards and forwards as he will, – 'tis held to be no digression. This being premised, I take benefit of the act of going backwards myself. (Sterne, 1975/1759, p.375)

It is customary in work of this type to identify gaps in the literature, thereby securing a position for one's voice. My aim in this chapter has been to acknowledge as well as to critique the work of geographers in the areas of geography and literature<sup>42</sup>. First, there needs to be some acknowledgement of the evolution of the work of geographers in relation to imaginative writing. As discussed earlier, early attempts to use literature as a storehouse of quotations or as illustration of topographical 'reality' were juxtaposed with work such as that of Darby on the Fens (1948, 1983) in which imaginative texts were used in

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<sup>42</sup> An exception to this is the work of Cresswell on mobility, which forms a part of a later chapter and is specific to some of the authors under review. Cresswell's work has been separated from this chapter due the specific nature of his work as it applies to the texts in question.

more complex ways. With the advent of humanistic geography, a broader and deeper discussion of the ways in which creative writing has impacts on social and cultural understandings emerged. While authors such as Pocock revered the supposedly transcendent nature of the author's 'genius' they also looked beyond the text to the ways in which texts had an impact on readers' understandings of particular locations and the social implications of 'image geography'. Cultural geography moved forward in this area of research and the critical eyes of certain geographers urged careful consideration of the ways in which cultural geographers engaged with texts, advocating, as Philo comments, the "patient excavation of the grain of component social lives, social worlds and social spaces" (2000, p.37). My own map of reading geographical research in this area seems to explode after this point, incorporating as it does postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, postcolonialism and other theoretical positions. It is with some trepidation that I attempt to pour yet more new wine into these older bottles by setting out my own understanding of where geography moves after this.

First, I echo both Friedman (1998) and Philo (2000) in that I advocate a close association with the social worlds within which texts are produced, the multiple voices that jostle with one another within narratives: complex, contradictory and fragmented (Gregory, 1995, p.30). Second, the work of Sharp in the area of critical analysis (2000) is particularly important, especially with regard to the contexts of reception and their importance in the production of texts. Third, I advocate that geographers remind themselves of the importance of Pocock's work on the image-geography of the North (1979, 1980). While it may seem outdated in some respects, it is, nevertheless, an important reminder of the ways in which texts and their reception permeate how we think about ourselves and others, the self-narratives we construct and our participation in the perpetuation of inscribed norms. Massey's (1994, 2000, 2006) and McDowell's work (1993, 1999) on social relations and power in relation to gender are also fundamental to the theoretical model that I advocate in the next chapter. While acknowledging these things, it is also necessary to identify certain aspects of my position that I feel need to be added to this by now, extremely full old bottle of new wine.

Religion and spirituality also need to inform geographical inquiry, both in their specific contexts and in their circulation and embeddedness in the everyday. Inquiries that trot out the 'assumed' notions of power relations in operation in religious contexts neglect a more intricate process that operates in a number of registers, at different times and in various locations. The enactment of legislation is informed by religious and moral underpinnings as much as texts are informed by it, even when the authors of laws and novels profess not to adhere to or to believe in, religion. The isolation of religion and/or spirituality is impossible.

Similarly, the deliberate isolation of texts is also impossible, for they circulate continuously within the cultural matrix. Mostly, (and there are some exceptions) geographers have tended to base their work on imaginative texts on one piece of writing or one author or, occasionally, on two. My own position is that in narrowing the focus to one work of literature, we are perpetuating the canonical isolation of supposedly 'important' texts, privileging them above other texts by regarding them as somehow worthy of scrutiny above others. While I advocate the liberation of identifying the choice of research material elsewhere in this work, I would also caution against isolating texts in this way. A worrying aspect of this isolation is that most academic papers in geography focus on individual works by men while works by women tend to be confined to the feminist niche. Orwell, Dickens, Hardy, Rushdie, Buchan, Scott, Salinger, etc., are treated in isolation, in very near danger of perpetuating the idea that (male) writers deserve to be monumentalised while other works that jostle alongside these authors remain unexamined. Sharp (2000) stresses the importance of the context in which works are produced. Part of that context is the other texts produced alongside the text in question. It is important to acknowledge some of these texts as part of that/those context/s. It is, of course, impossible to advance several texts all meriting consideration in an academic paper. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon those who value the importance of context and reception as well as the social worlds in which works are produced, to acknowledge that fragmented and diverse literary context. While Orwell was advocating socialism, he was also critical of contemporary women authors whose work he considered to be inferior to his own (1941) and perpetuating visions of England that could be seen as an advocacy of his inheritance of privilege

however much he rejected it (maiden ladies bicycling to Holy Communion and the clatter of clogs on the cobblestones on the way to the mills in Lancashire indeed!). His writing has merit and yet it does not exist solely within nor outside his chauvinist attitudes to women authors and his privileged upbringing. Nor does it exist outside the scores of other works that were outselling his at the time of their production. The context of production is as important as its reception. Reception and production, however, should not be seen as separate entities. There is a flow between them, particularly in light of seeing texts as material objects that are part of the cultural matrix. Embedded within that flow are publishers, whose role as “cultural agents” need to be considered (Brace, 2001,p.287).

Additionally, I also advocate the agency of the author and the importance of understanding the ways in which texts are silenced and/or marginalised. These aspects of the production of literature are as important as the highlighting of particular texts that achieved widespread acclaim. One of my aims in this work is to focus on women authors and their marginalisation in a particular era but there are many questions to be asked also of postcolonial literature, indigenous narratives, conservative narratives and those which have, at one time or another, been suppressed or sidelined. In today’s climate, it is far more marketable in some areas of the publishing world to promote a variety of authors (mostly young) and to highlight works by non-Westerners. In light of previous silencing, it is liberating for all to see that non-Western women are finally gaining a voice in the West as well as in their own cultures but others are often still excluded. Why are Scientologists seen as ‘freaks’ but Buddhists are not? As geographers, we have to ask questions about the *processes* by which these inclusions and exclusions occur, shrugging off ‘chattering class’ perceptions or, indeed, examining them as keys to understanding the ways in which social groups continually move to exclude or marginalise certain groups of perceived ‘others’. Why, for example, is a text which mocks Americans not seen as racist, while one critical of Israeli government policy can be regarded as anti-Semitic? Who has decided who can be the butt of our jokes and who must be taken seriously along with the Saturday morning latte? And why? Above all, how do place and narrative influence these processes and constructs?

The centrality of place to narrative and also to geographical inquiry into narrative is significant for this work, and indeed for any work that intends to focus on the relationship between geography and narrative. Textual places, however 'real' bear the stories of their creators and the stories of their readers. They bear the imprint of the dominant group within a culture, even when they seek to challenge or resist the prevailing ideology. In examining the links and influences that move between ideas of place and narrative, it is important to recognise the diverse, difficult, multiple (and often, contradictory) ways in which place operates through narrative and vice versa. Material, social, cultural, spiritual and political processes are all intertwined, operating within and out of narrative. The dominance of particular ideologies in certain places at certain times operates as much through narrative as through political discourse. Interdisciplinary inquiry into the processes by which narrative has bearing on cultural and socio-political outcomes and manifestations is at the heart of this thesis and a position that I advocate as the way forward for geographers in this area.

The purpose of this work is to suggest ways of developing even further the exploration of the relationship between geography and literature. The incorporation of feminist and new historicist understandings of how and why texts are produced or silenced, along with the analysis of their cultural origins, is intended to work *through* the complex and contradictory nature of the acts of writing publishing. In building on the work of geographers in this area, my aim is to offer a deeper analysis, one that draws on other disciplines and which also acknowledges that Geography is as essential to textual analysis as an understanding of textual strategies. In the next chapter, I look closely at new historicism, feminist literary criticism and interdisciplinary research and the ways in which these ideas and practices can be applied to geographical inquiry into geoliterary terrains. In addition, I set out my theoretical position and methodology.

A sudden impulse comes across me - drop the curtain ....  
Strike a line here across the paper, Tristram ... and hey  
for a new chapter! (Sterne, 1975, fp. 1759, p. 282)

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Continuities branching”: Gender, narrative and the cultural matrix<sup>43</sup>

Do I ‘situate myself politically as a writer’? Well, yes; of course. I always hope it’s obvious, although I try, when I write fiction, to think on my feet - to present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions. (Carter, 1997, p.36)

Shahrazad then speaks. But woman’s voice is more than a physiological faculty. It is the narrative instrument that permits her to be a literary medium, to vie with the male in the process of textual creation. To control the narrative process, however, is no small task. (Malti-Douglas in Gauch, 2007, p.ix)

Sire, we have neither seen her open her lips, nor heard her speak any more than your majesty has just now; ... We cannot tell whether her silence proceeds from pride, sorrow, stupidity or dumbness; (Everyman, 1907, p.103)

The Princess is silent when confronted by her new owner, the King of Persia. She has been sold to him as a slave by a merchant, having been sent by her brother from the war in the sea to earth. Repulsing the advances of a would-be suitor, she is bought by the merchant who hands her over to the King.<sup>44</sup> She remains silent for some time, eventually speaking in order to tell her story.

This chapter is a theoretical exploration of silence as well as a suggested approach to inquiries into geoliterary terrains. The silence in this case is textual silence and the silencing of text. Like the silences of the Princess of the sea, the reasons for silence can be explained in a number of ways. Despite the fact that each of the texts under discussion in this work was published at least once (and often more), each has been silent at some point or there have been attempts to silence it for varying lengths of time. Gender, the arbitrary nature of literary boundaries, laws, historical contextual factors (usually entangled with gender and class among other things) and historical events influence the production and reception of texts. What are sometimes deemed to be practical considerations (earning money, domestic concerns, family commitments) can also lead to silence. These are bound up with gendered perceptions as well as

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<sup>43</sup> “continuities branching – I find  
Myself lost in my father’s forest” (Hitchen, 1994, p.18).

<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note that the Princess remains nameless until she is married to the King and attains the status of Queen.

socio-cultural and religious understandings of what constitutes duty and obligation. The thread that runs through each of these influencing factors is power. Not power as a static commodity but one that fragments and moves through spheres in ways particular to time and space. As Veesper explains: “Foucault ... complicated the prevailing sixties notion that power was hoarded like shares of preferred stock. Rather, it was passed from Gucci handbag to backpack to hip pocket, the “Hey, boy” at work becoming the “Yes, Boss” at home.” (1994, p.11).<sup>45</sup> In the case of women, writing and silence, the shifts are still fluid and yet more restrictive.

On the one hand, as Cameron (1990, p.32) points out, women have access to language as human beings but conversely, it is not theirs because they are women, their “cultural Otherness” excluding them from the “endless conversation of men which defines what is beautiful, important and true”. I would go further than this, to comment that “beautiful, important and true” are largely masculinist conceptions of and concerns with power and the material currency of aesthetics. Women’s relationship to culture is compromised by power but there is, as Veesper points out, an “intricacy and unavoidability of exchanges between culture and power” (1989, p.xi). What is of concern here are the ways in which the silence of women has been historically and is still, negotiated, more often than not, on *their behalf* either by brute force or by law and social constraint. Olsen (1980, p.39) has concluded that we must not “speak of women writers in [the 20<sup>th</sup>] Century (as we cannot speak of women in any area of recognised achievement) without speaking also of the invisible, the as-innately-capable: the born to the wrong circumstances - diminished, excluded, foundered, silenced”. For Woolf, (1929), law and “custom” were “largely responsible for these strange intermissions of silence and speech. When a woman was liable, as she was in the fifteenth Century, to be beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents’ choice, the spiritual atmosphere was not favourable to the production of works of art” (p. 34, in Cameron, 1990). In less dramatic circumstances, women of any class were often occupied in the domestic sphere, in many cases giving birth annually, managing

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<sup>45</sup> This is also the concern of feminist commentators who view the shift in powerlessness from the public to the domestic, with the powerless, blue collar male exerting his power in turn, in the private sphere (Ferguson, 1984)

the domestic economy, as well as being concerned with the family business. Negotiating space for creative pursuits was hindered by time constraints and patriarchal expectations. For the women who did find the space for creativity, the work they produced was deemed to be of inferior quality or simply not deemed to be anything at all. In spite of this, women did write and pursue other creative avenues.

Writing, like so much else, is a gendered space, where the everyday shapes the space and space shapes the everyday (Spain, 1992, p.28), making them seem immutable and commonplace. In the case of women writing during the interwar years, change and negotiation of the bodily space (contraception, less restrictive clothing, the disposable sanitary napkin), the domestic space and what constituted women's work, saw them seeking to enter the historical narrative in greater numbers than before. So why then, almost 90 years later, are there these spaces of silence? For Gilbert and Gubar (1979, p.46), the answer lies in the 'official' history of Western literature: that it was and is "overwhelmingly male" and patriarchal. In keeping with this model, the silence of women was necessary to its survival. Giving equal space or privilege to women's writing would have meant a handing over or a sharing of power, or at the very least, some sign of recognition of the right of women to a share in that power, in that space. And in a patriarchal model, that would never do. Subsequent chapters will examine this issue in some depth undertaking to explore and in part, to explain, the ways in which these texts were silenced or muted.

A partial rationale/cogent reasoning for undertaking this work can be found in what Virginia Woolf offers, as she questions the "strange spaces of silence" (1929, in Cameron, 1990, p.33 & p.34):

The answer lies at present locked in old diaries, stuffed away in old drawers, half obliterated in the memories of the aged. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure - in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women. The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female. Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction. They were soldiers or they were sailors;

they filled that office or they made that law.<sup>46</sup> But of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains? Nothing but a tradition. One was beautiful; one was red-haired; one was kissed by a Queen. We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore.

Thus, if we wish to know why at any particular time women did this or that, why they wrote nothing, why on the other hand they wrote masterpieces, it is extremely difficult to tell. Anyone who should seek among those old papers, who should turn history wrong side out and so construct a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary woman in Shakespeare's time, in Milton's time, and in Johnson's time, would not only write a book of astonishing interest, but would furnish the critic with a weapon which he [sic] now lacks. The extraordinary woman depends upon the ordinary woman. It is only when we know what were the conditions of the average woman's life - the number of her children, whether she had money of her own, if she had a room to herself, whether she had help in bringing up her family, if she had servants, whether part of the housework was her task - it is only when we can measure the way of life and the experience of life made possible to the ordinary woman that we can account for the success or failure of the extraordinary woman as a writer.

Although I would argue against the use of the words "ordinary" and "extraordinary" in this context, Woolf's insight into the nature and conditions of women's lives is pertinent. The spaces of silence demand examination and discussion of the contexts in which women write, do not write, or are not acknowledged as writers. Through a discussion of the terrains depicted in the texts examined in this work, perhaps a new account of the lifeworlds of the authors and their readers will emerge, filling some of the spaces of silence. This chapter offers an approach to negotiating those silences.

The chapter also explores the unsettling nature of the research undertaken. The more I researched the texts, reading and re-reading them and the more I researched the lives and other works of the authors and the contemporary context, the less I felt I knew. Boundaries collapsed, assumptions faltered and preconceptions were whisked out of sight at the approach of new and often uncomfortable or disconcerting ideas and anecdotes. I had an image of patchwork fields, some ploughed to chocolate furrows, others stubbled and

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<sup>46</sup> In some cases, equally little is known about the male line but Woolf's main point here is to highlight the invisibility of women across class.

ready for gleaning, still others green with promise. The ordered patchwork of imaginary landscape, author, text and lifeworld that I had plotted gave way to oddly-shaped dogleg paddocks, weed-ridden corners and grubbed-up hedges. This was not supposed to happen! Lorimer (2010,p.28) in referring to the possibilities offered by Bakhtin and Benjamin, explores this dilemma, “the fragmentary nature of work on the past, the possibilities of assemblage as a motif, and the creeping doubts that partiality seems to cultivate”. Lorimer fords this dilemma by suggesting “crafting a different kind of writing about the past where demonstrating mastery of site, scale or period is *not* the ultimate objective” in which “claims to having only partial, provisional and incomplete knowledge” can offer new possibilities. It is interesting to find that Lorimer suggests that the fragmentary nature of texts provides gaps that can be “consciously held open” – still unsettling but interesting.<sup>47</sup> The unsettling nature of the project and its outcomes seems less daunting in this light.

Originally, I had a mission, one that had been quietly gestating for some time. My mission was to re-evaluate the texts in question and to make some gesture towards shattering the preconceptions shared by so many: that middle class women writing between the wars wrote best or average-selling drivel in the afternoon while Nanny saw to the children and Cook prepared dinner. They voted Conservative, preferred the status quo and were limited in their outlook, but these authors, often with difficult and sometimes extremely troubled lives, were in fact, sometimes, often and occasionally: breadwinners, servantless, drug addicts, factory workers, impoverished rural doctors’ wives, victims of domestic abuse; good, indifferent and bad at housekeeping; conservative, radical, difficult, easy-going, talented, dogged and creative. While some of this understanding remained intact, some of it equally, did not. The further I probed, the more unsettled the picture became. One thing that did not change, however, were the spaces of silence. There was always that silence, the silence created by a literary canon that refused to acknowledge the worth of most women writers, that treated many novels by men as monuments to high culture and civilisation. It resonated from pages of texts, from letters in archives, handwritten manuscripts, biographies and above all from anthologies and collections that purported to represent the fiction of the authors’ time but did

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<sup>47</sup> This work by Lorimer was first seen in 2007 when the ms was in preparation. It is now a chapter in a book published in 2010.

not (Rosen, 1998; Cowden, 1954). Instead, the whispers came from smaller volumes with titles such as *Women Writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, *Modern Women Writers* and *Gender and Writing between the Wars*. They had been, as I saw it, ‘cabined, cribbed, confined’<sup>48</sup> as women always seem to be. And, they had been silenced or ignored.

And there was a further dilemma/difficulty. Arguing as I do for the specific ways in which the texts and authors in this thesis were sidelined, how could I then argue for a more general silencing or muting? There was a tension that developed, the more I read. Much of the evidence of a more general nature related to the gendering of space and/or the place of women in society and, more specifically in literary history, does make quite general claims about the ways in which women have been treated historically and in the present (see Appendix 2). There are many valid claims of a general nature, for example, regarding the gendered space of the literary canon. When dealing with specifics and more, *arguing* for a more particular interrogation of specific sites, texts, places and spaces, how does this square with the more general claims I have been making and will continue to make?

The specific investigations of the thesis operate within a framework that draws on broader claims about the position of women in relation to history, society, politics, religion, and especially, culture. While this sets up a tension between the general and the specific, it also enriches the framework within which it sits. In my researches, I have not taken as given that women are always subject to control, suppression and often violent forms of exclusion. I have looked for this evidence and I am reasonably certain that I have found it, looking, of course, with modern era eyes. In fact, the taken-as-given of the ways in which women were/are excluded from full participation in society, culture, religion and politics, ensured that their situation was seen as immutable (Spain, 1992, p.28) and commonplace: the status quo. My primary purpose is to investigate the geoliterary terrains of the five novels under specific scrutiny. Both the period and the texts have been deliberately specified (more of which, later) in order to excavate the grain that Philo recommends (2000, p.37). Both period and texts are sited within the broader, general framework since the specific can

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<sup>48</sup> *Macbeth*, 3.4

sometimes frame the general as well. In 1901, for example, women in industry in Britain earned 43.7 percent of the male wage (Holloway, 2005, p.151) and by 1935, this had escalated to 48 percent. This general figure shows that, despite some improvement, women continued to earn less than men. In a more specific instance, women working in the textile industry saw their wages fall from 58.5 percent in 1906 to 55.9 percent in 1935 (Holloway, 2005, p.151). The specific instance of women textile workers with a *falling* percentage of the male wage is sited within a broader context across industries where, despite an increase in wage level, women *continued* to earn far less than their male colleagues. So one can draw a more general conclusion here, that work by women has been deemed historically by employers to be worth less than work by men carrying out the same type of work. The inequality continues, complicated by a history of trades unions that have traditionally had an “overwhelmingly male focus” (Crosby, 2007, p.330) in both Britain and Australia. This is borne out by anecdotal and other evidence that suggests that women writers are also paid less (Mackenzie, 2010; McInnes, 1965, p.275) than male writers. Exclusion is inevitable when weaving the specific into the general and vice versa but I am mindful of the contradictions and the complementary claims. They add to the unsettling nature of the work but I would also argue that they enrich it. What follows is a discussion of the theoretical positions that I have drawn upon in the exploration of geoliterary terrains.

“Do you remember, O Best Beloved?” was how Rudyard Kipling began his *Just So* stories (1902), stories that I loved as a child; stories that led me to make up my own. Kipling wrote these stories with his children in mind but that personal, “O Best Beloved” worked its magic and helped me, even then, to understand what happens between writer and reader.<sup>49</sup> In the shape of this and the following chapters is a measure of my response to the texts as a reader and as a writer. It is their story but also mine. What I understand now is that our attempts to gain insights into the work of writers are just that: attempts. However much we dissect and examine texts, the best explanation, from the writer’s point of view

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<sup>49</sup> I am aware that invoking Kipling is contentious. Rushdie acknowledges Kipling’s hybrid identity, commenting that no other British writer “has known India as Kipling knew it” (1992, p.75) but he also acknowledges that Kipling’s continued popularity in India is an act of “cultural generosity”. Rushdie’s conclusion is that there is much in Kipling that is “impossible to forgive” but that there is also much in Kipling’s stories that is “impossible to ignore” (p. 80). For me, that seductive, “O Best Beloved” was a personalised invitation and even though I still do not know how the elephant got its trunk, I prefer Kipling’s imaginative explanation.

may simply be: it is because it is. Choices made within texts may have pragmatic reasons behind them, creative reasons or even a sense of fitness. It just seems to be the right thing to plot or write at that time. However much we psychoanalyse the motives behind the writers' choices and the multiple influences on those choices, it is important to acknowledge that what we draw from the text is simply what we draw from the text. *How* we draw it from the text is a constantly evolving negotiation between reader, writer and context.

In exploring the geoliterary terrains of the texts in question and their social history, I am responding to the landscapes, the settings and the texts in the knowledge that the fragments I present are not always an *answer*. In fact, sometimes the fragments throw up more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, an examination of the contexts of production and reception can provide some insight into the nature of the relationship between reader and writer. Texts, their authors and readers circulate within webs of meaning and understanding. In exploring these webs of meaning and in seeking a way of working through the intricacies and conundrums contained within them, I have been drawn to the work of new historicists and feminist literary thinkers and critics.

### *New Historicism*

New Historicism seeks to understand texts through historical context and also to understand the history of culture and of politics through textual and historical context. Textual analysis is partially framed by contextual interpretation. The author is also central to the analysis of texts; the author's lifeworld is considered to be an essential aspect of textual exploration and contextualising. Drawing on Marxist thinking, new historicism examines the negotiation and exchange of culture, with particular interest in sites of struggle and resistance, engaging in a set of critical practices that is often termed 'cultural poetics'.

New historicists are resistant to, and reluctant to subscribe to, the idea of an all-embracing new historicist theory and methodology. Gallagher and Greenblatt point out that they "remain deeply sceptical of the notion that we should formulate an abstract system and then apply it to works" (2000, p.2).

There are, however, common characteristics among new historicist works which Gallagher and Greenblatt attempt to outline. Others (Guerin et al.1992; Barry, 2002) have similarly tried to codify various aspects of the work. Despite a reluctance to articulate an all-embracing theory, Veenser outlines five premises on which most new historicists base their work:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary “texts” circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. ... that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (1989, p.xi)

Drawing on the work of Geertz, Foucault and E.P Thompson, as well as (with belated acknowledgement) the work of feminists, new historicism explores the cultural matrix (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p.9) from which texts emerge. This echoes the work of Sharp (2000), Brace (2001) and Brosseau (1995) analysing modes of production and reception. What new historicists do, however, is to explore the wider context in which texts are produced. The idea that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably is new in terms of the relationship between geography and literature and one that offers interesting possibilities of interdisciplinary work, as will be explored further in later chapters.

By acknowledging that “every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes” (Veenser, 1989, p.xi), new historicism highlights the contradictory nature of research in this area, the treading of a fine line between critique and acceptance. Further, the understanding that “a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe”.(1989, p.xi), draws on feminist and Marxist theory on language, which has also understood that the dominant language both “limits textual resistance” and “provides the possibility for rupture, critique and transformation” (Kaplan, 1990, p.340). There is, in these assertions, interconnection with opportunities for analysing the “social situatedness” of literature (Kaplan, 1990, p.341). Every text is sited

within a cultural, political, religious and social context, which, while it confines and represses, also contains subcultures that aim to oppose or resist the dominant sphere. These subcultures are present in some of the fiction written by women during this period.<sup>50</sup> Contradictions can also be found in most of the fiction of the period. While some of the resistance and opposition are overt, other material steals its way into the text at some point. It is, of course, easy to read these signs with a 21<sup>st</sup> Century eye after decades of feminist and postcolonial criticism not to mention poststructuralism but there are tensions and contradictions in fiction. It is, after all, written by human beings. New historicism also provides some of the tools of excavation both within and outwith texts.

In looking beyond the text itself, new historicism articulates a means of exploring the fragmented nature of texts and the complications and contradictions not only within the text (Gregory, 1995) but also in the cultural and material context of production and reception. This provides a 'thicker' description of the lifeworld of the author and the geoliterary terrain of the text's production.

The work of Geertz (1973) and his use of the term 'thick description' (borrowed from Ryle, 1971) was a strong influence on Greenblatt and other new historicists who saw that his descriptions of the cultural webs of meaning (1973) within which people live had a "meaning encoded in symbolic forms that must be understood through acts of interpretation analogous to the work of literary critics" (Ortner, 1997, p.3). New historicists saw in Geertz's theory of ethnography a way of developing a literary criticism that would "venture out into unfamiliar cultural texts" (p.20). Fascinated by the "lived life" that Geertz narrated, described and clarified, Greenblatt saw "that lived life, at once raw and subtle, coarse and complex" which was exactly "the thing that had been progressively refined out of the most sophisticated literary studies" (Greenblatt, 1997, p.20). For Greenblatt, Geertz's thick descriptions of cultural texts "strengthened the insistence that the things that draw us to literature are often

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<sup>50</sup> As will be seen in the case of Thirkell, while the author is happily 'matching and hatching' her characters in the rural acres of Bassetshire, she also creates the character of a widowed author who rejects marriage and enjoys her single state. At no point throughout the series of novels in which she appears, does this substantial character even seem interested in finding a mate; quite the reverse, in fact, as shall be seen in *Chapter Eight*.

found in the non-literary, that the concept of literariness is deeply unstable, that the boundaries between different types of narratives are subject to interrogation" (p.21). Rather than 'collapsing' anthropology and literary criticism into each other, Greenblatt envisaged drawing on the "particular strengths" of each discipline (1997, p.20). What I argue for in this thesis is the addition of the geographical element in studying fiction while at the same time, drawing on the strengths of other disciplines beyond the boundaries of Geography. The spatial elements in much of the work by new historicists are inherently geographical. Greenblatt, in his study of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (2007b), looks to postcolonial theory when discussing the relationship between the characters of Prospero (the 'king') and Caliban (the slave), making a powerful critique of the colonial project in general and "linguistic colonialism" (p.34) in particular.<sup>51</sup>

James Shapiro's work, *1599: A year in the life of William Shakespeare*, (2005), is a record of the author's search for answers to an issue that seemed to have been neglected or ignored by other scholars: "how at age thirty-five, Shakespeare went from being an exceptionally talented writer to being one of the greatest who ever lived - put another way, how in the course of little over a year he went from writing *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to writing a play as inspired as *Hamlet*" (p.xxii) Shapiro's aim is to offer a 'story' (a very clear and definite choice of word in this context) to convey 'a sense of how deeply Shakespeare's work emerged from an engagement with his times' (p.xxii). My purpose in outlining some of the key aspects of Shapiro's book is to point to the ways in which geography can draw on new historicism. In exploring the contextual terrain, the lived life of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the political and religious domain, Shapiro teases out the webs of meaning that shaped the production of the plays, the cultural matrix from which they emerged. For geographers, the context in which texts are created, the social and political environments from which they emerge, are worthy of investigation. The places represented within

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<sup>51</sup> Caliban replies to Miranda's condemnation of him, after his attempt to rape her ("abhorred slave" she calls him in a speech that has been disturbing for a number of critics, Dryden included, since its inception):

"You taught me my language; and my profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
For learning me your language" (I, ii, 365-367)

Within that exchange between Miranda and Caliban there are many ideas and prejudices circulating, all of which are intensely problematic and not only in our own era.

texts necessarily portray an ideology, often operating “in the service of power” (Duncan, 1993, p.39). Shapiro’s “forced marches” (p.xii) through the terrain of Shakespeare’s world represent place in an historical sense but from a contemporary ideology and understanding. Shapiro’s deliberate siting of Shakespeare’s texts within a range of texts and spaces allows for inquiry into the politics of the texts’ production and reception as well as their conception. Rather than seeing the plays as isolated events, Shapiro draws out the everyday practices that contributed to their production. The author also explores the “multiple human geographies” (Gregory, 1993, p.304) in operation during the plays’ production and reception, their subsequent modification and their shaping of contemporary cultural thought. The flow between the shaping of the plays and their shaping of the social world in which they existed is porous and multi-channelled. New historicism’s engagement with the spaces of production and reception is geographical in its foundation and philosophy. In contextualising the products of material culture, new historicism is underpinned by geographical concerns that can support and elaborate literary critical work undertaken by geographers.

Nevertheless, attempts to tease out the cultural matrix from which texts emerge must involve geographers in the investigation of the multiple representations and identities of places and their siting on an historical continuum. Keeping the continuum in focus may add to the tensions between the general and the specific but it also enhances and enriches the excavation of what was once seen as the backdrop. From that backdrop emerge figures that were once the unregarded ragtag and bobtail of history, who now, instead of being props, are players, able to move about and to be heard, very often in their own language and idiom. *Their* geoliterary terrains are placed alongside those of others who have previously held the spotlight.

One of new historicism’s aims is to examine the “process by which certain works achieved classic status” (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p.10) as well as looking at “works that have been hitherto denigrated or ignored” (p.10), “recovering” authors of these works in the process. The authors of non-canonical texts are of interest, not solely in themselves but because they “change the account of those authors long-treated as canonical”. Works that “have seemed like entirely

isolated monuments are disclosed to have a more complex interrelation with other texts by 'minor' authors. This echoes the work done by feminist and postcolonial geographers who identify not only texts and authors that have been marginalised but also the processes involved in that marginalisation. By looking at 'minor' texts or those that have been ignored or sidelined by mainstream critics and the keepers of the canon, researchers can explore the 'other' lifeworlds that have been largely absent from dominant narratives which bear implicit and explicit understandings of the supposedly natural order of things. A re-examination of 'the canon' which excludes more than half of the population (women, immigrants, 'foreigners' and indigenous people, for example) also highlights the need to explore the context in which the canon itself was produced. Who made the decisions on inclusion and exclusion? Marcus (1989, p.148) maintains that the taken-for-granted versions of Modernism need to be interrogated through an examination of women's texts written during and immediately after the Great War. "Classic men's war novels" will look "very different" in juxtaposition to these works by women. Such investigations into the cultural matrix question not only inclusion and exclusion but also the conceptual underpinnings of literary scholarship as well as its politics.

The social relations and the power (including the economic) structure of the cultural matrix from which texts emerge and of which they are a part, merit close examination for the *geographical* implications they bear. By focusing on texts, specific spaces or particular, brief passages of time, geographers can examine and perhaps illuminate, the cultural, social and religious politics of those texts and spaces. By reading or redrawing the cultural, social and/or political map of a particular territory or geoliterary terrain, geographers can explore "the uneven, unequal unfolding of multiple human geographies" (Gregory, 1993, p.304). New historicism may provide a broader range of tools with which to achieve this.

Gallagher and Greenblatt indicate that while writers such as Thompson and Foucault were influential, there is no intention to claim them as models. "[I]nstead, they formed an environment, a large, unmapped and inviting disciplinary borderland" (2000, p.57). The motto of new historicism as defined

by Thomas (1990) is that “the text is historical and history is textual... meaning does not transcend context but is produced within it” and that:

human actions and institutions and relations, while certainly hard facts, are not hard facts as distinguished from language. They are themselves symbolic representations, though this is not to say ... that they are not real. (p.7)

The “unmapped” nature of the borderland has also attracted criticism from both new historicists and others. The reluctance to articulate a theory has led to misunderstanding and misattribution, as well as attempts to articulate a theory by some new historicists wishing to set out their arguments in response to critiques.

Thomas’s (1991) work on both defining and critiquing new historicism raises several issues, one of which is the difficulty of exclusion that occurs when others, perhaps historically excluded, become the “primary object of representation” (p.30). This is one of the “unavoidable tensions faced by a project calling itself new historicism” (p.31), which I attempt to answer later in the chapter. Newton (1989, p.153) criticises “non-feminist” versions of new historicism which, like post modernism and deconstruction, “are often carried on as if their assumptions and practices had been produced by men (feminist theorists, if they are mentioned at all, are often assumed to be the dependent heirs of male intellectual capital) and yet feminist labor has had much to do with the development of these literary/historical enterprises”.

The lack of attention to gender and women’s history in the earlier works of new historicists (and their lack of acknowledgement of the contribution by feminists to many areas of inquiry) is a valid criticism and one that more recent work has sought to address (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000; Greenblatt, 1997). Newton (1989, p.165) argues that:

A literary/historical practice that is consistently feminist and materialist ... tends to produce definitions of representation and of history that are more complex than those which are less consistently both. It tends to produce “history” in a way which allows us better to account for social change and human agency. (1989, p.165)

Newton (1989, p.166) also argues for the inclusion of the world of the domestic to be taken into account:

It is only once those levels of culture are actively explored that women's contribution to culture and that of other oppressed groups can be taken adequately into account. It is only once this taking into account begins that any historicism can produce something more than history as usual.

The author makes a powerful argument for an interdisciplinary approach that, through its consideration of feminist materialism, will strengthen new historicist readings of texts. Newton also makes the case for the inclusion within readings of the material world, the world of the domestic, women's power in the domestic space, as managers and as "silent participants". This suggests a relatively cohesive and inclusive interdisciplinary methodology for inquiry.

In contextualising texts within a broader cultural matrix that also pays attention to specific times and places, a new historicist perspective offers geographers a sharp focus for inquiry, one that teases out the political, cultural, institutional, economic, social and spiritual contexts of the materiality of texts. The intentional *siting* of a text within a range of texts, both fictional and non-fictional, allows for an examination of the politics of culture as well as its poetics (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000).

This argument for an interdisciplinary approach is one that has potential benefits for geographers and one that also provides the means by which the ground work of feminism and its contribution can be acknowledged.

### *Feminist literary criticism*

Like the new historicists, feminist literary critics and theorists are reluctant to endorse a 'one size fits all' position and "in the proposal of a general account of feminist literary theory's proper form there is something that feminist theorists... don't relish" (Rooney, 2006, p.1). In this thesis I am explicitly *not* judging the merits of the texts under discussion but I recognise the place of such

judgement in feminist literary theory.<sup>52</sup> Although, in using a form of critique that cannot be divorced from the language and the form that excluded women's fiction in the first place, those who critique texts by women can offer a new way of doing this, a new method that first, takes the text seriously rather than dismissing it as just more frivolous scribbling by a woman.

There is no uniformity in women's fiction any more than there is in fiction by men. Women's fiction has historically suffered the same fate as texts by many 'others'. Postcolonial work by feminist literary critics and feminist geographers has sometimes met at similar points, one of which is that the feminist collective project cannot be driven solely by the concerns of Western white feminists. Moreover, there is always the danger of a form of inverted racism or sexism by classification that homogenises all literature by, for example, black authors, colonial authors, lesbian writers and so on. Toni Morrison denies that she wanted to be "the voice of the African-American community" (Blau, 2008). "I thought I was writing about what I was interested in. No one comments," says Morrison, "when a white person writes about a white person" (Blau, 2008). How many white women are asked how important their work is to them "as a white woman"?

Although the writers in this thesis are white, western European women, their texts reflect a variety of concerns, sometimes similar, sometimes disparate. They may employ similar writerly strategies at times, or not. One point at which they do meet is in the silencing or muting that took place at some time after they wrote the texts in question.

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<sup>52</sup> I must confess to some ambivalence about this. Showalter (2009, p.512) argues that we need critical judgements of women's literature as well as a "literary canon". I have argued elsewhere in this work against the idea of a canon, insisting instead on several traditions which would allow for mobility of texts between traditions. Showalter argues that critical judgement and a canon would ensure that justice is done to women's writing and that a canon would allow it to be included in [America's] literary heritage. As I have said elsewhere, women's writing is emphatically *not* a ghetto. To insist on a canon would be perpetuating the monumentalising of texts (I know, as a reviewer of fiction, just how the invocation of words like 'classic' - a word I avoid using - changes the perceptions of texts). Critical judgement is still necessary but in order to assess texts by women (and those who have historically been marginalised in publishing), a new order and language must prevail. This may be idealistic but it is worth trying to change current practice in order that those works and authors who have been hitherto excluded are assessed according to different yardsticks, if they are assessed by any at all.

Rooney identifies this dilemma, between ‘women’ and other constructs asking just how it is that we can define or identify women readers and writers. Her conclusion is that the ‘health’ of feminist literary studies is bleak (2006, p.11) but she does acknowledge that feminism is making its way out of a niche and influencing thinking in a more general way than before. There is hope however, in Rooney’s more optimistic passage on the “collective conversations ... often contradictory, sometimes heated” about:

the meaning and practice of reading, the intersections of subject formations such as race, class, sexuality, and gender, and the work of literature. (2006, p.17)

These collective conversations must also, according to Rooney, “capture both the disciplinary and the extra disciplinary features of its practices”. This is all grist to my more optimistic mill of interdisciplinary inquiry. The collective conversation can include explorations of texts that work through various disciplinary concerns and preoccupations. The “sheer wealth of material engendered by feminist literary studies” (Rooney, 2006, p.9) suggests that the contradictory approaches cannot be reconciled and although her prognosis is grim, Rooney does indicate that, despite their diversity, feminist literary theories are “also increasingly pervasive and potent” (p.10), having an impact on many academic studies including geography.

Armstrong’s book *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A political history of the novel* (1987) had a significant impact on the study by feminists of novels particularly and also by other scholars in general. Armstrong declares that a study of novels must incorporate an historical perspective. The author also makes the point that rather than seeing women as powerless, critics and theorists should also examine the power held by women in particular places at particular times.

Rather than distinguish theory from interpretation and feminism from Marxism, deconstructionism, or formalism, I care mainly about those scholars and critics who have helped me to discover traces of the history of the present in several eighteenth and nineteenth Century texts and to understand my own insights as part of a larger project now going on within those disciplines where individuals have undertaken the work of creating a new political literacy. (Armstrong, 1987, p.27)

For Armstrong, that political literacy entails examining the power contained within the domestic setting, the manifestation of power as held by women of the “dominant class” (p.26) that helps to maintain that class structure. Armstrong insists that:

those cultural functions which we automatically attribute to and embody as women - ... mother, nurse, teacher, social worker, and general overseer of service institutions - have been just as instrumental in bringing the new middle classes into power and maintaining their dominance as all the economic take-offs and political breakthroughs we automatically attribute to men. I am not, in other words, constructing a woman's history from the viewpoint of an oppressed or silent minority ... I want to consider the ways in which gender collaborates with class to contain forms of political resistance within liberal discourse. (1987, p.26)

This statement is very much in keeping with postcolonial theories of white women who, although bracketed with “colonised others” (McEwan, 1998, p.381), maintained colonial power through complicity and active containment (Garrity, 2003, p. 26). While Armstrong's claim is, in part, a valid one, I would argue that oppression and silence are continually borne out alongside complicity. Works by women authors, many of which have historically endorsed the status quo, embracing patriarchal authority and effacing debate, have, at the same time, been denied their place in the cultural matrix, have not been accorded equal status with works by men and have been trivialised and dismissed. The continued existence of a canon denies women writers equal status and the numbers of women winning literary prizes is significantly lower than that of men. There are fewer women reviewers, works by women receive less print space and women writers commonly receive less remuneration for their work than men (Mackenzie, 2010). What some women write about is dismissed as being unimportant, or (see Appendix 2) “piddling” (Parker, 2004, p.3) and trivial. Not being on a ‘grand’ scale, perhaps dealing with the domestic space, the rearing of children and other ‘women's’ issues, their content is dismissed out of hand.

Some women may be complicit in endorsing writing by men as having more value. Other women may, in their writing, preserve the class structure but overall, inequality persists. As cultural artefacts, novels by women during the

interwar years cover less print space in commentaries, critiques and anthologies than those by men and when they do appear in print they are generally confined to niches and borders, marked 'Women's stuff'. That sounds fairly close to containment and silencing to me. These works are not deemed to circulate on an equal level with what is "beautiful, important and true" (Cameron, 1990, p.36). They are mostly kept on the sidelines. A later claim by Armstrong is that the acquisition of a "distinctly feminine authority" (2006, p.105) led to a "cultural gain" (p.105) for women (in opposition to their political lack of power). This applies to women writing and to women in "assuming a place at the centre of the household" (p.105). Again, it is undeniable that some women at some times and in some spaces can gain, exhibit and maintain power but this has clearly not enabled women to resist the state in any profound way, nor has it led to a fundamental change in the balance of power. Cultural and political institutions are still dominated by men. Women's cultural gain continues to be disproportionate to that of men.

Armstrong's work created a new way of looking at texts and while I am in disagreement with her variations on the theme of power, I do agree with her about adopting "various critical strategies" (1987, p.27) rather than holding, buckle and thong, to narrower views or simply just one particular theory. The circulation of ideas, no less than texts needs space. One of Armstrong's positions chimes with that of new historicism: that novels have "historical substance" and that they can serve as "primary documents for a new kind of history" (2006, p.107). As someone who learned a good deal of her geography and history from novels, I concur with this but perhaps that is personal bias.

That new kind of history can also draw on critical race studies. Varma asserts that feminist theory and critical race studies are not as incompatible as some commentators have suggested. Varma traces "the contours" (2006, p.232) of "common ground" (p.232) for exchange between the two, arguing that the "urgent task in hand is to understand gender and race power within a project of justice" (p.256). Varma's work is strongly geographical, appealing for a sharing of "space and struggles" (p.254) and the recognition of limitations as well as arguing for consideration of those "who have multiple geographical locations and affiliations, who teach, struggle, work and write in multiple sites" (p. 255).

Varma's work is optimistic and at the same time realistic, recognising what she terms, the "new global order" (p.254). The recognition of difference, for Varma, and a true understanding of how women write, live and learn in different places and at different times could lead the way to "new ways of reading the languages and practices of justice" (p.256).

My discussion of geography in the previous chapter including the exploration of work by Friedman (1998) and that of Evans (1987) and other scholars in *Chapter One*, points the way forward for a geographical inquiry into literature from an interdisciplinary feminist standpoint that aims specifically to focus on space, place and the cultural matrix of texts. A geographical feminist inquiry into geoliterary terrains that follows a spatial approach to cultural artefacts, to narrative and to lifeworlds would acknowledge the different registers in which webs of meaning are produced and received. Alongside the different registers are the tensions inherent in sites that are complicated by contradictory and intricate networks where decentring operates alongside a specific focus that centralises certain inquiries, issues, artefacts and narratives at certain times.

What follows is an outline of an approach that draws on new historicism, feminism, geography and other modes of inquiry.

#### *Towards an interdisciplinary approach to geoliterary terrains*

Central to this approach is the act of story-telling, embodied in the character of Shahrazad, who saves herself and others by using a powerful tool, that of storytelling (Pannewick, 2010, p.220). She is aware of the power she wields through storytelling, the ability to "contribute decisively to the production of images" of self and others (p.220). In addition there is a focus in this approach on the place of storytelling and the storytelling of place, the geoliterary terrains of texts. Working in an interdisciplinary context, I have sought inspiration from the texts outlined above as well as texts on language, philosophy, history, geography, feminist literary studies and the history of popular fiction while at the same time endeavouring not to lose sight of the centrality of the storytelling of place and the place of storytelling. Within the act of storytelling are many layers, "built from a rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions" revealing depth and complexity (Schama, 1995, p.14). Those layers encompass the

everyday and the extraordinary, the material practices and objects that circulate within and are products of, the cultural matrix.

Imaginative works are embedded within a "series of material practices" (Guerin et al., 1992, p.24). The context within which texts are written and received has import for the way subjects are depicted. Issues of "State power and how it is maintained, ... patriarchal structures and their perpetuation" (Barry, 2002, p.179), and also the 'real' lived lives of people, provide insights into the context in which the text was written, produced and received and the way in which it is read in contemporary society.

"In a stratified society all literature is engaged politically and morally, whether it's so perceived by the author or not. It will be so perceived by the readers it validates and by the readers it affronts" (Piercy, 1989, p.119). Lesbia Harford's work, *The Invaluable Mystery*, (1987) engaged both politically and morally, was deemed to be such an affront that no one in the 1920s would publish it. Other works with less overt political content are nonetheless engaged in the political sphere. Women's fiction has been referred to as 'piddling' but was/is in fact politically engaged in its use of the domestic sphere, where the authors presumably spend a great deal of time and in which space restrictions, resistance, power struggles, joys and sorrows form a significant part of the authors' lifeworlds. The comment by editors and prize judges on the reasons for rejecting some work by women as not being 'risk-taking' enough is an assumption of the 'natural order' of things where pseudo-feminist concerns with 'risk-taking' in women's fiction class the domestic sphere as dull, which is an insult to those women whose domestic lives are simply hellish as well as to those whose primary space is domestic and fulfilling.<sup>53</sup> There are, moreover, serious concerns about publishing maintaining the status quo, the patriarchal structures that continue to define women as 'other' as well as the spaces they inhabit. That said, the long tradition of domestic fiction written by women has triumphed over various projects to stifle it. It was banned as 'unsuitable' and as frivolous reading material for young women (as in the Bennett daughters in *Pride and Prejudice*, humouring Mr. Collins with a reading from *Fordyce's Sermons* instead of a novel) throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it

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<sup>53</sup> Just what constitutes 'risk-taking' fiction is open to debate as will be discussed later.

continued to be seen as frivolous and/or trivial and in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries, it is deemed to be parochial, narrow and not 'risk-taking': small space, small canvas, small world, small merit. And yet, it survives, even if many of its artefacts are missing or have disappeared.

The material practices of the everyday are to be found within the artefacts of fiction and in using novels as primary documents, the grain of component social lives and spaces (Philo, 2000, p.37) of the everyday, can be brought to light. The excavation of the grain of those components can illuminate, illustrate and advocate in addition to serving as records of 'lived' lives. These primary documents, imaginative works, circulate with other texts on politics, contraception, household cleaning, interior design, reports on slum-dwelling families, hunger marches and film stars. These novels, considered quite often to be minor, change the account of works that have been venerated as 'classics' (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000) and they also change the account of the everyday and the extraordinary. Greenblatt remarks that life is "inseparable from the imagination" (2007a, p.xi) and that supposedly non-fictional accounts contain "narrative cunning and linguistic artfulness" the "artfulness of the ordinary" (p.xi). Historical narratives can be as imaginative and 'cunning' as their fictional contemporaries.

The grand narratives of history have, as Thompson (1978) and Clark (1995) have established, marginalised or denied other narratives. There is, remarks Freidman (1998, p.219), "a belittling of history that presents a *story* of women's experience, with its implicit attack on narrative itself as an inferior mode of historical writing". In this belittling of women and their narratives, agency is reduced or even tabooed. The editors of a new anthology of contemporary writing commented that "on the whole the submissions from women were disappointingly domestic" (Laville, 2005). This snubbing assessment has implications not only for the way in which texts by women are currently received but the way in which they are produced (even down to their covers). The contexts of writing and reception (Sharp, 2000, p.126) are equally important and merit consideration, as do their authors.

Authors, while not being privileged interpreters of texts, are also important to any consideration of text and context. Moreover, Barthes' (1968) notions of the 'death of the author' and the supremacy of the text run counter to many feminist understandings of the ways in which women have been marginalised in the production of texts. Miller (1988, in Friedman, 1998, p.189) maintains that:

"[b]ecause women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, (I think, collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc... only those who have it [the status of subject] can play with not having it".

For African-American women, for example, the notion of the death of the author is particularly offensive. As Homans (1983 in Kaplan, 1990, p.351) comments:

A defense of the 'signature' for those who have never had one would apply even more powerfully to those whose names were once not even those of their own fathers or husbands but those of their masters.

Interconnected with the above is the *agency* of the author which is also an important consideration. Agency of the author is central to any contextual reading. For women writers, the will to be known within a society that has historically devalued or silenced women authors, their concerns and their stories, agency can be seen as a form of activism and resistance (albeit constrained by multiple demands for complicity). This includes problematic texts by women as well as those that seek to challenge the status quo.

The approach I advocate is not without its dilemmas. Leaving spaces open can be intimidating. Equally, privileging certain texts above others risks accusations of the very practice I critique: exclusion and the production of a canon. In analysing one text, whether it is perceived to be within or outwith the canon, we create boundaries, ring-fencing and privileging one text over another, making our own choices as subjective as those whose literary snobbery or discrimination we resist. This contradictory position, however, can be a source of liberation if we recognise our own fixing of, even temporarily, boundaries that exclude as much as they include. A rationale for a particular focus, for example, on a certain place or period could acknowledge the setting of limits as well as offering to readers a clear demonstration of self-awareness on the part

of the researcher that is itself a critique of previously tacit acceptance of canonical sources. By clearly recognising and acknowledging the contradictory nature of their choices, researchers can highlight a diversity of opinion, interest and engagement with a number of texts. As a deliberate rejection of a narrower, less inclusive position that has historically elevated a reduced number of mostly male and largely Western authors of texts to a prominent position, researchers are offering alternative viewpoints. Perhaps offering a range of texts for analysis will confirm that “the study of teaching and of cultural poetics are enmeshed in a larger cultural politics that is without disinterested parties, without objective positions” (Montrose, 1989, p.31). The momentary spotlight on what was previously a backdrop not only allows new players to step forward; it also destabilises notions of a ghetto.

The approach I have outlined, advocating an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the strengths of new historicism, feminism, geography and historiography, is designed to work *through* the intricate and conflicting nature of imaginative texts. Through exploring the webs of meaning, examining the layers of myth and obsession, the ways in which texts and geoliterary terrains throw up conundrums can be explored and analysed. I have advocated an approach for the analysis of geoliterary terrains that is situated within the cultural matrix: the political, cultural, economic, social and religious zones of the production of imaginative literature. Within these zones are the places depicted within the fiction and the personal, textual voice of the author. Places, be they rural landscapes or city blocks, are stories in themselves, with multiple meanings and identities for the people who know of them and those who read of them. They are, as Massey says, “the bearers of social relations” (1994, p.22), bringing with them people, structures of power and ideologies. No textual places are innocent of these things, even supposedly tranquil rural oases designed to evoke an idyll of a bygone, mythical age or a nostalgic revisiting of happy childhood memories.

In exploring the possibilities of new historicism and feminist literary criticism in relation to geographical research into imaginative sources, I have outlined possibilities of alternative ways of investigating the cultural matrix from which texts emerge as well as the webs of social relations, power and identity that are

entwined with notions of place and space. I have also argued for the continued examination of the agency of the author. Textual analysis is incomplete without it. Barthes' notion of the textual supremacy, is, I have argued, drawing on the work of Miller (1988) and Friedman (1998), untenable from a feminist position and also from a geographical position, where, as Philo (2002, p.37) has shown, landscapes depicted in literary imaginings can be "evocations bound up intimately with the circumstances of the writer."

At the heart of stories are places. Textual places, however 'real' bear the stories of their creators and the stories of their readers. They bear the imprint of the dominant group within a culture, even when they seek to challenge or resist the prevailing ideology. Non-canonical texts are as much a part of these stories as those that are deemed to be canonical. These non-canonical texts have been seen historically as:

texts that have been regarded as altogether non-literary, that is, as lacking the aesthetic polish, the self-conscious use of rhetorical figures, the aura of distance from the everyday world, the marked status as fiction.... There has been in effect a social rebellion in the study of culture, so that figures hitherto kept outside the proper circles of interest - a rabble of half-crazed religious visionaries, semiliterate political agitators, coarse-faced peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies whose writings had been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship, scandalmongers, provincial politicians, charlatans and forgotten academics - have now forced their way in, or rather been invited in. (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, pp. 9, 10)

This is the image that is so moving in Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1978) and in Clark's *The Struggle for the Breeches* (1995): people on the margins, their stories ranging from the triumphant to the mundane to the unbearable but they are always 'lived' lives. The comment mentioned earlier that was made by the editors of an anthology of contemporary women's fiction, calling it "disappointingly domestic" shows just how fragile these stories can be and how precariously they perch now, as they have always done. Civilians in Iraq and other areas of the Middle East (Riverbend, 2010; Sadoranges, 2010) document their experiences (which are, for the greater part, ignored by

mainstream media) and others closer to home tell the unbearable, occasionally mundane or hopeful stories of their nightmarish lives (O'Reilly, 2008).<sup>54</sup> These are manifestations of a will to be known in spite of all the obstacles before the tellers of these stories. Interpretations and analyses of these stories as well as the stories themselves, are part of a narrative continuum, driven by the imperative of storytelling. An interdisciplinary approach to geoliterary terrains that works *through* textual complexity has the potential to offer new ways of seeing familiar stories as well as uncovering other stories that have yet to be told and those that have been silenced.

Friedman's (1998) promotion of *locational feminism* is one that draws together the interdisciplinary strands of the approach I advocate. Locational feminism acknowledges the politics of the production and consumption of knowledge and its situatedness within specific locations (p.32). The tensions between multiple "constituents" of identity and the complex and often contradictory nature of attending to gender are essential characteristics of locational feminism. These characteristics work in conjunction with attention to the "specificities of time and place" (p.5) but also sit alongside a more global context which acknowledges difference as well as connectedness. Friedman advocates a "geopolitical literacy" that incorporates change over time and over borders, while continuing to acknowledge the "interlocking dimensions of global cultures, the way in which the local is always informed by the global and the global by the local" (p.5).

Changing gender systems interact with changing social conditions and movements (Friedman, 1998, p.5) and inform the processes of negotiation and exchange that occur within the cultural matrix. Locational feminism operates through the *mobility* of cultural exchange. Greenblatt's (1995, p.41) assertion that culture is a network of "negotiations for the exchange of material goods, ideas" and, through institutions (marriage and enslavement, for example), of people, explicitly addresses such mobility. The mobility of cultural exchange also allows for a more located view of how power (and oppression) is exercised.

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<sup>54</sup> From the weblog of a young woman living in Iraq ([www.riverbendblog.blogspot.com](http://www.riverbendblog.blogspot.com)). October 22, 2007, records: "Syria is a beautiful country- at least I think it is. I say 'I think' because while I perceive it to be beautiful, I sometimes wonder if I mistake safety, security and normalcy for 'beauty'."

Locational feminism as explored here can be seen as the meeting-place between geography, new historicism and feminist literary criticism: an interdisciplinary mobility that contextualises the cultural matrix of texts.

Earlier, I addressed the question of tension between the general and the specific. This tension is part of locational feminism, an approach that does not cancel out difference. It negotiates difference and incorporates it while at the same time assuming difference as integral. In the following chapters of this thesis the located nature of women's place, the storytelling of place and the place of storytelling will operate within this framework, examining and exploring the context in which the texts were produced and received, the cultural exchanges that occurred. Within this framework also, the everyday lifeworlds of the texts' authors will be situated, examining how, during this period and in these places, the authors negotiated their lifeworlds: from finding a space in which to write, the compromising of the opportunity in which to write, to the oppression and control of their work (and of the women themselves) and how they were silenced and at which times.

### *Research Methods*

The texts for this project were chosen from a much wider range of texts written by women during the interwar years. There is a range of urban, rural and provincial terrains depicted in these novels, providing a slightly wider scope than confining the texts to perhaps rural or urban. The dates of publication vary, including one novel that was published over sixty years after it had been written. The choice of authors was secondary to the choice of texts although a strongly personal element did exert influence through my knowledge of the authors and their texts. This was as much a result of research (in both the academic setting and in work for literary societies) as of personal choice as a reader. The choice was also informed by my reading of a range of works by feminist scholars and other commentators on fiction written by women. A footnote sometimes revealed texts of which I had not heard and which I subsequently investigated. Choosing from and researching these sources highlighted the deep intertextuality of materials and their circulation in a range of ways, from literary criticism to social histories to incidental mentions in

passing. This happened over time. My reading of Light's (1991) text in the early 1990s led me to examine other, similar commentaries and in turn uncovered novels of which I had never heard. In some instances, the works in question were unsuitable because they were written outwith the period under scrutiny. At other times, the novels described had been the subject of intense investigation by other writers and I had chosen to look at texts that had been less in the spotlight. In more serendipitous moments, browsing the shelves of a charity shop led me to an author such as Angela Thirkell. My enjoyment of audio books meant that I sought out other texts in local libraries, which is where I discovered Brittain's *The Dark Tide* (1923). A friend handed me Harford's *The Invaluable Mystery* recommending it to me. While all of this seems to be *ad hoc*, my interest in the fiction of this period drew me to certain bookshelves instead of others, certain biographies, commentaries and critical works. The refining of the list of works was more concentrated, aiming to select a range that was not representative of a particular genre (such as crime or romance) but more of a disparate grouping of works by women during these years. There is a cross fertilisation of British and Australian authors, some of whom travelled between Britain and Australia and some who did not. Again, there was a personal element involved in this choice, as mentioned earlier.

The research was carried out by repeated readings of the text, note-taking and the making of marginal notes. In addition, biographies of the authors were explored, papers, letters, handwritten manuscripts and household fragments were copied, read and linked to the works and authors in question. Contemporary and historical accounts of the social context were examined, including lists of publications and cultural events pertaining to the years of publication for the texts. Critical essays written about the texts and their authors from the time of publication to the present were consulted for evidence of critical reception and/or rejection.

While it was impossible to encompass the whole context of each text, effort was made, where possible, to search out the less well-known accounts, the marginalia of literary societies, the anecdotes and the passing contemporary reference. I consulted archival material from the British Library, some of which included personal letters, a manuscript of one of Thirkell's novels and other

pieces of memorabilia. Although some of the archival material consulted was not directly related to the works under discussion here, it provided background and many insights into the lives of women writing during this time. I consulted material related to authors whose works were originally considered but were not in the final choice of five texts. These, too, provided rich background material.

The archives available from both the Dorothy L. Sayers Society and the Angela Thirkell Society provided materials that were consulted for details of the authors' working lives and lists of their publications, some of which are relatively little known and which provided valuable insights into the lifeworlds of the authors.

Research, as Parr so acutely points out, is messy, "evading neat, organizing frameworks" (1998, p.29) and the open-ended nature of my quest for context alongside the text certainly bears this out. As well as research related to the texts themselves and in addition to the theoretical underpinnings of the work, I consulted a number of research reports that experimented with different styles of presentation as well as experimenting myself with various forms before settling with the present one. This is in tune with what Lorimer describes as geography's "fine spell of experimentation in form and tone where fragmentary data is being turned towards more imaginative styles of composition and expression" (2007, p.28).

While the reader may wish for more (or less!) imaginative styles of "composition and expression", I have positioned myself as storyteller, for there is a story to tell, gleaned from the pages of these texts, the works and fragments that rub shoulders with them and share shelf space with them. This story is to be found more in the kitchen than the Cabinet Office, in everyday material practices and lived lives. That said, constantly rumbling in the background and sometimes very present in the foreground is the Great War, the first conflict, the end of which began the interwar period. The interwar period is one of aftermath and prelude, interwoven with the Great Depression, sited on a narrative, historical continuum in which texts circulate and a matrix from which they are produced and received. As I write these words, conflict drags on in Afghanistan and a recession continues as unemployment rises. The review sections of the weekend

newspapers list books published during this time (still according more space to men than to women) and I try to get these words down, carving a niche within my own domestic space from which to tell this story, paradoxically looking for silence in which to write.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Domestic Dwelling: Hostages to Fortune and the post-war domestic landscape*

Ali Baba, on the other hand, who married a woman as poor as himself, lived in a very mean dwelling, and had no other means of maintaining his wife and children than his daily labour... (Everyman, 1907, p.247)

*August 2<sup>nd</sup>*. - Noteworthy what astonishing difference made in entire household by presence of one additional child. Robert finds one marble - which he unfortunately steps upon - mysterious little empty box with hole in bottom, and half a torn sponge on the stairs, and says, This house is a perfect Shambles - which I think excessive. ... Mealtimes, especially lunch, very, very far from peaceful. From time to time remember, with pained astonishment, theories subscribed to in pre-motherhood days, as to inadvisability of saying Don't, incessant fault finding, and so on. Should now be sorry indeed to count number of times that I find myself forced to administer these and similar checks to the dear children. (Delafield, 1934, pp. 235, 236)

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 the shell fire. (Woolf, 1935, p.23)

This chapter concerns itself with a novel that fell silent for a number of decades, eventually being republished in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is one text in a continuum of works that have fallen silent for a number of reasons, as discussed earlier. The text has survived along with other texts from earlier periods that also deal with the difficulties of being a woman in a male-dominated society, where most women “wrapped themselves in robes tailored by others” (Klapisch-Zuber, 1992, p.1).<sup>55</sup> Women, it seems, are still either

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<sup>55</sup> It would be divergent here to debate the notion that somehow ‘elite’ minorities and their sources are to be regarded with suspicion; an inverted snobbery of, ironically, *bien pensants*,

wrapping themselves or being wrapped, in clothes tailored by others and those clothes often seem to be designed with restriction in mind: intellectual, social and cultural hobble skirts.<sup>56</sup> The text chosen for examination in this chapter, *Hostages to Fortune* (Cambridge, 1933), also challenges the status quo.<sup>57</sup>

*Hostages to Fortune* (HTF) is a work that fell silent for a significant period. Probably more is known about Pisan and other medieval authors than is known about Elizabeth Cambridge, whose novels sold well and were reviewed favourably in *The Times* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. This chapter aims to “resurrect the words of women from the silence of the sources” (Régnier-Bohler, 1992, p.427). In order to do so, the domestic space and domestic fiction must be discussed. Initially, I explore understandings of the domestic space, moving between this and the domestic novel in general and domestic novels by women during the interwar years in particular, and the contexts within which these works were written. The focus then narrows to Cambridge and HTF, its

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in themselves an elite. The supposedly elite texts from the Middle Ages comprise works by troubadours, mothers of poets, householders and mystics alongside noblewomen with access to writing materials and books. Feminism, and the quest for social and cultural equality and justice have been replaced in certain quarters with a slavish devotion to fashion, an unthinking political correctness that reconstructs stereotypes. All of which may seem a harsh generalisation in itself but at certain points in preparing for this work, I have encountered just such attitudes. Women novelists, classified as ‘minor, middlebrow and middle class’ during their lifetime, continue to be seen as somehow unworthy of scrutiny, precisely the views of the literary establishment at the other end of the political spectrum. As I have argued elsewhere in this work, it is not until we focus on a particular group that the intricacies and embroilments emerge. They can be so easily dismissed by those who seek to privilege one voice above others. With a somewhat crusading spirit, I re-echo the words of Greenblatt and Gallagher (2000, p.21) about inviting in the rag-tag and bobtail of history: “semiliterate political agitators, coarse-faced peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies whose writings had been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship”. Surviving texts from women in the Middle Ages need not necessarily be dismissed as the writings of a privileged elite. Even if they were, surely they are worth exploration as texts that offer insights into the lives, values and imagination of a particular group that constituted part of a larger historical period? And how easily dismissed are certain voices in the quest for a re-visioning of history? In this case the voices form part of a largely silenced group: women.

<sup>56</sup> Designer Paul Poiret, who both designed and advocated the wearing of trousers by women in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century also designed the “hobble” (as in, ‘to limp’) skirt, which restricted women’s movement by drawing in a full skirt between knee and ankle. At various points since then, variations on the hobble skirt have been reintroduced - Diana Ross has worn several versions of hobble skirts for her performances. Restriction and boundedness of women, through hobble skirts and corsets and in China, through the binding of feet, for example, served to emphasise the status of the patriarch, as ‘his’ women were confined by their dress and defined by it in terms of social status, thus confirming their male ‘keepers’ as men of property. One can see “what sort of woman is being portrayed” (Brooks & Rafferty, 2007, p.50) by her dress - “that corsets were also called ‘stays’ is no accident” (Brooks & Rafferty, 2007, p.49).

<sup>57</sup> The title of the novel comes from an essay by Francis Bacon ‘Of Marriage and Single Life’ (1612 & revised in 1625): “He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune, for they are impediments to great enterprise either in virtue or in mischief.”

concerns, preoccupations and most of all, its landscape, moving between 'inside' and 'outside', that is, the domestic space and the rural landscape of the novel's setting. Themes of domesticity, marriage, children, gender, rural isolation and women's writing are scrutinised, moving between text and context, the literary and the non-literary. Cambridge's own life and the reception of her texts are also examined. The threads that run throughout the chapter are: the embeddedness of "expressive acts" (Veeser, 1989, p.11) within material practice; the contradictory and often confusing circuit that runs between participation within, resistance to, and endorsement of, culture; the silencing of women and their words as part of a continuum. At the end of the chapter are some information boxes, giving details of the novel, its author and the context in which the novel under discussion was published and received.

Above all, this chapter is part of a work that both plays with and explores the stories women tell about themselves and others. Shahrazad speaks. Shahrazad tells:

Violet looked at the litter.

'To begin with, you won't be able to sprawl about like that when you've got a house of your own. Who's going to pick up after you, what sort of house do you think you're going to have?'

'I shall have a lovely home,' said Catherine confidently. 'I shall have wood fires, and scones for tea, and wonderful old furniture picked up cheaply...'

'And wood ash all over the place, mice in the larder.... And William down with a cold. I admire your courage.'

She [Violet] stood up to go.

'In any case,' she added, 'you won't be able to lie about trimming hats for yourself and reading novels... you certainly won't have time to write any.' (*HTF*, p.13)<sup>58</sup>

### *The domestic space*

In the last year of the Great War, Catherine gives birth to Audrey (see Box 4.1). As Catherine lies in bed, trimming a hat, her sister, Violet, warns her about the

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<sup>58</sup> All quotes from *HTF* are taken from the first edition, 1933, Jonathan Cape, London.

future, telling Catherine that she will “never have another quiet moment” (*HTF*, p.11). ““You won’t know how to manage her,’ she said”, to which Catherine responds, ““No’” not “prepared to argue the point” (*HTF*, p.14). It is interesting to note that Violet uses the term ‘house’ and Catherine ‘home’. For Violet, the physical structure and its materials, even down to the “wood ash” (p.13) are of most concern. For Catherine, the comfort, material and otherwise, is of importance.

**Box 4.1**

**Hostages to Fortune by Elizabeth Cambridge**

(1933, Jonathan Cape, London)

Catherine marries William (last names are rarely used in the novel) during the last year of the Great War. William is working as a doctor at a base hospital in France. While he is there, Catherine gives birth to their daughter, Audrey. When William is invalided out of the Army just before the end of the war, they settle in Oxfordshire, William’s boyhood home and away from Catherine’s native Cornwall. Catherine and William spend the rest of the novel in an old house that needs constant maintenance. They supplement William’s small income by growing fruit, selling jam and eggs and growing their own vegetables. Adam and Bill, their sons, are born in the house. Catherine gradually finds that life is a constant battle: to educate her children at home (the house is remote and they cannot afford to send the children away to school), to work both inside and outside of the house, to fulfil her role as a doctor’s wife and as William’s lover/companion. William’s practice covers 27 villages and there is only one other partner. Both he and Catherine are constantly tired, fractious and irritable with each other and worried about money. In the background is the wider economic difficulty of the Depression, the changing countryside as the young move to the towns for better paid work, and increased mobility brings day trippers to the countryside.

The novel is the story of family life, told mostly through the eyes of Catherine. Much of the text is taken up with the struggles of rearing children, marital and family relationships. Catherine’s family life is mirrored by her sister Violet’s struggles with her older children and Violet’s life in Cornwall with her husband, Edward. Violet is mostly disgruntled and disappointed, an unhappy and prickly person, constantly critical of Catherine. Catherine’s writing ambitions seem to be continually thwarted and circumscribed by the demands of others.

There is no great denouement, no earth-shattering, sudden occurrence. That has all happened before the novel begins, during the Great War. This is a novel of aftermath, the everyday of that aftermath, seen through the lens of the domestic space.

The domestic space incorporates both of these aspects and more.<sup>59</sup> Briganti and Mezei's (2006, p.19) understanding of domestic space is one that:

takes into account the material, psychological, spiritual and social aspects of house and home and garden within the wider context of the everyday and of human relationships within and beyond the house.

It is a good working understanding of the domestic space, one that encompasses implicitly, notions of culture. Domestic spaces need not, necessarily, however, be confined to houses. Bed-sitting rooms, Bedouin tents, caravans, shop awnings and institutions can all be classified as domestic spaces. It is not unknown for people to live and work in their offices. Women serving in combat zones have attempted to recreate a domestic space in their quarters as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry did during the Great War (Lee, 2009). For the purposes of this chapter, the house/home (in which Catherine and her family settle) is the primary domestic space under focus.

The domestic space in which Catherine and countless other women found themselves after the Great War was not that of the Edwardian era. If that remark seems facile or trite, it is nevertheless of immense importance. As Joannu (1999, p.9) remarks, "if an understanding of gender is crucial to an understanding of historical change, an understanding of historical change is crucial to an understanding of gender" (1999, p.9). Following the Great War the home was "repeatedly reimagined" (Humble, 2001, p.110) by many people, including writers, the media and government. As Humble points out, the poor health of the (male) conscripts was blamed on housing conditions. Committees were set up to deal with housing, including an all-women committee that reported on women's housing requirements. Larger houses, once staffed by squadrons of domestic servants, were no longer practical as fewer workers opted for domestic service. So acute did the shortage become that unemployed women who refused to take on domestic service were denied unemployment

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<sup>59</sup> As I wrote that sentence I was immersed in the domestic space, trying to carve out this chapter between the demands made by domesticity, where piles of books and papers jostled with washing, tidying (impossible in the circumstances), animals needing fed and walked, food needing preparation and the working week ahead. My immersion in all of it made the expressive acts of each more difficult and perhaps skewed my thinking. In taking the domestic space seriously, I continually make compromises, ones that often lead to frustration and difficulty as well as to pleasure and satisfaction but rarely dullness. Even cleaning out a hen house can provide temporary and satisfying respite from doctoral demands.

benefit (Beddoe, 1989, pp.50-52). In a change reminiscent of rural England after the Black Death, domestic servants found themselves in a seller's market. This permeated the domestic space from working class homes to aristocratic ones (D'Cruze, 1997). More prosperous working class women could often afford, pre-war, to hire a maid of all work.

When young women began to seek work elsewhere, women of all classes were obliged to re-think domestic work, taking on more themselves and requiring the same of their daughters (as we will see, later in the chapter, no such requirement was made of sons). For working class and middle class women, this meant keeping their daughters at home for longer, feeling the need for their wages and their labour in the domestic space. This is evident in *HTF* when Irene, who works for Catherine and William, is discouraged from leaving for work in Oxford. Her pay packet *and* her presence at home are felt, by her mother, to be essential. In *The New House*, (Cooper, 1936), Rhoda, the unmarried daughter of the house, is thought to be essential (and is) to the running of the house. Rhoda is unable to escape unless she marries.

The enslavement of wives and daughters is a common theme of novels during this period: the inability to escape except through marriage. In Nancy Mitford's *Love in a Cold Climate* (set during the interwar years), Polly Hampton, the beautiful daughter of wealthy aristocratic parents, although quite happy to remain at home and unmarried, asks her mother, in a fit of temper,

'What else can I do? You haven't exactly trained me for a career, have you?'

'Oh, yes, indeed I have. I've trained you for marriage, which, in my opinion (I may be old-fashioned), is by far the best career open to any woman.' (Mitford, 1949, p.100)

Daughters may go out to work and they may not but their place, until marriage, is with their parents. Despite the New Woman (McCracken, 2007) having other career options, marriage continued to be seen as the most important.<sup>60</sup> Upon marriage, the primary occupation of women was household management and the

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<sup>60</sup> The New Woman was a term that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to describe women who were less constricted by convention than they had been previously, leading a more public and independent life.

rearing of children. In the new world of post-Great War Britain, the domestic space may have been partially determined by new thinking on housing and motherhood but Edwardian values also intruded, creating uncertainty and “a state of flux” with “difficult and disturbing change” (Humble, 2001,p.111).

Juxtaposed with the domestic space were the significant gains achieved such as women having the vote (initially extended only to women over 30) and in seeking to enter areas of employment that had been seen as male. “It comes as something of a surprise”, says Spender (1982), “to encounter not only the optimism but the confidence in the future of many women of this period ... rather than seeking permission to enter the male domains, quite a few women assumed they had a perfect right to go in” (1982, p.605). In *HTF*, Catherine’s sister Violet, is bemused by her daughter Jane’s attitude to life. Far from being envious, Violet is profoundly shocked and hurt by her daughter’s rejection of her own values, seeing it as a rejection of herself:

You know what Jane’s flat is like. The most awful set ... up to all hours talking so that you don’t know which way to look. Young men in dirty pullovers trying to look like that dreadful person in *The Constant Nymph*, and girls who can hardly get their lips apart for paint .... (*HTF*, p.210)

Simplistically, this passage can be seen as the eternal struggle between one generation and another but post-Great War, the change was immediate and glaring. The Bright Young Things, immortalised in *Vile Bodies* (1930) included women who revelled in new found freedom. For Jessica Mitford (as opposed to Nancy Mitford, whose work was quoted earlier), these “children of the Great War” released from its horror, developed a

sort of frenetic ecstasy comparable to the St. Vitus Dance of the Middle Ages ... They gaily toppled the old, uncomplicated household gods ... and created an upheaval in standards of behaviour ... As for their ‘lifestyle’ as it would now, alas, be called - women wearing skirts up to the knee, bobbing their hair, smoking, drinking cocktails - how desperately risqué and it improper it all seemed! In Nancy’s [Jessica’s sister’s] novel, *Highland Fling*, written in 1929, the daring words, ‘Have a sidecar [cocktail], Sally darling’ ... must have seemed every bit as shocking to the older generation as talk of pot, grass, speed to the parents of the sixties. (Mitford, 1977, p.20).

Catherine's niece Jane, while seemingly a 'new breed', exchanges the domestic tyranny (as she sees it) of her mother and aunt for a newer version of the same. She marries a poor composer, works hard as the family breadwinner, coming home of an evening to entertain her husband and his friends while they discuss Art:

Jane and the student Hansi ran about with cocktails and coffee cups, talked incessantly, seemed to know about everybody's work and their exact (varying) relationship to everybody in the room .... Peter [Jane's husband] sat on the floor by the gas fire, ... hands in his pockets, treating his set with kindly insolence. He never moved from that position. If people wanted to talk to him, that was their affair. (*HTF*, p.220)

After clearing up, emptying ashtrays and setting the flat to rights, Jane is off to bed, only to rise early the next day for work. Peter comments that Jane is "such a good housekeeper" (p.220). When Peter leaves Jane for another woman, she eventually goes to stay with Peter's family, running errands for them and taking on the role of housekeeper cum secretary. Most of this is told through Catherine's view which is jaundiced and a little sceptical of Jane's supposedly freer interpretation of commitment and relationships. The domestic space of Jane's flat seems to Catherine to be even bleaker than her own.

Jane criticises Catherine for going through life "half asleep" and not living it to the full, for being "sentimental and thoroughly dishonest" (p.221).

Rebellion of the arts, freedom of sex life, the social regeneration of mankind through the tacit refusal to do anything which gave the doer a moment's inconvenience ... to these things Jane was bringing the same earnestness which Violet [Jane's mother] had lavished on the upkeep of her house, the teaching of a narrow social code, the preservation of an absurd set of conventions. (*HTF*, p.222)

All three women are in thrall to one form of domesticity or another. For all Jane's rebellion against her mother's "narrow social code" (p.222), she is still defining herself in terms of Peter's life and their domestic life together. She creates a home where Peter's needs are paramount.

The abstract nature of the home, puzzling if often recognisable, “will always defy a rational deconstruction and complete explication of its meaning and content” (Benjamin, 1995, p.3). Perhaps a bridge between deconstruction, meaning and understanding is that of fiction. The domestic novels of the interwar years often attempted to explore and explain the meaning of the domestic space. Women novelists “simultaneously privileged and critiqued the home and homemaking” (Briganti & Mezei, 2006, p.6). They began to “view the world, family and the house from inside the domestic sphere through housework, housekeeping, cooking, cleaning, decorating and to create artistic order out of the disorder of living” (2006, p.6). In contending with the domestic space those who inhabit it must weave “a path through a medley of structures built by others for [them] to live in, according to designs that answer not to [their] particular background and circumstances, but to some generalised conception of pan-human needs” (Ingold, 2005, p.502). Through the “material culture” of the space, “settled gender divisions” were (and are) articulated (Hetherington, 2007). Women writing about the domestic space began to explore its meaning and its impact on their daily lives.

The proliferation of magazines during this period (Briganti & Mezei, 2006; Dancyger, 1978; Humble, 2001) whose primary focus was domestic concerns also included feminist publications such as *Time and Tide* that were considered to be progressive. *Time and Tide* was founded by Margaret Haig in 1920. As well as featuring articles about international affairs and supporting women MPs (Spender, 1992, p.609), it also featured work from authors such as Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, E. M. Delafield and E.H. Young. E.M. Delafield’s and E.H. Young’s domestic fiction, later to be published in novel form, was serialised in the pages of *Time and Tide*.

Delafield’s *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930) satirises the domestic life and the upbringing of children. She made her readers, says Beauman (1984), “reassess the nature of their everyday lives” (1984, p.113). The book is “wry, witty, observant, yet hinting at a more profound awareness” (p.113), making readers aware of the “empty complacency of provincial life” (p.114). The comedy is evoked through “the heroine’s continual and irrepressible fight for life” (p.114). The heroine is a writer, the wife of an estate steward and a

mother of two, whose daily round is that of the kitchen range going out, the needs of the children (“Query: Is not the inferiority complex, about which so much is written and spoken, nowadays shifting from the child to the parent?” 1930, p.89) and battling with Cook (the heroine does have domestic help but this seems always to add to her frustration), callers with time on their hands and her husband falling asleep every night over *The Times*. “Gendered spaces themselves shape, and are shaped by, daily activities” (Spain, 1992, in Llewellyn, 2004, p.44) and the ‘provincial lady’ feels herself to be all too shaped by her environment. Her attempts to break away from the domestic space are mined for comedy as well as her rare evenings out when she attempts to join in conversations with those who have read the latest books, seen recent exhibitions. Unlike her heroine, E.M. Delafield was able to leave the domestic space with less trouble and wrote an account of her travels in newly communist Russia, living and working on a commune. She wrote, however, that she was concerned about fitting the journey in with the children’s term-time so that she should not miss too much of their holidays and that the children “were thoroughly sympathetic and approving” (Delafield, 1937,p.3).

Apart from *Time and Tide* and its progressive agenda, other magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping* identified less than romantic views of homemaking. One contributor, complaining of having to cajole £1 from her husband for a deposit on a vacuum cleaner, railed:

‘I’ve had just about enough of working a twelve hour day while you work eight!... Your office equipment is 1934 while I’m still working in 1834.’ (in Dancyger, 1978, p.144).

Other publications such as *Peg’s Paper*, serialised romances and “instead of avoiding difficult issues entirely, it sought to incorporate them, although disguised, into a fiction that identified with the concerns of its readers” (Bloom, 1993, p.85)<sup>61</sup> Most publications, however, extolled the virtues of homemaking/housekeeping in one form or another.

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<sup>61</sup> My mother, growing up in rural New South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s, read her mother’s copies of *Peg’s Paper*. An avid and catholic reader, she found the romances to be mawkish and “trashy”.

As McDowell (1999, p.89) points out, viewing the home solely as a “locus of oppression” denies the experience of those for whom the home was also a place of escape. It is a tension that is evident in domestic novels of the interwar years. That tension often manifests itself in fictional representations of motherhood and the rearing of children. Earlier in the chapter I quoted from *HTF* and the birth of Catherine’s first child. The novel and those of many of Cambridge’s contemporaries (and many women writers of fiction to this day) concern motherhood. The extraordinary change created by the birth of a child and its impact on the domestic space is explored by Oakley, whose research studied the impact of motherhood on the lives of sixty-six first time mothers:

Having a first baby is a journey into the unknown in more senses than one. Apart from the birth, which is a central drama ... three changes have to be accomplished more or less simultaneously: giving up paid work [even if only for a short time]; taking up a totally new occupation - that of mother; becoming a housewife ... Unlike most other changes of occupation, this transformation ... entails more than small changes in routine: different hours, different workplace, different work-mates, more or less money. The language of capitalism ... masks the actual labour of housework and childcare ... while domesticity may be a theme running through women’s lives from birth to death, suddenly having no other occupation to call one’s own may seriously injure a woman’s self-concept, ideas she has cherished for a long while about herself as a person. (Oakley, 1984, p.69)

Parenthood and the rearing of children within a domestic space is a common theme of domestic fiction. It is worth noting here that this concern, which should be of primary importance to society at large, has been, and continues to be, critiqued as a poor choice of subject for fiction unless the content is sensational or disguised as ‘high art’. This is also manifested by the poor rates of pay for nursery nurses and those working in caring occupations with young children. As a central theme of some of the fiction in this work, parenthood, and particularly, motherhood, as a material practice and as an expressive act reflects, imagines and explores the tensions, delights and struggles of parenting. The dismissal of such fiction in favour of work that is seen to be more ‘relevant’ or ‘cutting edge’ denies the experience of the majority of humankind. If not all parents, most of us have been children, part of a family of some sort or another.

In the case of women's domestic fiction, it is doubly dismissed: by the nature of its subject matter and by who wrote the words.

### *Writing the domestic space*

And 'who wrote the words' continues to be as contentious as it was in the interwar period. Before moving on to examine *HTF* in detail, I want first to examine the ways in which domestic fiction continues to be dismissed and silenced. Left huddled outside in the cold, domestic fiction was not deemed to be fit matter for the canon. Critics such as the Leavises and George Orwell (Hayes, 1993, p.71) dismissed 'middlebrow' fiction by women as rubbish at best and at worst as contemptible scribbling that addled the minds of its readers. Humble (2001,p.18) finds it significant that these critics "insist on the distinction between the ordinary reader - uncritical and voracious - and the intellectual reader, who is imagined as calm and judicious". She finds it "no accident that they both [Q.D. Leavis and George Orwell] apply exactly the same terms of distinction to men and women as to readers". Despite women's fiction being published in unprecedented quantities (Beauman, 1984; Bloom, 1993):

the paucity of critical weight applied to female writing from those decades [1930-1955] belies the variety and volume of those works which, for the most part, have been overshadowed by the male writers of the period. (Clune, Day & Maguire, 1997, p.57)

Much of women's fiction, although popular and even critically acclaimed, eventually disappeared from even library shelves.

This can, in part, be explained by the continual assault on domestic fiction in particular and fiction by women in general (with a few exceptions) is dismissed by critics to this day. Diversity definitely does not mean domestic. As McDowell (1999,p.89) has pointed out, the domestic concerns of black women often do not conform to white feminist understandings of the domestic space. For some black women, the home is often a refuge, a place where being black takes on a less oppressive meaning than in the 'outside' (hooks, 1997). By and large, critiques that dismiss domestic fiction as parochial and narrow, dull and depressing (Parker, 2004; Litt & Smith, 2005) participate in a literary economy

that mirrors the broader one: what women (and some men) do inside the domestic space is of no consequence. What is enacted within those spaces is deemed to be too familiar to warrant much consideration. The fact that such space is still, overwhelmingly, seen as the domain of women who are unpaid for the roles they fulfil within it (Rudd, 2006), is the key to continuing attempts to silence it. The language used by critics who dismiss such work confirms this. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, some women writers began to pay attention to the everyday and women's experiences of the everyday (Humm, 1991, p.25). In fusing their lifeworlds with their fiction, the writers who promoted the everyday were challenging the status quo, writing about what interested them and their readers. This type of narrative was not seen by literary institutions as a valid or as having literary merit and so was placed outside those institutions and their influence.

Parker (2004, pp.1 &2) comments that despite the proliferation of women writers since the publication of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and despite feminist critiques of their work, "the views that Woolf was challenging nearly eighty years ago remain pervasive today and 'feminine' is still a pejorative term when used in relation to fiction". Parker cites terms such as 'limited', 'tedious', 'gossip' and 'lament' being used by critics. After the inception of the Orange Prize in 1996, fiction by British women was attacked by critics, according to Parker, for its "dreary, domestic self-obsessions". Male critics were more defensive of the tradition of domestic writing than were women in this instance, according to Parker:

Robert McCrum ... insisted that, 'Just because our writers are not compelled to compose on a symphonic scale does not mean that they are tone-deaf or that a string quartet cannot be as significant as a composition for a full orchestra. ... David Lodge dismissed the notion that insular, parochial or domestic fiction cannot be great literature. (Parker, 2004, p.3)

Amanda Craig (1999, in Parker, 2004, p.3) commented that "it does seem a little harsh to criticise those of us whose creative work is fitted around dirty nappies, domestic chores, broken sleep, the school run ... and usually composed on the kitchen table, for failing to ignore these facts in our fiction". And on it continued, with the debate raging in the pages of newspapers and literary

periodicals. Both subject matter and the authors came in for heavy criticism and the ensuing debate meant that, once again, women were under fire for writing the domestic.

In 2005, the editors of *New Writing 13* (2005), commented that, “On the whole, the submissions from women were disappointingly domestic, the opposite of risk-taking - as if too many women have been injected with a special drug that keeps them dulled, good, saying the right thing, aping the right shape, and melancholy at doing it, depressed as hell” (p.1).<sup>62</sup> A.L. Kennedy weighed into the debate in the pages of *The Guardian* (2005), remarking that “Women’s Writing” was a stick used to beat women who write:

Either Women’s Writing is fluffy and inconsequential, full of romps and buttocks - or Women’s Writing is coarse and aggressive and the kind of muck you’d expect from an off-duty stripper in a strop - or Women’s Writing is obsessed with plumbing and bleeding and bonding to whale music. Effectively, Women’s Writing is whatever has most annoyed any given journalist, commentator, academic, or author in the past few books by women they’ve read. (March 24, 2005).

Kennedy went on to critique booksellers and publishers as well as commentators, finding it “offensive” that people were being told “what to think”, also pointing out that writing the domestic was not “sex-specific”, citing *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* as examples of domestic novels written by men. The scope of this work precludes a debate on the ways in which both of these novels view domesticity but it is worth pointing out that domestic novels by men provoke little comment on the setting and nature of their fiction. Kennedy argues for the writing of the domestic space as a space that is a primary concern of human beings: “As far as I am aware, human beings’ homes are quite often domestic interiors and falling in love is something human beings do. Why should they not write about it?” (Kennedy, March 24, 2005).

Writer, Jane Rogers also used the pages of *The Guardian* to criticise the editors of *New Writing 13*. As one of the editors of the previous edition Rogers

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<sup>62</sup> An opinion piece in the periodical *Msllexia*, commented on views of risk-taking, remarking that risk-taking meant doing things like brain surgery in a combat zone (2005). For some women, still, risk-taking means much more than experimental fiction. Taking up a pen at all in some countries and in some circumstances can be a risk.

expressed bemusement at the fact that in “12 months, women writers have suddenly become ‘dulled.... depressed as hell’”, remarking that it was a “tragedy that two such fine and intelligent writers [the editors] have gone into print hailing a ‘generation of young male writers’ and dissing the women” (March 24, 2005).

The silencing continues, albeit with more voices raised in defence of domestic fiction. In the case of *HTF*, the novel was silent for some decades until republished by Persephone Books seventy years later.<sup>63</sup> It continues to sell.

### Hostages to Fortune and *Elizabeth Cambridge*

*Hostages to Fortune* centres on Catherine, her life with her GP husband (William) and children (Audrey, Adam and Bill) in a remote Oxfordshire village. The landscape is William’s boyhood landscape, alien to Catherine, who hails from Cornwall. The domestic landscape is alien to her as well and one of the novel’s themes is Catherine’s struggle to subdue it, conquer it and defy it. The family has little money and ‘make-do and mend’ is a continual effort for both William and Catherine. They live in the house that comes with the practice, a large, rambling and rather run-down house. Inside the house, Catherine feels small and frightened. Over the years, William and Catherine try to be as self-sufficient in the garden as possible and this adds to Catherine’s domestic struggles, for it is she and not William, who has to manage the children in both garden and house. She feels inadequate and constantly tired:

The terrific business of keeping her house warm and clean and her household fed and clothed took up all the foreground of her mind. There was no time to love Audrey

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<sup>63</sup> The publishing by Persephone Books of works that have long since been out of print has proved a popular and thriving venture. Cooper’s assertion (2008) that the books are “gentle domestic tales written by largely middle- and upper-class women” is either sloppy research or a deliberate attempt to undermine women’s fiction and/or Persephone Books. In fact, several of the books on Persephone’s list are written by men. In addition, the subjects of the books cover quite a range. Persephone has published books on anti-Semitism, domestic violence, non-fiction works on the status of women and a seminal text by Hilda Bernstein. *The World that was Ours* (2004), concerns the events leading up to the Rivonia Trial in South Africa (when Mandela was incarcerated and Bernstein’s husband acquitted). It is a work that connects everyday family life with the political. I find it infuriating that commentators continue to categorise texts and their publication in such a simplistic way. Persephone’s aim is to take these out-of-print works from the ghetto and bring them to a new readership. Even Cooper eventually admits to her *Guardian* readers that the books are a “mixture of style and substance” (2008).

and Adam. By the time she had provided for their bodily needs she had little energy for their affections. She didn't want to love anybody or be loved. She wanted to sit down and not even to think (*HTF*, p.51)

William “spent his days toiling around twenty-seven villages and putting up endless bottles of medicine when he came home at night” (*HTF*, p.50). As prices rise and inflation gets away on them, they are unable to budget on William's uncertain, pre-NHS income. Calls to patients are often unpaid or paid in kind, with what little the mostly farm-labouring population can afford to give.

In such a setting, Catherine's writing, dating from her single days, takes a definite back seat. When William is still in France in 1917 and Audrey still a baby, Catherine snatches time to continue a novel:

Catherine went on writing a novel in the Wessex manner, full of strong-minded dark women and farms of lonely places and Nature and Destiny, and a great many other things which she knew nothing whatever about. For more than anything else, more than William or Audrey, Catherine loved ink. (*HTF*, p.23).

Some years later, it seems “only natural” to William that she should rarely write now. “A woman gave up that sort of nonsense when she got married” (*HTF*, p.105). Catherine rarely talks of her writing. But she does finally finish the novel in the Wessex manner and sends it to a publisher. She feels that the book, having been “written with such difficulty,” must be worth publishing. The novel is rejected and eventually returned to her, it comes back grimy and torn. She will have to re-type the novel before it can go out again:

But how ... and when?

Other women managed to write novels and bring up families. Catherine wondered if they had all washed behind their children's ears and pushed them about in perambulators and swept under their beds and weeded the garden and picked the fruit and made their children's clothes and done the hundred and one odd jobs that fell to her share, because William was always out and odd labour ruinously dear...

She shut the manuscript into her drawer amongst her clean frocks and shut the door with a bang. That was that! (p.107)

After a long walk in the fields, chiding herself for feeling bitter, Catherine resumes her domestic duties. By the end of the novel, Catherine muses “of all the things I once thought, I have only my thoughts left” (p. 304).

Although the above outline may seem unremittingly grim, Catherine does enjoy lighter moments. There are moments of tenderness between herself and William and the children and times when she is occasionally in the company of others. But there is a sense throughout the novel that Catherine is discontented, unhappy and unsure of herself. The war, she feels has “given her back quite a different person” in William, “sharper, more irritable” (p.31, 32). Their relationship, while tender at times, is often tense with the two of them seeming to be on completely different wave lengths. “When they were not speaking to each other, they could think kindly of each other” (p.59). When alone, Catherine is “comparatively happy” (p.51). Catherine’s embeddedness in the emotional and material spaces of domestic life constrain her. She is at her most free when on her own. When William is sent away to convalesce after contracting Spanish influenza, Catherine reads contentedly of an evening. There is time for her to regain the inner life she inhabited before her marriage and before war broke out.

The outside sometimes appears to Catherine to be as alien and tiring as the domestic space. On her walks with Audrey and Adam through the fields, she feels she knows “the look of the road so well that every tree, the position of every gate” is a “weariness” (*HTF*, p.140). They rarely see others and when they do, Catherine worries about the children, who are awkward in company. For Catherine, making friends with another woman in a similar situation (known only as “Hilary’s mother”) confirms her in the belief that she and other women seem “to be getting nowhere” (*HTF*, p.184). Hilary’s mother lives and works on a farm, dealing with domestic chores, educating her children, breeding horses, seeing to the hens. She rails against it,

Up at six to feed my ghastly hens, and drag water up to them and collect the eggs. Then breakfast with my wretches... work in the house... then out for an hour to exercise the ponies. (*HTF*, p.183)

“Hilary’s mother” then has to contend with her children trying to light a fire in the paddock near where the winter feed is stored. Having watched their mother stamp out the fire, the children complain that she has “spoilt everything” (*HTF*, p.183). Catherine confides that when the children say they don’t know what to do, she feels “like a jellyfish” (*HTF*, p.183), to which Hilary’s mother replies,

‘You aren’t a jellyfish, you’re a doormat. These infernal children make doormats of us. Nobody took all this trouble with us. And our people didn’t have to work like we do. Look at you ... look at me ... we work. We’re always teaching them to blow their noses and wipe their feet ... and pick up the litter they leave lying about. I don’t like work. I’m not used to it. I can’t give myself up body and soul to children, and ponies, and hens ... And I get so tired that sometimes I’m bothered to know how I’m to keep going.’

She took her foot off the bucket.

‘Since you’re here I’d be thankful if you’d come and help me feed my mouldy hens.’ (*HTF*, p.183, 184)

Catherine replies,

‘it seems to be taking one round and round in a circle. It’s the same as it was five years ago. The children aren’t any tidier or any different. We work just as hard and things don’t get any easier. We simply seem to be getting nowhere’

‘Where d’you expect to get? That’s life isn’t it?’ Hilary’s mother swilled the last of the water out of the pail. ‘Or if it isn’t life it’s all that you and I are going to get, my dear, so make the most of it.’ (*HTF*, p.184)

Catherine’s situation is, in some ways, easier than those of other women. She has some help in the house and clearly has access to some form of contraception. Middle-class women in previous generations had more domestic help and less ‘hands on’ experience of rearing children. But since she is married, Catherine is also unable to work outside the home as most of the work to which she is suited is not open to her, thanks to the Marriage Bar, which prevented women from working in teaching, the civil service and nursing once they were married. It is likely that William would have vetoed this idea anyway.

Since Catherine and Hilary's mother live in a remote area, they are obliged to educate their children at home, being unable to afford to send them away to school, saving as much as they can for the short secondary schooling they can afford to give them. As in most aspects of her life, Catherine feels ill-equipped to manage the education of her children. Her feelings of inadequacy permeate her thoughts. She feels she is a poor manager, poor housewife, mother and teacher. "Catherine knew that her teaching was faulty. She was too much afraid of failure" (p.149). We never see Catherine before she takes on marriage and motherhood for the novel opens with the birth of Audrey. Initially, she is captivated by motherhood, feeling a "love, deep, impersonal and compassionate" for Audrey (*HTF*, p.11). While breastfeeding Audrey, she is fascinated by both the process and its connectedness between herself and her daughter:

It was wonderful to be able to give anyone else such complete satisfaction. Lying there, with her arm around her baby, Catherine was happy, and she was not often happy. There were limits to what she could give. Usually, she wasn't capable or sympathetic enough to give gracefully, but here she could give freely ... more freely even than she could give to William. The whole business was so natural. She gave, and her daughter took, no trouble afterwards about gratitude. (*HTF*, p.15)

Later, immersed in domestic life, working hard, Catherine feels she does not even have time to love her children. It is all she can do to mend, manage and teach. As she looks at Adam when he is a baby, Catherine comments to herself that he "ate away so many hours". She also tries to keep Adam, his needs, "his perpetual crying" away from William, who becomes irritable at the sound of Adam crying (*HTF*, p.49). But there are moments when Catherine is awed and delighted by Audrey's facility with words, her vivid imagination, her "bursts of poetic speech". She even bites her lip when chastising Audrey (p.69). Adam, however, is a different kettle of fish. Catherine admits to finding it "increasingly difficult to be just to Adam" (p.71), who tends to wheedle his own way out of others, something that Catherine finds shocking. Violet criticises Catherine for being alternately unloving and absurd with her children (p.140). Catherine is more likely to kiss Audrey for "talking nonsense" (p.140) than for bringing her a bunch of wilted flowers (which Catherine suspects have not been gathered for her at all). The children find her critical and never satisfied. Adam in

particular, feels that everything he does comes “unfinished the moment she looked at it. He so much wanted her praise” (p.167). Later she admits to it being “folly” to want happiness for one’s children (p.304) and recognises, with disappointment, Audrey’s withdrawal from her as she emerges into her teens. Catherine sees that having “fought that battle with William, she wouldn’t fight it again with Audrey” (p.287).

Despite affectionate moments between them and their love for one another, William’s and Catherine’s relationship is full of tension and the withdrawals that Catherine so minds about Audrey as she grows up. When William arrives home on leave after Audrey is born, he is disappointed because Catherine looks “ill and tired and shabby” (*HTF*, p.19). Catherine’s shabbiness bothers William and Catherine is fully aware of this. It does not seem to occur to William that her domestic duties leave her little time for worrying about her appearance. Professing to love her as he does, nevertheless William sees her “as woefully shabby”;

It hurt his own proper pride and his love of her. She was a different person from the woman he had married ... he hated to have what Catherine had not. (*HTF*, p.74)

William sees it as “bad for the practice” that she is looking so down-at-heel and eventually persuades Catherine to have a ‘nice’ dress made up for her (with funds they can ill-afford) but

when she put it on, she could see how her colour had faded and the light had gone from her hair. But she liked to take it out of the cupboard (*HTF*, p.75)

and look at it. She has no occasion to wear such a dress and finds that it makes her feel more dowdy and faded than ever. It is eventually dyed black (a more practical colour). Catherine often feels that William loves her “for all the things for which she didn’t want to be loved”,

He praised her if she made a successful boiling of jam or a good cake or if she spent the morning polishing a piece of furniture. (*HTF*, p.104)

What she wants is for him to say “that she was a help and a trier and that she was doing the best for the children” (p.105). Catherine muses that it never occurs to William to argue with her as he argues with Jane about Life. As William and Jane enter the house having done precisely that, Catherine is conscious that she is wearing an overall, her hair ruffled and her sleeves are rolled up. She looks at William to “see if he minded” (p.104). Instead, he kisses her and exclaims over the green peas she has been shelling.

The portrait of William and of Catherine’s relationship with him (told mostly through Catherine’s eyes), does him no favours. William has as little to do with the children as possible, is jealous of her attentions to them and finds Catherine shabby. He is completely unhelpful when she asks his advice on the best way to teach the children. Most of the time, he simply expects Catherine to ‘get on with it’ as he gets on with his own job and the chores he does around the house. The material practices in which they both engage are expressive acts for William and Catherine. But for Catherine, these material practices require a boundedness that William, working away from home each day, does not experience to any great degree. Housekeeping for Catherine is indeed what is ‘keeping’ her within the domestic sphere, bearing out Geyh’s (1993) reading of housekeeping as a “process of constituting a settled and enclosed subjectivity within those structures of house, family and society”, the house as “the ideology of the patriarchal family made concrete” (1993, p.109).

Similarly, Irene, the young woman who comes to help Catherine in the house is bounded by this ideology, at once captive within her own family and yet similarly situated with Catherine, William and the children. Cambridge reveals a sympathetic and discerning understanding of Irene’s place in the household and her inability to escape. Catherine appreciates Irene’s unconventional approach to her domestic duties but she worries that she is not providing a good enough experience for Irene in her chosen career.

Like Catherine, Irene was virulently untidy ... but clean. She never learnt method. She would drop her work in the middle of a crowded morning to mend a bicycle tyre ... disentangle Adam’s fishing line or execute minor repairs on the stove or kitchen furniture ... She could cook anything for which any sort of recipe existed. ... the kitchen, to the end, looked as if a

bomb had burst in it and was always encumbered by invalid bicycles, rag animals in process of construction and the novels of Bulwer Lytton and Mrs Henry Wood. ... The children adored her, for she taught them all in turn to ride bicycles and then disappeared with them into the valley where they learnt to catch roach and perch. (*HTF*, p.84)

But it is her own family that keeps Irene where she is. She hands over her wage to her mother. When Irene tentatively suggests she could earn more by finding work in Oxford, her mother vetoes this, expressing a desire to have Irene near her (*HTF*, p.194). But Irene eventually does go, leaving for another place where the work is better paid. Her father, a shepherd, is now too ill to work and as an agricultural labourer, is not entitled to the dole. Irene tells Audrey,

Even our mother sees I've got to go, now. She'll have to go out by the day [to domestic work], next winter. Our father won't like that. He's never let her do no outside work, not since they married. It's hard on her ... (*HTF*, p.270).

For Irene and her mother, 'going out' means domestic work, albeit not in their own homes. Irene's mother will continue to work within the domestic space after her day's work. Given their economic circumstances there would be little in the way of labour-saving devices. If Catherine could not afford them, then Irene's mother certainly could not. For all of these women, the differences of economic and social status notwithstanding, the home space is the "site of much domestic labour" (Gregson & Lowe, 1995, p.226), the bulk of which is (and continues to be) performed by women. The deprivations of rationing, the indifferent quality of meat (*HTF*, p. 49), the exorbitant price of eggs, the rise in prices while incomes remained static (p.50) were all difficult for Catherine, for Irene and for her mother but for all three, and for Hilary's mother, the domestic space commanded most of their attention.

The outsideness and insiderness is all one to Catherine. She feels as alien in the landscape as she does in the house. She envies her children and their identification with the countryside. For her, however, the struggle seems to reduce towards the end of the book. The children grow up and go away to school, the house is less cold, their fruit trees and vegetable garden are thriving and she is gradually beginning to feel more secure. It is significant that her

'letting go' of her children and of her ambitions make Catherine feel more contented:

She leaned, in the dusk, against the rough tweed of William's sleeve and thought that at last, even that wish had left her and that it was beyond her, in such a world, to plan happiness for her children.

And with the loss of that, the last of her ambitions, she lay still and was content. (*HTF*, p.304).

Having only her own thoughts (p.304), Catherine is prepared to let all else go.

How much of this is the author's desire is unknown but the work is autobiographical to some degree (Lane, 2003). Cambridge married a doctor during the Great War, lived in Oxfordshire and gave birth to a daughter and two sons (see Box 4.2). She wrote short stories before her marriage and wrote novels after her children were born. There are elements of autobiography in another of her novels, *The Two Doctors* (1936). One of the main characters, Hilary, is married to a doctor, moving to the countryside for him to set up practice:

She knew she was without any desire to reform, alter or dominate her neighbours and far too prone to accept things without believing she could improve them. She sometimes wished, for John's sake that she could be what is known, bodefully, as a 'wonderful woman'. (Cambridge, 1936, pp. 14, 15)

This is reminiscent of Catherine's acceptance of things in her life and her desire for praise from William about her capabilities. It is intriguing to speculate on just how much of her life Cambridge wrote into *HTF*. Barnes (1984, p.3) speculates on what makes us "chase the writer" once we have read his or her work. "Do we think the leavings of a life contain some ancillary truth?" asks Barnes (1984, p.4). One of the aspects of 'chasing' the writer is the desire to know how closely biography and fiction connect with one another. Some authors deny such connections: Sayers, for example, whose life is writ large in her work, claimed that only *The Nine Tailors* contained any autobiographical details and yet her other novels seem to be drawn from the people and places she knew in her life. Others, such as Mavis Cheek, claim the opposite.

## Box 4.2

### ELIZABETH CAMBRIDGE

Writing under the above pseudonym, Barbara Webber, a doctor's daughter, was a VAD during the Great War. Born in 1893, she grew up mostly in Plymouth and Westgate-on-Sea before attending a finishing school in Paris. Publishing her first short story at the age of seventeen, Cambridge continued to write short stories until the outbreak of the Great War. During the War, she married a country doctor's son, George Hodges, who was also a doctor. The family lived in Deddington in Oxfordshire and had a daughter and two sons. Cambridge published her first Novel, *Hostages to Fortune* in 1933, publishing five more novels between 1934 and 1940. She died from tuberculosis in 1949.<sup>1</sup>

#### Novels:

- 1933 - *Hostages to Fortune*
- 1934 - *The Sycamore Tree*
- 1935 - *Susan and Joanna*
- 1936 - *The Two Doctors*
- 1938 - *Spring Comes Again*
- 1939 - *Portrait of Angela*



Cambridge in 1913 (Courtesy of Persephone Books)

*Hostages to Fortune* was reprinted by Persephone Books in 2003. Between 2003 and 2007 this edition sold 3000 copies (Persephone Books, 2008)

1. The source of this potted biography is drawn from the dustjacket of the 2003 edition of *Hostages to Fortune*. Upon contacting Nicola Beauman of Persephone Books, she informed me that little was known about Cambridge other than the above (pers. comm., 2008).

Cheek has remarked that every incident in her books has either happened to her or to someone she knows (pers. comm., 2007). Cheek also identifies so closely with her novel *Yesterday's Houses* (2006) that she says it stands as an autobiographical work, with the central character, Marianne Flowers, effectively herself (pers. comm. 2007). That Cambridge's life is intertwined with, and implicated in, her novel is evident, if only from the sketchiest of details. Certainly the domestic struggle outlined in the novel and its details are not wholly manufactured by the author. Cambridge knew what was entailed in the bringing up of children, housekeeping and in being the wife of a doctor. How closely her relationships with her children and her husband resemble those of her own life is unknowable. Even the author cannot truly know how much of herself she puts in. That she puts herself in at all is clear in most cases, using incidents, characters and observations drawn from life. How else is fiction to be written? Even science fiction contains some measure of "Love and Sex and Loss and Pain" (Cheek, 2006, p.268).

And for most women, writing domestic fiction encompassed the steadfast flow of the daily routine, small joys, greater sorrows, spatial boundedness and the tussle between duty and inclination, not to mention the gendered nature of their relationships with men. In Dorothy Whipple's *They Were Sisters* (1943), domestic life takes on an altogether more menacing aspect, with Charlotte, one of the sisters in the novel and her children being terrorised by a violent and sadistic husband and father. So not all was sweetness and light in the domestic world of fiction. Certainly, in *HTF*, Catherine is resentful and discouraged by her attempts at being a wife and mother and discouraged by William from discussing her response. At the same time as she resents the limitations imposed on her, she reinforces these with Audrey, having her make her brother's bed and darn his clothes. Audrey resists this:

'It's not fair,' Audrey said with tears in her eyes. 'Because he's a boy! Why shouldn't they make their own beds?'

Boys have to go out to work all their lives. You may have a house of your own. Besides, you can't do things only for yourself. It's so dull.'

'I shan't marry,' said Audrey.

Having lodged her protest, she settled down with some pride to the work which Catherine had set her. (*HTF*, pp.181, 182)<sup>64</sup>

Catherine spends “terrible afternoons in the carpenter’s shop with Adam, who wept profusely” (*HTF*, p.181). In both cases she reinforces the gendered roles in the domestic setting, despite her own misgivings about her situation, she is also complicit in setting them down for her children to follow. William, seeing how well Audrey cooks, begins to “notice and like his daughter. She was a competent little thing” (*HTF*, p.182). William sees the traditional roles of male and female as right and proper. Catherine, who often finds the constraints of her role irksome, nevertheless sets about instilling the traditional roles into her children. Perhaps she sees this as a realistic option, particularly for Audrey. Having struggled with it herself, she does not want the same to happen to Audrey. Acceptance, rather than resistance is what she wants for her daughter.

Cambridge critiques and yet embraces the domestic role of women. Catherine loves her children and yet resents how little time her domestic duties leave her to write, to think and even to love. Like much of the domestic literature of the period, the exploration of the domestic space is a three-way tug of war between duty, fulfilment and the pleasures of domesticity: work well done, work done out of necessity and work left undone, such as Catherine’s writing. In the aftermath of the Great War, Catherine feels that her ideals and her youth have been betrayed:

She no longer believed that a new heaven would come with the peace. It was too late. They were all too tired, too spoiled and broken.

*Les lauriers sont coupés  
Nous n’irons plus au bois.*

There were no laurels for Catherine and her generation. Cut.  
All cut.

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<sup>64</sup> Conversely, in a later work by McNeil (2004, p.5), a mother deplors the way her daughter has taken to housework:

... ‘she loves it. It’s so humiliating. It makes me feel like she’s judging me ... how come I’ve ended up with a post-feminist three-year-old who likes having a good go round with the duster?’

‘Is it post-feminist then, to like cleaning?’

‘Yes, it bloody is. And I’m fed up with it.’

Something dark, bitter and fatiguing had been worked and kneaded and ground into the very stuff of their natures. (*HTF*, p.65)

This is a novel of aftermath: the aftermath of war, of youth and of ideals. Catherine struggles with each of these in turn. It is not surprising then, that at the end of the novel, she is left with only her thoughts and finds contentment in letting go of her ambitions (*HTF*, p.304).

### *Conclusion*

The domestic space does not merely exist, it is made (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p.22). The processes of creating, understanding and belonging (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p.22) involve the material, the imaginative, the cultural and the social. The binaries that dog the domestic space are those of public/private; male/female; work/leisure; active/passive. These binaries have operated in the service of devaluing the domestic space, the work - creative, physical, repetitive, reproductive, productive, nurturing and essential - that is carried out in this space and those who perform it. Given the devaluing of the domestic space, it is not surprising that fiction, such as *HTF*, taking the domestic space as its theme, is also devalued. This has been demonstrated by the critiques that emerged in the interwar years and those that are still circulating in the pages of literary publications and the review columns of newspapers. Apart from denying a more intricate, troubling and nuanced character for the domestic space, such binaries limit examination of the various interactions that occur within it. The material and emotional intermingle, along with power and identity and the nature of social relationships. These all occur across time and space and at different scales (the “multi-scalar” that Blunt and Dowling identify; 2006, p.22).

In *HTF*, the scale of the domestic moves between the interior, domestic spaces, where the invalid bikes jostle with kitchen equipment and novels by Mrs Henry Wood, where Catherine’s now rejected and grubby manuscript lies passively in a drawer and where Audrey is made to darn her brothers’ clothes; to the garden, where Catherine struggles to grow food and to instruct her son in the ‘masculine’ art of woodwork; to the wider space of this remote part of Oxfordshire where Catherine feels alienated and not ‘at home’ but which for

William, Audrey, Adam and Bill is home. Catherine's feelings of containment are also entwined with her thwarted literary ambitions. Her domestic work prevents her from retyping her novel, while her husband both devalues and discourages Catherine's writing. Catherine, who loves ink more than anything, experiences the depletion of her imaginative world as her life loses elements of its former freedom. Even the outdoor spaces (an alien region for her) assume a repetitive and containing air, where she finds the walks with the children dreary and dull. There are the bodily scales that are in operation as well, the functional and the sexual being much in evidence in *HTF*. Catherine's body moves through reproduction, physical labour, a sexual relationship and her physical presence in house, garden and countryside. When she is breastfeeding Audrey she feels she is giving complete satisfaction, a closeness that is not dependent on gratitude. Later, she feels both physically and emotionally distanced from William.

*HTF* characterises the home as a space of alienation, where spatial proximity induces distance, as it occurs between William and Catherine, between them and their children. Catherine is too tired even to love her children sometimes and William leaves most of the nurturing and rearing to her, almost fearful of interaction with his children, while at the same time being jealous of their demands on Catherine. Families, as Cambridge portrays them, occupy the same space but at the same time, each member lives in a different world. While Jane is ministering to Peter and his Art, making a space where her husband's friends and followers can be entertained, Peter is ministering to himself, absorbed in his own narcissistic lifeworld (what Lacan would no doubt attribute to a fundamental error of perspective at the 'mirror stage').

The presence of Cambridge in the shadows and the parallels with her own life inform the narrative and at the same time haunt its pages. The sketchy details of Cambridge's life show that some of Catherine's experiences mirror her own but it is unclear just how much the author draws on her own life and how much is re-imagined for the narrative of Catherine and her family.

The richness of the themes in *HTF* is at odds with the oft-repeated perceptions of domestic fiction as trivial and narrow. The writing of the domestic in *HTF* is

forensic in its examination of relationships and of the spatial elements of house, garden and locality (and nation), woven through a theme of aftermath (the Great War, economic recession) that is counterpointed by the material and emotional practices of the everyday.

**Box 4.3**

**Context**

Any attempt at adding contextual details must be both subjective, signifying absence as much as presence. The table below outlines some of the events of 1933, when the work was first published. I have chosen that year because I have no details of when the novel was written. In searching for contextual details that might flesh out the novel's publication, I turned to a number of sources. One source consulted, English Literature in Context, edited by Poplawski (2008), contains a section, written by the editor, "The Twentieth Century, 1901-1939". In this chapter there is much of interest. What is striking, however, is the absence of literature by women. The chapter, in its historical overview, contains a history of the suffrage movement and the position of women but the texts treated in depth are those by men, with the exception of Virginia Woolf. A few works by women are mentioned but the chapter primarily deals with works by men. The illustrations for the chapter, using contemporary sources, contain advertisements for a car and an electric lift, a Punch cartoon of a man in a cart and another in a car, battlefields and a balloon ascension. Two photographs dealing specifically with women are a photograph of suffragists and that of a "war widow". The table below lists political events, contemporary culture and also a list of books published in 1933. Items are marked with various symbols to identify their sources.

1933

***Political and Other Events***

- Hitler becomes German Chancellor \*
- Oxford Union debate: 'That this House will in no circumstances fight for King and Country' passed by 275 votes to 153+
- First concentration camps set up+
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Agricultural Marketing Board limits imports to control home production and to keep prices up+
- Germany leaves Disarmament Conference & League of Nations +
- 'Buy British' campaign introduced ~
- First commercially produced synthetic detergent ~
- Polythene discovered~
- Ramsay MacDonald is Prime Minister~
- Nancy Cunard, a journalist with the ANP (Associated Negro Press) in Britain, inaugurates the 'British Scotsboro Defense Fund' to raise money for the 'Scotsboro Boys' young black men falsely accused of raping two white women.#

***Contemporary Culture***

- Exhibition of Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth (NPG)+
- Spencer completes 'peace in war' murals at Burghclere Memorial Chapel, near Newbury+
- Mae West appears in the films *I'm no Angel* and *She Done Him Wrong*+
- The film *Duck Soup* by the Marx Brothers is released as is *King Kong* and *The Private Life of Henry VIII*+
- England's controversial 1932-1933 'Body-line' cricket tour of Australia+
- British Film Institute founded

***Books Published***

W.H. Auden, *The Dance of Death*\*  
Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*\*  
Ivy Compton-Burnett, *More Women than Men*\*  
Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*\*  
George Orwell, *Down and Out in London and Paris*\*  
Stephen Spender, *Poems*\*  
Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*+  
W.B. Yeats, *The Winding Stair*\*  
Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgeware Dies*+  
Stella Gibbons, *Cold Comfort Farm*+  
Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise*

## The Nobel Prize, 1933

Physics:	Erwin Schrödinger and Paul Adrien Maurice Dirac
Physiology/Medicine:	Thomas Hunt Morgan
Literature:	Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin
Peace:	Sir Norman Angell

(from [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/lists/1933.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/lists/1933.html), last accessed 11.02.09)

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### 'Old, unhappy, far-off things': Anna Kavan and *A Charmed Circle*

Will no one tell me what she sings?  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things  
And battles long ago. (Wordsworth, 1807)

The Princess of Bengal began to talk wildly, and show other marks of a disordered mind, next day and the following ones; so that the sultan was obliged to send for all the physicians belonging to his court, to consult them about her disease, and to ask them if they could cure her. (Everyman, 1907, p.305)

The hills step off into whiteness.  
People or stars regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

... They threaten  
To let me through to a heaven  
Starless and fatherless, a dark water. (Plath, 1999, p.5)

She stapled the pages of her manuscripts together with a hypodermic syringe. When she died, the police disclosed that there was enough heroin in her house to kill the entire street (Ironside, 2006). That was in 1968. In 1929, Anna Kavan did not exist. A woman called Helen Ferguson, later called Anna Kavan, published a novel: *A Charmed Circle*. In examining the work of Ferguson/Kavan, it is hard not to conflate the author and her works.<sup>65</sup> Despite my advocacy for exploring the networks that encircle both author and text, in the case of Anna Kavan, one is dragged, Alice-like, into a vortex of lifeworld, reinvention, author, text, discarded lives, imagined lives and the shreds of dismembered diaries and personal papers; it is a world in which it *almost* ceases to matter.<sup>66</sup>

Kavan's difficult and troubled life is pockmarked with the scars of this personal dilemma of identity. A heroin addict, a neglected and unloved child, an abused

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<sup>65</sup> Kavan went by many names, as will be discussed throughout this chapter. I accord her the name, Kavan, in most cases, as this is the name by which she preferred to be known. Kavan's many names are at the heart of the material practices and the webs of meaning found within her work.

<sup>66</sup> The Caterpillar asks Alice "Who are you?". This is the title of a later, probably semi-autobiographical work by Kavan (1963). Alice answers the Caterpillar, "I hardly know ... just at present ... I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." The Caterpillar asks Alice to explain herself. She replies, "I can't explain myself ... because I'm not myself" (Carroll, 1978, p.29). Kavan reworked her identity, name and appearance throughout her life. It would be easy to see this as simply a state of psychological confusion but for Kavan, each reworking of identity allowed her to change direction and to shrug off, in part, other "old, unhappy, far-off things". It is also intensely geographical, which will be explored later.

wife, an artist, a writer, an interior designer, a mother, a daughter, a patient and a woman of many names, it is difficult to divine the web of meaning that was, at her death, at least, Anna Kavan.

This chapter explores the geoliterary terrain of Kavan's first published work, *A Charmed Circle* (1929) and the web of meaning surrounding it. Initially, the chapter outlines the plot of the novel and its setting, as well as identifying the characters and their concerns before moving onto the themes emerging from the narrative. The deeper, more internalised landscape of the novel and its characters are also treated in light of Kavan's preoccupations as they emerge in her *oeuvre*. Kavan's life is both outlined and discussed in light of critical and biographical works dealing with Kavan. With a slightly crusading spirit, I critique the ways in which Kavan has been presented by those who have written of her life and work. I maintain that the identification of autobiographical detail in an authors' fiction is a difficult and unstable undertaking in the exploration of an author's lifeworld and her fiction. In the case of Anna Kavan, who resisted biographical enquiries, the several selves of the author are elusive. I caution against over-emphasising connections between an author's life and fiction, arguing for a more nuanced approach that identifies themes and preoccupations evident in fictional works and explores these in relation to material practices, lifeworlds, contemporary detail and the concerns of the reader. The chapter also examines Kavan as a professional writer, the critical regard for her work during and after her lifetime and the ways in which gender has affected critiques of her work. In addition, I argue that more critical attention needs to be paid to the early works of Kavan. These texts form a substantial part of her fictional works and must be studied in the context of her entire output, rather than being dismissed as 'country house' novels. The following discussion of *A Charmed Circle* is an attempt to redress the balance.

### *A Charmed Circle*

The Deane family lives in the Old Vicarage, Hannington in an unspecified provincial setting that is close to London (for a plot summary, see Box 5.1). There are three children, Olive, Beryl and Ronald, the son, who is living in London at the start of the novel. Their father is a retired GP and their mother is

a writer. Each of the Deane family is trapped within the Old Vicarage. Although the two daughters, Beryl and Olive, are doubly trapped because of their gender, each of the Deanes is trapped by their restricted emotional lives. The house is comfortable and well-run with a “faded prettiness”, giving the impression of being “compact and self-sufficing” (ACC, p.11). Kavan’s 1946 review of books centred on the Victorian age reprises the theme of seclusion, talking about Victorian mansions that are designed to “exclude rather than to welcome” (1946, p.65). Kavan discusses the house as a place where the individual escapes from the “pressure of anxiety” (p.65), although in ACC, the stifling atmosphere of the house reflects the stifling streets of Hannington. Real escape comes through visits to Will Trenchard’s farm.

The material comforts on offer at the Old Vicarage are not sufficient to assuage the stifling repression felt by the family. The doctor tells his daughter, Olive:

‘There is some defect in us all, some flaw, some canker of the soul that holds us back from fruition. Life is too hard for us. We yearn and struggle and rebel, but in the end we are always vanquished because of that obscure disability. We cannot succeed because we are not free. Some inhibition, some fatal limitation, binds us, from which we can never escape. ... It’s better not to fight ... I fought, and life hurt me. Since I stopped fighting I have suffered less.’ (ACC, p.300)

The doctor, affected by some form of mental ill health, probably depression, says little, keeps mostly to his study and although he interacts occasionally with his children, has little to do with Mrs. Deane.<sup>67</sup> He is “at the same time the centre of the household and a person of no importance in it” (ACC, p.13). He does not interfere with any domestic arrangements, nor does he offer an opinion on anything. He rarely speaks and yet manages to exert “a strong mental influence in the household” (p.13). His health is described as “not good” and, with his stooping, pallid appearance, gives him the “appearance of an invalid” (p.13). Despite his silent withdrawal, the doctor does not fade from the narrative.

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<sup>67</sup> I am reluctant to use the terms ‘mental illness’ and ‘mental ill health’ for they do not convey the variety of interior torment that can afflict people across space and time. I ask forgiveness in advance for using such crude and ill-fitting terms and all that they may convey. I am particularly conscious of this regarding Kavan. Kavan herself was hospitalised several times due to ill health of a psychological nature and, as shall be discussed later, was treated by psychiatrists. Their diagnoses are not known.

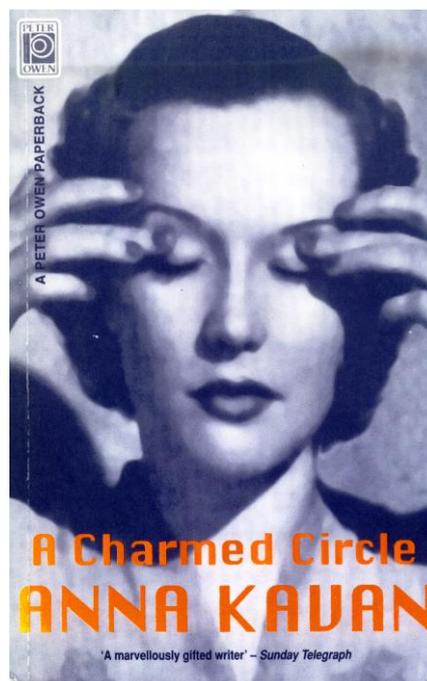
### Box 5.1

*A Charmed Circle* (1929), Helen Ferguson/Anna Kavan, Jonathan Cape, London.

*A Charmed Circle* (ACC) was the first novel of Helen Ferguson, who later changed her name to Anna Kavan. The story is set in the town of Hannington, once a rural area but now built over with housing developments. In the middle of the town stands the Old Vicarage, home of the Deanes. Dr Deane (known as “the doctor”), a retired GP, is a morose and uncommunicative man, while his wife, known only as Mrs Deane, is gregarious, domineering and enjoys socialising. She is said to be writing a book on English folklore but appears to be making little progress. The elder daughter, Olive, is the one who stays at home and undertakes the bulk of the household duties. Her brother, Ronald, returns from London, only to go back there to take up work in the theatre. The younger daughter, Beryl leaves the Old Vicarage without informing her parents and exchanges domestic tyranny for the tyranny of an exacting, capricious and jealous milliner who employs her. The beginnings of a romantic friendship with a friend of her brother fail when Beryl’s employment ends in difficult circumstances and she returns home.

The beginnings of a romance between Olive and a local fruit farmer, Will Trenchard, come to nothing once Beryl returns and he realises it is Beryl and not Olive to whom he is attracted. As the novel ends, the family is gathered, once more, awaiting the return of Ronald.

The narrative is bleak and stifling with a cloud of misery and oppression hovering over it. The doctor tells his children that there is a flaw in the family, a fatal weakness, probably referring to his own and almost certainly to Olive’s, depression. Even the more enterprising Beryl feels it at times. There is also a strong theme of captivity, in that the younger Deanes are destined, according to their father, to return time and again to the Old Vicarage. It also seems that anyone who comes into contact with the inhabitants if the Old Vicarage is destined to suffer disappointment and unhappiness.



**Figure 5.1** Cover of the 1994 edition, featuring a photo of Kavan by Walker Evans

Olive feels a particular bond with her father, suffering as she does from low spirits and morbid thoughts (again, probably depression - the word is used by and about her on several occasions during the narrative). She feels that they are “united in the understanding of their failure; the heavy consciousness of their predestined fate” oppresses them with its “undeserved, uncomprehended cruelty” (p.300).

When the novel begins, both Beryl and Olive are living at home with their parents. Beryl is “twenty-one or twenty two” (p.12) and Olive five years older. Their brother Ronald returns, after living and working in London. His return, after giving up his job (unspecified clerical work), delights his mother but no one else in the household. Beryl is furious with Ronald for returning home as his presence in London was, for her, a guarantee of her own escape there. She had hoped that he would find her work. She leaves Hannington without any explanation to her parents. In the end, it is Ronald’s friend, a sculptor, Christofferson (Chris) who finds Beryl work in London with a fashionable milliner. Olive stays at home and forms a close friendship that develops into a tepid romance with a local fruit farmer. This ends in dreary misery when the farmer realises he is more attracted to Beryl, who has returned home, having fallen out with the milliner and having rejected Christofferson. Ronald, too, escapes Hannington once more when he is offered work as an actor in London. At the close of the novel, the family is waiting, yet again, for Ronald’s imminent return.

On the face of it, the novel’s plot appears pedestrian, offering a story that has been told many times: the dutiful daughter trapped at home, a slave to her demanding mother, an unfulfilled romance followed by the return to dull routine. There is the feckless, self-absorbed son of the house, doted on by nobody but his mother, inevitably disappointing all around him. Yet this novel is anything but pedestrian. Kavan’s work during the interwar period is often overlooked in favour of her post-war, more experimental, existential novels (more of which, later). Her work during this period is deemed to be conventional and a bit too ‘domestic’, inclining toward the ‘country house’

romance (Davies, 1970; Garrity, 2003) but as Ironside (2006, p.50) explains, these novels are not interwar 'Aga-sagas'<sup>68</sup>:

Threading through [the early novels] are a horror and a cruelty that are menacing and claustrophobic.

In these novels, as in the later ones, a sense of the characters feeling or being trapped recurs. In 'The Professor' (1946), one of Kavan's later short stories, the claustrophobia is intensified as the professor is surrounded by inanimate objects come to life:

The professor is ringed, pressed on all sides by the massed uniforms, fear now coming out on his face like sweat. (1946, p.174)

Despite certain moments of unevenness, the narrative of *ACC* focuses on the Old Vicarage and its inhabitants, all of whom are trapped within the Old Vicarage, even when they leave it. They are socially and emotionally ill-equipped to form satisfying relationships with others outside the family and so they return to what they know and perhaps partially understand, even if they find it stultifying and suffocating. The only member of the household who appears to be less suffocated is Mrs Deane, whose character and behaviour drives the rest of the family into one form or another, of withdrawal.

Mrs Deane is a writer, working on a book dealing with folklore, apparently destined never to be finished. Rather like a 19th Century matriarch who pretends to be busy at her needlework, Mrs Deane pretends to be busy consulting her books and writing:

Mrs Deane read steadily with the air of one who reads with a set purpose and not merely for amusement. On a small

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<sup>68</sup> 'Aga-saga' is generally a derogatory term for what are seen by some critics as fairly shallow women's novels about middle class women living in country houses. The *Aga-saga Head Girl* is usually acknowledged to be Joanna Trollope. Once again, it is worth pointing out that, far from conforming to stereotype, Trollope's work explores the lives of women across class and sexuality. Themes such as domestic abuse, lesbian relationships, adoption, mental ill health and grief have featured in her work. As I have argued elsewhere in this work, confining texts to single categories such as romantic or women's novels denies any distinctiveness for the texts in question and refuses to acknowledge these texts as places where "elaboration and exchange can occur" (Evans, 1987, p.33). It is akin to describing the novels of Jane Austen as Regency chick-lit, thereby doing both Austen and chick-lit a disservice.

table beside her chair was a pile of three or four heavy volumes and she occasionally took up one of these and looked up some reference or made a note in the margin. There was something important in the way she did this which was amusing ... A pair of horn-rimmed spectacles gave her the air almost of a child 'dressing-up'. ... So intent was she on presenting the picture of a lady thoroughly absorbed in her reading, that she really thought she was absorbed. In the same way she had convinced herself that she was really interested in the big books beside her. If anyone had dared to suggest that her reading and the book she was writing on English Folk-Lore were merely an impressive pose, she would have been offended and genuinely indignant. (ACC, pp.12, 13)

The family maintains the fiction of Mrs Deane's work by apologising for disturbing her during the day when she is 'working'. Mrs Deane also reinforces this by keeping to her bed of a morning, breakfasting "delicately in her bed as befitted a person who has worked far into the night" (ACC, p.21). When Olive suggests that the family could go away for the summer, Mrs Deane berates Olive:

'Well, I must say, I think it's very inconsiderate of you, Olive. ... What do you think is going to become of my work while we are gallivanting about on holidays? You know perfectly well that I must stay quietly here if I am to get my book finished in time to be published in the autumn.' (ACC, p.26)

Beryl, however, enacts the role of the small boy crying out that the emperor has no clothes but only to Olive and when her mother is out of earshot:

'What sort of a life do we have here? ... We never go away, we scarcely see a soul from one year to the next, we have no interests, no occupations. Even mamma's writing is a sham.'

Mrs Deane frequently reflects on her situation, regarding herself as a martyr, an "unfortunate woman". She is described as someone who dramatises all "her thoughts about herself" (ACC, p.22). She figures to herself at least, as triumphing over adversity, remaining youthful, pretty and having a "gallant nature" (p.22). She is disappointed in "her husband ... her children ... her home" (p.23):

‘Who could have guessed that the doctor, who was so clever and enthusiastic in his profession and made love to her so ardently, should quite soon after their marriage have grown so indifferent and morose? She recalled the dismay with which she had watched him withdrawing more and more into himself and shutting her out of his life... Then had come his illness soon after Beryl’s birth; the slow, tedious convalescence and the gradual realization that his nature was permanently changed and warped. From that time he had grown more silent, more eccentric.’ (ACC, p.23)

Mrs Deane is also upset by what she sees as the destruction of the local area, hemming her in and depriving her of the “good families” who once lived there. She has taken up her writing as “a method of self-assertion” (ACC p.24). While thinking that this is a means of “expressing her personality” in reality it affords her “an excellent excuse for domestic tyranny” (ACC p.24). She can thus be excused the tasks she finds tedious and hand them over to her daughter, Olive but as the matriarch, she can still supervise her daughter and blame her when things go wrong, giving her “an excuse for bullying Olive at all times,” which she is “rather fond of doing” (ACC p.24).

When Ronald returns home, Mrs Deane is delighted. He is her favourite child (ACC, p.43). She is disquieted, however, by the reaction of the doctor when he is told of his son’s return:

[the doctor] had taken it in the oddest manner; almost, if it had not been preposterous, she would have said that in his silent way he seemed pleased, triumphant even; as if he found the event some reason for personal congratulation. (ACC, p. 43).

Will Trenchard, the farmer who has a brief romantic liaison with Olive, finds the family odd - all except Mrs Deane, who, as she does with Ronald and his friend Christofferson, exerts herself to be girlishly charming. Before the arrival of Ronald’s friend, Christofferson (Chris), the sculptor, Mrs Deane busies herself with the arrangements of the spare room and plans her wardrobe for the visit. She thinks that Chris will be bound to admire her as she is “a very charming figure” (ACC, p.76). She sees herself as the “*grande dame*, frail and exquisite in appearance” and “stimulating in the brilliance of her mind” (p.76). Mrs Deane imagines to herself the witty conversation between herself and Christofferson: “arrowy wit, delicate ... slightly satirical” (p.76). Chris finds Mrs Deane

charming; Beryl, watching them converse wonders: “Can he really be so fascinated by mamma?” (ACC, p.87).

Despite his finding Mrs Deane charming, Chris is soon put out by a gauche attempt by Ronald to engineer a romance between Chris and Olive. On discovering this, Chris leaves. Mrs Deane is sure that if only she had been able to “keep him more to herself”, the visit would have been more successful (ACC, p.105). After Chris’s departure, Ronald refuses to accompany her on a visit to friends in the country and she muses on what a “trial” her children are to her, with their “queer moods and incomprehensible behaviour” (ACC, p.106). She feels that Olive and Beryl “are bad enough” but Ronald, who has been her “comfort and stand-by”, now seems to have become “bad-tempered and incalculable as well” (ACC, p.106). Mrs Deane reflects that she will simply have to bear it with her “customary fortitude”. This gives her an opportunity to reinforce her position as matriarchal martyr:

Deep in her heart she even felt a tiny thrill of pride at the thought that fate might flatter her with this added trial. It gave a new lustre to her halo of martyrdom. (ACC, p. 106)

Mrs Deane gradually loses control of her children, one by one. Although Olive remains apprehensive of her mother and her mother’s demands, she is able to dismiss these as she becomes more involved with Will Trenchard. Even her mother’s probing comments about her improved appearance at this time have little effect on her:

Mrs Deane recognized the improvement in [Olive] and was reluctantly constrained to praise it.

‘How much better you’re looking these days,’ she said. ‘That way of doing your hair suits you very well. I always said that if only you would take a little trouble with your appearance, you would be quite attractive.’

Olive, thinking of Will ... was pleased. She wondered if he, too, had noticed the improvement, and fancied that he did. (ACC, p.205)

The other two children go away to London but oddly, Mrs Deane appears not to notice the growing friendship between Will and Olive. More visits to Will

Trenchard's farm (an escape from the stifling heat of Hannington) or to his aunts' house give her a new occupation. She seems remarkably obtuse about the situation developing between Will Trenchard and Olive, preoccupied as she is with herself. Although she is biting, tiresome and domineering, Mrs Deane's focus remains largely on herself. Despite the departure of the other two children, or perhaps because of it, Mrs Deane's comfort is not disturbed as she has Olive to run the house, which she continues to do.

When Beryl reluctantly returns to the Old Vicarage, Mrs Deane feels a sense of curious anti-climax. As she reads Beryl's letter informing her of her return, she is "surprised at her own lack of feeling in the matter"(p.269). She has become used to Beryl being away. She feels almost indifferent but "in the recesses of her mind the bitter grudge still lurked" somehow obscured by "delusions, pretences and self-deception"(p.269). What she does feel is that her pride has suffered as a result of Beryl's "scandalous departure" (p.269). But Mrs Deane finds that she really cannot feel too intensely about the whole thing. She is largely indifferent and, if anything, finds it "incredibly tiresome and annoying" (p.269). She tells her daughter that she hopes she will behave well and not "stir up trouble with Olive". The house has "never been so quiet and restful since you went away". (p.270). As Beryl and Olive do not get on, it is understandable that Mrs Deane should feel so little real anger against Beryl. Since she has Olive still with her during Beryl's' and Ronald's absence, she has someone to perform the household chores she dislikes and also someone to bully, but she does not have to witness the grating irritation that comes from the relationship between Olive and Beryl.

Mrs Deane is one mother in a long line of maternal figures throughout Kavan's writing; and while it would be simplistic to assume that the portrait of Mrs Deane is modelled on Kavan's own mother, there are certain similarities in how Mrs Deane and other mothers and aunts are portrayed in other texts. Some of the characteristics of the maternal figures are a close match with comments that Kavan made about her own mother, all of which will be discussed in greater depth at a later point in this chapter. If Mrs Deane carries certain traits, then it is Olive whose thoughts, seemingly, from the evidence available, mirror most closely those of Kavan.

As Olive, in the throes of her deepening friendship with Will, and comparatively happy, looks back, it seems to her that she has “lived for more than twenty years in a dismal nightmare of misery and apprehension. Now, at last, she was freed from her alarms, from the perpetual tyranny of a stronger personality” (ACC, p.206). Earlier, when she hesitantly talks with her mother about the possibility of the family going away for the summer and Mrs Deane berates her for her selfishness, Olive suddenly feels it is simply not worth it to assert herself:

Olive’s heart failed her at the thought of all the argument, intrigue, persuasion, bullying and diplomacy that would be required if she were to keep to her plan ... It no longer seemed worth the effort involved. (ACC, p.26)

As an adult, Kavan complained of her mother’s “tyranny” and the “cloaking of oppression under the pretence of affection” (Callard, 1992, p.34). Much the same attitude is reflected in Olive’s attitude to her mother. Olive also suffers from the same morbid sense of despair as her father, who comments that she is closest to him in nature (ACC, p.299). The word depression is used many times throughout the book, especially in relation to Olive. Even Beryl, more resilient and assertive, feels it at times. After her return she muses that the “gloomy atmosphere of the Old Vicarage” continues “the work of depression” (ACC,p.301). Kavan’s writings about her state of mind in later years echo these feelings of morbid despair, menace and futility, as do her feelings of being tyrannised. In ACC, Olive is tyrannised by both her mother and her sister, even though, at the end of the book, Beryl’s dominion over her appears to have been broken (ACC, p.316). Despite her sadness at Will’s going away from her, Olive feels some triumph that Will has left rather than deserting her for Beryl (ACC, p.316), a rather pathetic victory of sorts.

### *A contained circle*

ACC is a text that speaks of containment. As with most of Kavan’s works, the landscape is both deadening and a source of fear to the principal characters. Hannington, where the Deane family lives, is no Gothic horror landscape, full of

phantasms and sinister overtones but a dusty, dreary provincial town in which two sisters, Olive and Beryl are contained. They live in the Old Vicarage that is:

shut within the circle of its walls and trees, in the middle ...  
The mean streets surrounded it, the rows of squalid houses pressed against it, yet it was hidden from them, utterly separated from them, cut off as effectually as if its walls and trees had been leagues of land and water. (ACC, 1994, p.11).

The Old Vicarage, in response to the engulfing tide of “squalid houses”, heightens its garden walls, thickens the screen of trees and stands “obstinately firm, like a sullen rock that refuses to be submerged by the tide” (p.10). “The doctor”, the father of Olive, Beryl and their brother, Ronald, is a retired GP. He tells his son at one point:

‘We’re all bound here. Not one of us is free. You think you are free to leave this house to-morrow like your friend Christofferson, but you’re not. You can’t leave it. You tried once and you had to come back. You’re not free.’ (ACC, p.124)

Given the interplay of dysfunction throughout the Deane family, it is difficult to separate the dominant atmosphere of despair, stormy argument and oppression from the overall gloom presented by the house and the household. Even the local area is one of immense dissatisfaction. Ronald, who is the least affected by the atmosphere of the Old Vicarage, even comments on the “foul” place that is Hannington, whereas, when Mrs Deane, Olive and Beryl visit Conigers, Will Trenchard’s farm or his aunts’ house in the country, they all feel happier. Beryl, particularly, loves the farm and feels “as if there is some close connection between [herself] and Conigers” almost as if it belongs to her but she feels sad “to think that, after all, [she has] really no right here or in any place like this” (ACC, p.286). She finds the contrast between Conigers and her own home “in the middle of that horrible town” upsetting (ACC, p.286). Olive, too, loves the farm and finds that her vitality improves after visiting there.

The doctor does not accompany his family on the visits to the country and this may, in part, account for their enjoyment of the place. But it is more than the release from the brooding gloom of the doctor’s depressive presence that allows both Olive and Beryl to feel more alive. Perhaps it is the change from routine,

the contact with people other than family or the more open nature of the space that they visit. The return to the house brings with it a sense of gloom, isolation or dejection for at least one of the characters, often more.

Several re-readings of the novel have reinforced for me the unstable nature of fictional settings. In the case of *ACC*, there is sometimes little to differentiate between the Old Vicarage and Hannington, at others little difference between the Old Vicarage and its inhabitants. At still others there are clear limits to the ways in which the space of the Old Vicarage impinges on narrative and characters. There is the “present absence” and absent presence (Kneale, 2006,p.107) of the doctor. There is the tyranny of Mrs Deane, ‘working’ and yet managing to bully Olive even when Olive is occupied elsewhere in the house. It seems odd that there can be a stream of containment and oppression on the one hand, between inhabitants, house and town and a jarring separation, on the other hand, between the disparate elements, still overarched by an atmosphere of desperation and “malignant sadness” (Wolpert, 1999). One does not feel the town containing and constraining the inhabitants of the Old Vicarage at all times and yet there are constant reminders of the dusty, dull, “foul” town that add to the oppressive atmosphere felt by one or other of the characters. The provincial nature of the town and its lack of attraction for the younger Deanes is juxtaposed with two more desired spaces: London and Will Trenchard’s farm. London’s metropolitan charms draw Beryl and Ronald, while Will’s farm is especially attractive to Olive (an, at times, to Beryl, also). It is not merely being away from the Old Vicarage that is liberating but also being away from dull and dusty Hannington that provides some relief. Perhaps Kavan was drawing on her own containment in Reading with her mother, when she was not allowed to go to Oxford to study but kept in Reading until her mother decided it was time for Anna to be married. At the time of writing *ACC*, Kavan had not long left Reading, having returned there from living abroad. Is it too predictable to draw a parallel between Kavan’s own situation and that of the young Deanes?

The network between house, town and the Deanes is as much an interior landscape (in every sense) as an exterior one that moves between spaces and yet makes a whole on occasion. This is not necessarily the intention of the

author. Neither is it necessarily a flaw in the author's handling of the narrative. It may well be both or neither. The equivocal response on my part is due, in certain measure, to the way in which I approach the text as a reader. One looks for continuity and sometimes predictability in texts. One looks for points at which recognition develops a deeper connection, perhaps with one's own life experience or what one already knows of the author or books of a similar nature. But how often is this realised in fiction? Why is it that, as readers, I and others look for diversion, escape, interest, involvement and excitement, yet look for predictability as well?

The space that is the Deane family is one of dysfunction, dissatisfaction, oppression and desperate misery. It is not the misery of poverty. If a family ever chorused, "What's the use?" the Deanes do. There are striking resemblances between the Deanes and the Lambert family in Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), each family member suffering in some way in addition to the collective misery. The doctor may seem on the surface to be a withdrawn melancholic man, having as little to do as possible with his family and yet he contributes to the collective misery of the family in his infrequent conversations with them and by his silent, morose presence. The opening scene of the novel, where each of the family is waiting for the tea tray at ten o'clock shows them waiting for it to be over so that they can go to their rooms and be alone. The doctor arrives just before the tray is brought in. He says nothing, sits down and resumes reading the book he has brought with him. He drinks his cup of Ovaltine, sets the cup down and departs. The atmosphere is heavy with silence, not an awkward silence but an oppressive one. Even Mrs Deane, in an attempt to make her daughters talk with her, becomes querulous and demands that they tell her their news when she knows that they have done little but domestic duties all day. As the two sisters leave the room, the doctor, on his way to bed, says to them, "Another day over". It is the first time he has spoken all evening (p.17). It would be naïve to classify his behaviour as standard patriarchal oppression. It is as much, if not more, his mental ill health that constrains the family than his gender, and yet his place in the household as the 'head' of the family cannot be dismissed either.

The domestic life of the Deanes is one of the key elements of the narrative and yet it is far removed from the domestic life of the family in Elizabeth Cambridge's *Hostages to Fortune* (1933). They are both, however, classed as domestic novels, dealing primarily with domestic concerns within a domestic setting. The arbitrary nature of such a classification is shown to be limited and wayward when we look at these two novels within such a category. Domesticity is shown through these two texts to have very different meanings. Despite the struggles of Catherine in *HTF*, she feels affection and love as well as frustration and despair. The only affection that could be classed as such in *ACC* is that between Mrs Deane and Ronald and the brief and transient affection between Will and Olive.

### *Who are you, Anna Kavan?*

The emotionally distant atmosphere is one that echoes Kavan's own life (an outline summary of Kavan's life is contained in Box 5.2). Since she was mentally ill and a drug addict for most of her life and since all of her texts are strongly engaged with psychological states and human behaviour, it can be all too easy to play "spot the life story" in a reading of her fiction. Of course, it goes without saying that a writer may write herself into the fiction but how the reader interprets this is a moot point. Those of us who write about fiction can be quite profligate with our interpretations. Despite the threads of madness, isolation and alienation that run through her work, Kavan did not appear so to her friends. Aldiss (1995) comments that, according to Marriott, a friend of hers, Kavan was "in many ways an ordinary and pleasant, creative person, chic, generally fun to be with." (1995, p.138). Aldiss (1995) also recognises that identifying the writer's work too closely with the writer has its drawbacks:

The fiction remains at arm's length from the facts of [Kavan's] life. Writers have many reasons for using persona not entirely congruent with their own natures, for fact is more complex than fiction. What rises from the printed page is part of an elaborate game of hide-and-see which a writer plays, perhaps unconsciously, not necessarily with the reader but with himself or herself. (Aldiss, 1995, p.138)

The fine balance between recognising emerging fictional themes and their relationship to the author's own life is so precarious as to be impossible. There

are, however, webs of meaning that encircle both author and fiction, life and art.

#### Box 5.2

##### Anna Kavan

Anna Kavan was born Helen Woods in 1901, while her parents were living on the Côte d'Azur. Helen was sent away to a wetnurse before her parents returned to live in London. When she was four, Helen's parents moved to America, leaving her in London in the care of her nurse. She was later sent for and travelled to America, where she was sent to boarding school. She rarely saw her parents. When she was fourteen, Helen's father committed suicide. Despite not seeing her father very often, Helen was greatly affected by her father's death. She was then sent to a boarding school in Switzerland before returning to school in England. She saw very little of her mother.

Helen was offered a place at Oxford but her mother rejected the idea of Helen going to university. Instead she was encouraged (co-erced) aged nineteen, to marry Donald Ferguson, who was thirty. After her marriage, Helen Ferguson travelled with her husband to Burma, where he worked as a railway engineer. The marriage was most unhappy and Helen returned to England with their son, Bryan.

Helen then lived with her mother just near Reading. In 1926, she moved to Bedfordshire, where her son was living with a nurse, although she rarely saw him. By this time, she was already using heroin, having tried cocaine, also. She had begun a relationship with Stuart Edmonds, a painter who was also an alcoholic. After she had moved in with him, Helen began to call herself, Helen Edmonds. Her first novel was published in 1929, followed very quickly by two more in 1930, one of which contained a character called Anna Kavan. After a suicide attempt and the failure of her relationship with Edmonds, Helen was admitted to a psychiatric clinic in Zurich. In 1938, after another spell in hospital for psychiatric treatment, Helen emerged as Anna Kavan, no longer brunette but blonde and somewhat thinner. Her next work, *Asylum Piece* was published under her new name of Kavan. The death of her son, Bryan, in 1942, on active service, led to a further attempt at suicide.

From this time onward, Anna wrote, worked for Cyril Connolly on the journal, *Horizon*, also writing for the journal. She also painted and later, began to work as an interior designer and property developer. Her use of heroin grew but her friends maintained that they were unaware of this, for the most part. She was treated by the psychiatrist, Karl Bluth, who began to supply her with heroin. The two formed a close relationship and Anna was deeply affected by his death in 1964. Anna died in 1968, shortly after having her novel *Ice* (1967) selected as the best science fiction novel for 1967.

One of the primary aims of this work is to explore the “network of material practices” (Veeser, 1989 p.xxii) embedded within the expressive act of writing fiction and this, of course, encompasses the lifeworld of the author. That said, I am in agreement with Kneale (2006) that the reduction of texts to context or as “simple expressions of ideology” or as “outcomes of the author's life” (2006, p.108) is too simplistic. Barry's (2007) criticism of contextual readings is more

nuanced than Kneale's and, as stated elsewhere in this work, I do take issue with some of the more extravagant claims he makes about the place of context in new historicist readings of texts. Barry (2007, p.192) does, however, warn against the burial of texts within context and advocates allowing the texts to speak for themselves. In selecting single texts by authors rather than the authors and their works as the subjects for study in this work, it was and is my aim to focus on the text as the primary source for the exploration of the material practices embedded within it. In offering connections between the author's life and the text, I do not intend to have the last word. Rather, it is my intention to explore the ways in which life and text form part of the web of meaning.

#### *A stranger still: Kavan and her biographers*

While the above strays from consideration of this text (in some ways), there is a further point to make: that thus far, Kavan has been remarkably ill-served by many who have written about her life and, to a lesser extent, about her texts. The early texts barely rate a mention in most treatments of her *oeuvre*. Much of her later, more experimental fiction is examined (Garrity, 1994; Crees, 2006; Callard, 1992; Reed, 2006; Nin, 1969; Young, 2001; Aldiss, 1986) but relatively little is said about her early fiction. Even if this fiction were regarded as a form of apprenticeship (and a remarkably productive one it was), there seems to be more focus on Kavan *after* she changed her name and appearance. Only Ironside (2006), in a short essay on Kavan, accords any weight to the early works. The only early work that merits consideration from other writers is her novel, *Let Me Alone* (1930) which is generally said to mirror her first marriage (in which the heroine is named Anna Kavan after her marriage). This story was reprised, albeit slightly differently, as *Who Are You?* (1963). The later books are extraordinary, written with a terrifying beauty and the surreal events and landscapes of these later texts are remarkable creations in every sense. No doubt they were very real for Kavan. And there is the rub. Kavan's life was so extraordinary, eventful and at times, horrific, that those who have written about her (Callard, 1992; Reed, 2006) seem to take a perverse delight in reading her fiction as biography and her life writing (the few diaries and letters that were not destroyed by her) as fiction. Buchanan (1999, p.360), comments:

Kavan's reclusive and eccentric life has attracted...scholars, but has also made it difficult for prospective biographers to uncover important events which might bear on her writing.

No doubt that was precisely Kavan's intention when she destroyed her papers and changed her identity.

Both her addiction and her mental ill-health are seen as somehow distorting 'reality'. Pain is pain and fear is fear. How can this not be 'real' to the person who is fearful or suffering from mental or physical pain? Kavan understood very well that reality is an unstable and volatile concept, and highly individual. On her later work, she commented:

I wanted to abandon realistic writing insofar as it describes exclusively events in the physical environment, and to make the reader aware of the existence of the different, though just as real, 'reality' which lies just beyond the surface of ordinary life. (Kavan in Callard, 1992, p.122)<sup>69</sup>

Kavan goes on to remark that there is no 'absolute' reality but that she wants to

free the reader from the actual written word, so that he [sic] would ... be stimulated to relate to what is written to his own and the whole human condition, which of course is again different for each individual. (1992, p.122)

In discussing Kafka, Kavan remarks that he does not "run away from reality" (1946, p.65):

When life frightens and hurts them, they [writers] do not look back at the nursery windows with longing eyes, but incorporate in themselves a part of life's fear and pain. The artistic value of their work endures because it is also part of

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<sup>69</sup> During the course of my researches into ACC, I was incredibly frustrated by the poor referencing of materials related to Anna Kavan. Both of her biographers had access to the remnants of Kavan's private papers lodged at the University of Tulsa and the University of Texas, mostly related to her later life. They also had access to several private papers and memoirs. It was incredibly frustrating to read in both biographies, words such as "As Anna explained" or "Anna wrote" without any idea if these were diary fragments, private letters, or personal conversations (in some instances these are recorded as well). The above quote begins with "Anna Kavan explained" (p.122). There is no other reference. Kavan's later biographer, Reed (2006) appears to have carried on the tradition. Even reproductions of Kavan's paintings are undated and unsourced, as are the photographs, which come from various private collections. Young (2001, p.189) describes Callard's attempt at biography as "amateurish".

reality. It is conscious, uncompromising, personal, true.  
(1946, p.65)

In her work, both early and later, Kavan also reflects the “personal” and the “true” in her work. This is quite an achievement in the later work as Kavan explores the conscious and the subconscious in imaginative ways; and yet there is no doubt that Kavan does relate to the human condition, warts and all. The nursery was not a place of safety for Kavan but a space of abandonment, where her parents left her shortly after her birth.

Reed, in the introduction to his biography explains that Kavan “did everything she could to resist biography” (2006, p.13), “reinventing herself” and destroying her papers. Reed remarks that his book looks at “the person, the addict, the myth of somebody who intended to be ‘a thrilling enigma for posterity’”. He also states that his interest is in “rehabilitating the dispossessed” (2006, p.14) - in other words, somehow doing Anna Kavan a favour by lifting her out of her murky past into enlightenment, rather in the manner of King Cophetua offering marriage to the beggar maid. If there is any myth that is Kavan it is the myth that has been perpetuated by two rather patronising biographies, casting her alternately as a pathetic victim of circumstance, an ‘outsider author’ and an *idiot savant*, who, quite surprisingly, wrote rather clever novels and, by Jove, was something of a painter as well and quite a successful interior decorator. And, more amusingly, she also bred bulldogs! Aldiss called her “Kafka’s sister” (1995). In other words, Kavan has done not too badly for a drug-addicted neurotic woman. Why could Kavan not simply be Kavan rather than Kafka’s sister or de Quincey’s heir? Had she been male, would she have been described as Kafka’s brother? I doubt it. Despite the resistance of Aldiss (1995) to stereotyping Kavan as a mad, heroin-fuelled visionary, he does Kavan no favours when he insists that she might never have been published, had it not been for the male publisher, Peter Owen. Why not, Aldiss declines to say. If Kavan is comparable to Kafka, why should she not be published as he was? Although he admires Kavan’s work, Aldiss clearly finds it less marketable than Kafka (1995, p.140). Could it be because she was a woman, because she was mad or both? Aldiss is silent.

Here again is the “practical denial of women as agents ... as the origin of meaningful action” (Evans, 1987, p.9). The source of Kavan’s work must be traced back to male writers. Kavan’s work, however much her biographers admire it, is then simply feeding off a larger male tradition. She is a “negative inclusion” (Evans, 1987, p.13), a “trivialized and distorted presence”. Not only that, but her ability to ‘reinvent’ herself, to distort the truth, means, for her biographers, that one needs to look closely at her fiction in order to establish the ‘truth’ of her life. Reed (2006) comments with amusement that during the 1920s, Kavan would not register with a medical practitioner as an addict because she was reluctant to disclose her age, but does not cite the source of this comment. He also states that “people who live in and write directly out of their imagination are often reluctant to reveal biographical details, usually because their lives involve the need to continuously recreate reality through fiction” (2006, p.27). Callard (1992) accuses her of being a liar, for writing in (one of the few remaining fragments) of her diary that she has been lying throughout the diary. Callard maintains that Kavan wrote this “possibly because Edmonds (her husband [sic] at the time) is reading the diary or because she fears her mother may have read it”. He then leaps to the conclusion that she is an “habitual liar” because “some friends later in life” ascribed her “lying” as an outcome of her addiction (1992, p.36). These speculations lead both biographers to ‘pick and mix’ when it comes to making sense of Kavan’s life. On the one hand, they feel that ‘the truth’ is revealed through her fiction. On the other, they are by turns convinced that Kavan’s own words in diaries, letters and conversations provide evidence of their (the biographers’) astute and discerning interpretations of Kavan’s life through her fiction while continuing to maintain that she is a liar and a serial reinventor of herself. Both biographers write as though there is one ‘real’ Kavan.

### *A scarcity of love*

Kavan was born in Cannes in 1901 as Helen Woods. The family was wealthy. She was sent elsewhere to be wetnursed before rejoining her parents in West London. When Helen/Anna was four, her parents moved to the U.S., while Helen went to live with her nurse’s family in Southwark. She then moved to the U.S. to be with her parents in California, being sent to an American boarding

school when she was six. She remained there for the next seven years, rarely leaving the school and rarely seeing her parents. Her father, Claude Woods committed suicide when Helen was fourteen and her mother sent her to boarding school in Switzerland. Later she was sent back to England to school and attended two boarding schools in quick succession, again rarely seeing her mother. Although miserable at school, Helen did well and was offered a place at Oxford but her mother, upon whom she depended financially, refused to allow her to attend university. She lived with her mother in the country near Reading (see Figure 5.2). Both of these circumstances, living with her mother in Reading and not being allowed to go up to Oxford, echo the confinement of Beryl and Olive in ACC.

At nineteen she married Donald Ferguson who was employed as a railway engineer in Burma. It is not clear whether or she was co-erced into the marriage by her mother or whether she married Ferguson as an escape from her mother. The marriage failed.



**Figure 5.2** Kavan aged 18 (Reed, 2006)

It is at this point that her biographers try to discern the ‘reality’ of this period of Anna’s life by reading through two of her texts: *Let Me Alone* (1930) and *Who Are You?* (1963). In both works a young woman (named Anna-Maria Forrester who marries Matthew Kavan in *Let Me Alone*) marries a much older man and goes with him to live in Burma. Much has been made of both novels as records of Kavan’s first marriage. In both, the husband of the main character (Anna Kavan in *Let Me Alone* and “the girl” (2002, p.12) in *Who Are You?*) is portrayed as contemptible and unlikable. The husbands in both books rape their wives; they are also portrayed as inarticulate, violent and thoroughly unattractive. How much can one understand these two novels to be portraits of Kavan’s own first marriage? It is probably more accurate to say that Kavan *drew* on certain aspects of her marriage and her life in Burma to write these novels. Was she raped by her first husband, Donald Ferguson? While it may seem highly likely, it is not clear if this is fact. Certainly, Kavan was deeply unhappy in the marriage, which officially lasted only two years (Callard, 1992, p.26).

If we are to take these texts as portraits of her marriage, there is a glaring omission. In neither of these novels is there a child born. In *Let Me Alone*, the character, Anna Kavan, has a miscarriage. In the later *Who Are You?*, ‘Mr Dog Head’, as the girl’s husband is called, tries to ensure that she will become pregnant but no child is born. In her own life, Helen Ferguson (as Kavan was known at this point) gave birth to a son, Bryan and returned to England, citing the effect of the climate in Burma on her son as the reason for her departure. The exclusion of the birth of a child from the novels demonstrates that, however much Kavan drew on her own life in writing these novels, neither text is an *exact* rendering of her life. Within the novels, no doubt Kavan draws on and conveys memories of her own mental state during her time in Burma. That she later changes her name to Anna Kavan may indicate her close identification with the character in *Let Me Alone* (the character, Anna Kavan, reappears in Kavan’s later novel *A Stranger Still* published in 1935, now separated from her husband). What one should be wary about, is using either of the texts as a biographical blue print.

What is evident from the novels, however, particularly in *Who Are You?* is Kavan’s ability to portray deep unhappiness and mental anguish. The “brain-

fever” birds have a monotonous cry, one that penetrates the girl’s consciousness to such an extent that they drive her close to hysteria. The birds’ call,

consists of the same three inquiring notes. Who-are-you? Who-are-you? Who-are-you? Loud, flat, harsh and piercing, the repetitive cry bores its way through the ear-drums with the exasperating persistence of a machine that can’t be switched off ... until hundreds or thousands of them are shouting it all together ... [they] eternally repeat the question no one ever answers. (2002, p.7)

Kavan conveys the same atmosphere of imprisonment and misery in these novels as she does in *ACC* and other works. Throughout, there is a persistent theme of oppression and containment within a space, be it a Victorian vicarage, a house within the Burmese forest, an asylum or a train carriage. There is internal containment, an oppression of spirit for several of the characters. There is also an emotional oppression: the inability of the characters, such as Olive, her father, Anna Kavan (the character) to assert their emotional needs. For all of the main women characters in the novels, there is an element of strong control by another person, by a spouse, a mother, a father or a sibling. Another aspect is an absence: the absence of love and affection. The spaces of containment and oppression are also empty spaces. They are brimming with wretchedness but empty of tenderness and affection.

After the geographical and physical separation from Donald Ferguson, Kavan moved back to her mother’s house near Reading (and perhaps from one space of control and containment to another). From there, she went to live in the south of France, where she met the painter, Stuart Edmonds, an alcoholic with whom she lived (see Figure 5.3), calling herself Helen Edmonds, although there was no record of a marriage, or of a subsequent divorce when the relationship ended (Reed, 2006). There was a daughter, born of this relationship, who died in infancy. It is at this point that Reed, as a biographer, decides, without presenting any supporting evidence, that Kavan is glad of this:

it was probably an enormous psychological relief to her when the child died in infancy, freeing her of the inevitable creative sacrifice that comes of being a mother. Little is known about the child, and Helen’s [Kavan’s] natural tendency to suppress emotion meant that she largely buried

her existence in the disinformation that substituted for her past. (2006, p.31)

Aside from the arrogance of that last sentence, the assumption that the birth and death of Kavan's daughter left little mark on her, apart from relief, is an enormous leap of faith. One must, of course, not assume that, as a woman and a mother, Kavan was delighted with the birth and distraught after her daughter's death. It is extraordinary, nonetheless, to assume that Kavan was indifferent or even ill-disposed towards the birth of her daughter and untouched by anything more than relief after her death. When her son Bryan was posted as 'missing, believed killed' in 1942, Kavan attempted to commit suicide. Is this because, at this time, Kavan was now a habitual drug-user and that drug addiction and motherhood do not mix? These are similar claims to those made about Thirkell, whose daughter died in infancy. Because Thirkell did not personally organise the funeral of her daughter and because she was seen 'out and about' after the child's death, it has been assumed that Thirkell was unaffected. Prescribed 'motherly' behaviour by biographers seems to be yet another form of containment.

At first, Kavan took cocaine and later moved on to heroin. Davies, a long-time friend of hers, wrote, in his introduction to a posthumous collection of short stories by Kavan, that her addiction came about as the result of using heroin for a "painful spinal disease" (1970, p.9).<sup>70</sup> Although Davies, who actually knew Kavan, is probably in a better position than either of her biographers to verify this claim, there is something a little naïve in the assumption that there were no other illnesses or stresses that led to Kavan taking heroin.

### *Change the name*

Kavan's relationship with Edmonds became increasingly difficult. Self-harm and suicide attempts led to a period in a clinic. "She became Anna Kavan by deed poll," wrote Davies (1970, p.7). "And, after a period spent in a mental hospital, at a time when she became a registered drug addict and almost unrecognisably spectral in appearance, she published under this name, in 1940, the much

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<sup>70</sup> The full text of Davies' introduction to *Julia and the Bazooka* (1970) appears at the end of this chapter along with a Prefatory note by Kavan's publisher, Owen, which appears in the latest edition of *Asylum Piece* (2001).

praised series of sketches, *Asylum Piece*.” In this work, a series of very short stories, some of which allude to life within a clinic for the mentally ill, others describe imprisonment.



Figure 5.3 Kavan with Edmonds, c. 1932 (Reed, 2006)

Each of the stories has a surreal quality and yet the emotional responses of the main characters, usually told in the first person, realistically convey the psychological struggles and motives of each of the characters. It is at this point that the ‘reinvented’ Anna Kavan is seen by critics in a new light and comparisons are made with Kafka. This is the point at which Kavan’s work is seen as changing from her ‘country house’ novels such as *ACC*. Nin (1969, p.171) comparing Kavan’s work to Kafka’s comments that in *Asylum Piece*,

the nonrational human being caught in a web of unreality, still struggles to maintain a dialogue with those who cannot understand him [in fact, most of the characters are women].

For Kavan, this seemed to be a lifelong struggle. She was described by friends she had in later life as fun and interesting, so she obviously had some connection

with some of the people she knew. How far she felt any rapport with them is unclear. The interior, psychological spaces of anyone's life are hard to discern.

The book did not do as well as it might have, perhaps because, as Kavan indicated, of the timing of its publication at the beginning of World War II. In 1942, after her son was found to be missing in action and presumed dead, Kavan attempted suicide and during a period in the psychiatric ward of St Stephen's hospital in London, she met Dr Karl Theodor Bluth, a psychiatrist who was to become her therapist and friend until his death in 1964. The generally accepted ethical relationship between therapist and patient was blurred into a form of mutual dependence, with both Kavan and Bluth writing to each other. It was an intense relationship but there is no evidence that it was a sexual one. Some of the (unsourced) passages from letters between the two indicate that Bluth's need for Kavan was, at times, as great as her own. He sent her poems, most of which she kept (Reed, 2006, p.84). They also collaborated on a piece of writing.

Kavan's later works explore the subconscious, the illusory and the magical. They also plumb psychological states, examining people's thoughts between waking and dreaming. In *Sleep Has His House* (1948), the nocturnal is examined through a portrayal of "the symbiotic relationship between a mother, generically referred to as A, her young daughter, B, and their conspiratorial nocturnal retreat from various incarnations of paternal authority" (Garrity, 2006, p.256).<sup>71</sup> Kavan's foreword to the book explains that the book:

describes in the night-time language certain stages in the development of one individual human being. No interpretation is needed of this language we have all spoken in childhood and in our dreams. (2002, p.50)

The book explores one of Kavan's recurring themes, the relationship between mother and daughter:

It is not easy to describe my mother. Remote and starry, her sad stranger's grace did not concern the landscape of the day. Should I say that she was beautiful or that she did not

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<sup>71</sup> *Sleep Has His House* was published in the US under the title *The House of Sleep*. Garrity's article, although astoundingly jargon-laden, at least treats this work by Kavan as a text and is quite specific in her desire not to conflate Kavan's life with her work.

love me? Have shadows beauty? Does the night love her child? (2002, p.7)

Young (2001, pp. 186, 187) explains that Kavan “detested” her mother and yet kept a portrait of her after she died. She also explains that Kavan’s mother completely dominated her. In any of Kavan’s texts where there is a mother or an aunt who fulfils the maternal role, the relationship is emotionally distant and power is exerted over the child or daughter/niece to a significant extent. The figure of Mrs Deane in *ACC* is certainly one of a woman who desires to control her family, succeeding to varying degrees with each of her family, but her desire is consistently evident.

It would be simplistic to say that each of Kavan’s maternal portraits is that of her mother. It is evident, however, that the mother/child relationship both fascinates and haunts Kavan. So also do imprisonment, mental anguish, addiction and life in a psychiatric clinic. Many of these aspects are drawn from Kavan’s life and her experiences, as are the preoccupations of other writers of fiction.



**Figure 5.4** Kavan with her mother in South Africa, 1947 (Reed, 2006)

Young (2001, p.186) describes Kavan’s fiction as “secretive and encoded”, adding that the meaning is not always accessible, even to Kavan. And, of course, the meaning and its accessibility will vary from reader to reader. It is

pertinent, at this point, to quote at some from Young's essay on Kavan (2001,p.191), with particular reference to Kavan's fictional landscapes:

Her work, far from being science fiction, evokes the cold, ancient landscape of opium dreams and visions. And within is always the figure of the child, fatally, psychically wounded ... Kavan's work can be read on a number of levels and it seems possible that she constructed it, as she did her life, as a series of what her friends described as 'sliding panels' or 'Chinese boxes'.

### *My soul in China*

Young also refers to Kavan's legacy as "a living tissue of lies, truths, of codes and duplicities" which was "literally the skin of her soul" (2001, p.191). For Young, Kavan's world is "hermetic, enclosed, self-obsessed, and the suffering is endless" (p.190). These insights all carry with them the atmosphere of the later, more surreal works but there is much here that also chimes with the early books by Kavan. *ACC* depicts a world in which loneliness and depression dog the main characters, particularly, the doctor and Olive. The Old Vicarage is an emotionally remote and chilling place, where affection is largely a stranger. The more I have read of Kavan's later work, the stronger becomes the link between Kavan's later work and *ACC*. This is the start of Kavan's interest and even obsession with the isolation of the individual: just as each of the Deanes is alone in the Old Vicarage, so are Kavan's later characters. 'B' the 'daughter' in *Sleep Has His House* (first published, 1948) explains that:

At school and at home it was the same; I was alone. This I accepted and knew it would always be so, wherever I went ... There was no place for me in the day world. My home was in darkness and my companions were shadows beckoning from a glass.(2002, p.100)

In *A Stranger Still* (1935), the character (as opposed to the person) of 'Anna Kavan' who had first appeared in *Let Me Alone* (1930) is now separated from her husband. After leaving her lover in France, she takes the train to Calais, travelling through the night. She reflects:

And it was dreary, dreary; like the melancholy phantasm of some Schopenhauer-created world. The ghastly midnight

dreariness of the train travelling northward in the dark ... Anna felt a grisly breath upon her, the deathly depression of the unwilling traveller wakeful and solitary in the chill midnight hours, disconsolate, drear, like a nausea of the soul. (1995, p.232).

In her short story, 'World of Heroes', the female narrator tells the reader that she is "lonely, so terribly lonely" and "solitary, helpless" (1970, p.57). In 'Julia and the Bazooka' (bazooka was Kavan's name for the hypodermic syringe), Julia asks, as she stands, isolated, in a freezing landscape, "Where has everyone gone?"(1970, p.155). Isolation is not confined to Kavan's work, of course since it is one that occupies many writers and has occupied them for centuries. For Kavan, writing as Helen Ferguson in 1929, emotional remoteness and isolation in the midst of a family is part of the interior landscape, part of the overall, domestic scene in the novel, just as it is for the 'girl' in *Who Are You?* (1963), and the character 'Anna Kavan' in *Let Me Alone* (1930). Their physical and emotional isolation is, like the Deanes', located in a domestic setting. This has echoes of *Hostages to Fortune*, where Catherine experiences isolation in the rural setting that is so unlike her childhood region of Cornwall. In both *Who are You?* and *Let Me Alone*, the main female character ('the girl' and 'Anna') is geographically isolated from what she knows. In both novels and in *Hostages to Fortune*, the containment within an alien space exacerbates feelings of isolation and alienation.

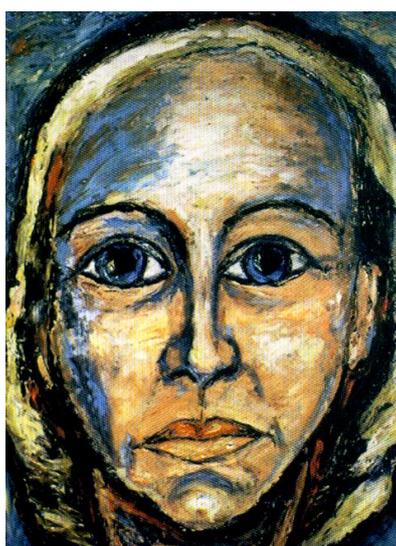


Figure 5.5 Kavan self-portrait, undated (Reed, 2006)

Kavan wrote in a review of the intensity of the “isolation of the mature individual” (1946, p.64) and of the “extreme insecurity in the outer environment” that is “counterbalanced by the extremity of inward recession” (p.62). She also commented that there is a need to ‘escape’ such insecurity and isolation. While she did not articulate the role that drugs play in such escape, it may be that her views in this piece of non-fiction reflected her own feelings of needing to escape. According to Davies (1970), Kavan would slip from the dinner table later in the evening to inject heroin as a means of escape.

The continuity of theme and the progressions of her pre-occupations, such as isolation, are evident throughout Kavan’s fiction. Both the early and the later work merit examination. Kavan’s later work is certainly more assured as well as more experimental but the early work also has merit. It is evidence of a writing apprenticeship in which Kavan explored the issues that were to preoccupy her in her later career. The early fiction is also an indication that her work was on the edge of the mainstream. Reviews of the early texts seem to indicate that Kavan was not producing fiction of a predictable ‘country house’ type, despite its categorisation as such. The review of *ACC* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, while criticising the style and structure in places, suggesting that the book was a “little too ambitious” (*TLS*, 1929), did not dismiss the text, believing there to be promise in the book and commenting that “the workmanship [my italics] as a whole is well up to the somewhat difficult standard of modern achievement”. The review also took the central aim of the work seriously, even if the reviewer felt that the author did not always succeed in conveying it. A review of *Goose Cross* (1936) commented that “those readers who have a taste for plumbing the “death-dark universe” will find here material to their liking. Those who prefer life and light will do well to pass on by” (*TLS*, 1936). That universe was present in all of Kavan’s work although it would take another decade and a half for it to achieve critical recognition. Aldiss remarked on his meeting with Kavan shortly before she died, that she “longed to have a reputation ... she liked the idea of being regarded as a science fiction writer” (1995, p.141).

Although her book sales were never in the best-selling league (Aldiss, 1995,p.141), Kavan’s novel *Ice* (1967) was named Science Fiction Book of the Year, even though, as Young asserts (2001, p.187), it was never really science

fiction but rather, a surreal novel dealing with a nuclear holocaust. Even Aldiss, who praised the work as science fiction called it “unclassifiable” (1986,p.337). There is, in a way, a sense that Kavan seemed to be ahead of her time. Her work, *Asylum Piece*, appearing in 1940, was engulfed by the Second World War and yet its themes of imprisonment, incarceration and mental breakdown were very much those of the post-war *avant garde*. Similarly, Kavan’s preoccupations with drug addiction found a readership after her death in the 1970s.

Kavan, in spite of her mental ill health and addiction managed to work at the discipline of writing for over forty years. She also painted, worked as a property developer and interior decorator, and worked for Cyril Connelly, writing pieces for *Horizon: A review of literature and art*, throughout the war years, although she felt that Connelly was not as supportive of her writing as she felt he might have been (Aldiss, 1995, p.141).

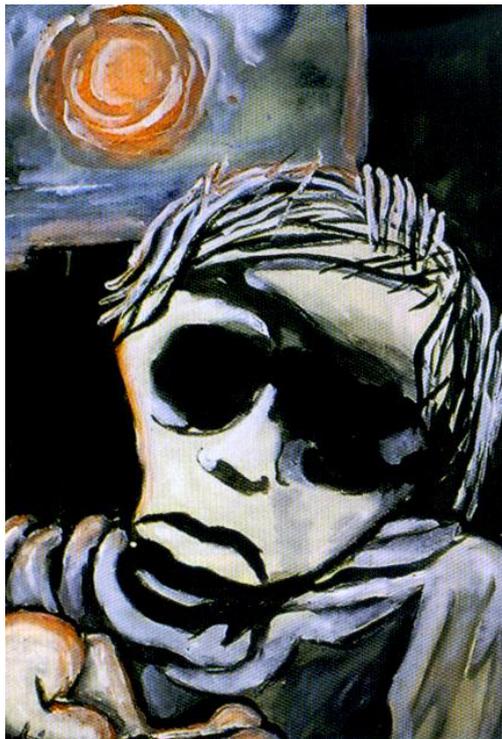


Figure 5.6 A later self-portrait by Kavan, undated (Reed, 2006)

It seems strange that Kavan’s biographers have paid so little heed to her discipline and capacity for work. As Davies (1970) and Young (2001) comment, most of her colleagues and friends were surprised to discover that she was a heroin addict. While this says much about the conceptions people have of drug

addicts, it also indicates that Kavan was productive and active in her life (and probably secretive about her drug use). Although she was to have several spells in psychiatric institutions, Kavan also carried on an active professional and social life. She did not live only by her pen but by other means.<sup>72</sup> Her early efforts, while less well-regarded by later critics were, nonetheless, steadily published in the years 1929 to 1937.

The starting point for this work on Kavan was my reading of the earliest of Kavan's published works, *A Charmed Circle*. The novel, written during a period that interests me, intrigued me enough, as Barnes, says, to "chase the writer" (1984, p.3) and her works. Its geoliterary terrain of darkness, containment, despair and isolation is one that is played out in different ways across all of Kavan's fiction. Katherine Mansfield wrote in 1920 of minds having "wild places, a tangled orchard where dark damsons drop in the heavy grass ... the chance of a snake or two ..., a pool that nobody's fathomed the depth of" (2005, p.170). It seems that nobody has yet fathomed the depth of Kavan's mind, nor of her fiction, and perhaps that is unnecessary; although more critical engagement with her early work may lead to a deeper understanding of that work as well as the development of Kavan's career as a writer.

### *Conclusion*

The tormented geoliterary terrains of *ACC* form part of a wider set of terrains for Kavan whose personal terrains were equally, if not more, tormented. Interior isolation is mapped onto a more exterior alienation, from the rooms of the asylum to the remote forests of Burma. Kavan's psychological geography and the geoliterary terrains of her novels are like a "series of Chinese boxes" (Young, 2001, p.191), each contained within the other and at times circulating about one another. The oppressive domesticity of *ACC* echoes *Hostages to Fortune* and yet is not identical to it. The dysfunctional family of the Deanes, their social relations (or lack of them) and their disconnection with the exterior spaces of the novel, mirror their disconnection with one another within a more interior space. The Deanes retreat to their rooms, spaces where, perhaps, they can escape the claustrophobia of their family life.

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<sup>72</sup> Priest (2006) even goes so far as to say that Kavan was a "renowned" interior decorator (p.4).

The theme of containment is persistent in Kavan's writing, as are alienation and isolation. Her own lifeworld appears to be one of containment and isolation. From the institutional spaces of the asylum to the remote jungle of Burma, there is a sense of Kavan being in those spaces and yet not *of* them. Rather, she moves through them, much as the more spectral characters of her later works move through their night worlds:

There was no place for me in the day world. My home was in darkness and my companions were shadows beckoning from a glass. (2002, p.100)

"There is no place for me", says the character 'B'. Did Anna Kavan feel as though there were no place for her? Despite my arguing for some critical distance in merging Kavan's life with her fiction, there is no doubt, that the persistent themes of her fiction are preoccupations for Kavan. The difficulties of her 'madness' as she called it, her family life and her drug use highlight these preoccupations. They are central to her writing and to her lifeworld. Like Shahrazad, Kavan has been seen as the story as well as being seen as the storyteller. The links between her fiction and her own lifeworld are strong but complicated by the author's imaginings of herself as well as of her characters. A study of any of her novels is inevitably tightly woven about Kavan herself. The disturbing themes of containment, isolation and alienation are evinced even in the titles of some of the novels and as such, are so central to Kavan's lifeworld that I have used them as subheadings for this chapter (see also Box 5.3 for a list of Kavan's works). Kavan felt herself to be a stranger, even to herself, and the geoliterary terrains of her fiction reflect the tragedy of her isolation.

### Box 5.3

#### Major works of fiction published by Anna Kavan

*First published under the name, Helen Ferguson and later republished under the name, Anna Kavan*

*A Charmed Circle*, 1929, Jonathan Cape, London.

*The Dark Sisters*, 1930, Jonathan Cape, London.

*Let Me Alone*, 1930, Jonathan Cape, London.

*A Stranger Still*, 1935, John Lane, London.

*Goose Cross*, 1936, John Lane, London.

*Rich Get Rich*, John Lane, London.

*All published under the name Anna Kavan*

*Asylum Piece and Other Stories*, 1940, Jonathan Cape, London.

*Change the Name*, 1941, Jonathan Cape, London.

*I Am Lazarus: Short stories*, 1945, Jonathan Cape, London.

*Sleep Has His House*, 1948, Cassell, London.

*The Horse's Tale* (with K.T.Bluth), 1949, Gaberbocchus Press, London.

*A Scarcity of Love*, 1956, Angus Downie, Southport, Lancashire.

*Eagles' Nest*, 1957, Peter Owen, London.

*A Bright Green Field*, 1958, Peter Owen, London

*Who Are You?*, 1963, Scorpion Press, Lowestoft

*Ice*, 1967, Peter Owen, London.

*Julia and the Bazooka and Other Stories*, 1970, Peter Owen, London.

*My Soul in China: A novella and other stories*, 1975, Peter Owen, London.

*My Madness: The selected writings of Anna Kavan*, 1990, Picador, London.

*Mercury*, 1994, Peter Owen, London.

*The Parson*, 1995, Peter Owen, London.

## Box 5.4

### Context

The table below lists political events, contemporary culture and also a list of books published in 1929. Items are marked with various symbols to identify their sources.

1929

### *Political and Other Events*

- Wall Street Crash ~
- Baldwin Govt resigns; Ramsay MacDonald elected as Prime Minister +
- Hunger March of Glasgow +
- All-fascist government elected in Italy+
- The term 'apartheid' first used in South Africa+
- Airship *Graf Zeppelin* flies around the world in 2½ days+

### *Contemporary Culture*

- The first of Disney's 'Silly Symphonies' shown+
- Laurel and Hardy's 'Two Tars' produced+
- Astronomer Edwin Hubble confirms that the universe is expanding+
- Epstein creates 'Day and Night' façade for the London Transport building+
- 'The Kiss' starring Greta Garbo is released+
- The Book Society is founded+
- Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet* is produced+
- G.B. Shaw's *The Apple Cart* is produced+

### *Books Published*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*~  
Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*~  
T.E. Lawrence, *Revolt in the Desert*~  
Dorothy L. Sayers, *Tristan in Brittany* (translation)  
G.K. Chesterton, *The Father Brown Stories*~  
Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September*~  
Ivy Compton-Burnett, *Brothers and Sisters*+  
J.B. Priestley, *The Good Companions*+  
Louis MacNiece, *Blind Fireworks*+

## The Nobel Prize, 1929

### Nobel Laureates

Physics - Prince Louis-Victor Pierre Raymond de Broglie

Chemistry - Arthur Hayden and Hans Karl August Simon von Euler-Chelpin

Medicine and Physiology - Christian Eijkman and Frederick Gowland Hopkins

Literature - Thomas Mann

Peace - Frank Billings Kellogg

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/lists/1929.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/lists/1929.html) last accessed 27.06.09

### Sources

+ Widdowson, P. (2004), The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and its Contexts, 1500-2000, Palgrave, Basingstoke, p.189

~ Day, G. (ed.) (1997), Literature and Culture in Modern Britain, Volume 2: 1930-1955, Longman, London, p.xiii

## Chapter Six

### *The Nine Tailors: Sayers, Spirituality and the Fens*

If you come this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.  
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.  
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment  
Is England and nowhere. Never and always. (Eliot, 1946, p.27)

Narrative is one of the ways in which knowledge is organised. I have always thought that it was the most important way to transmit and receive knowledge. I am less certain of that now - but the craving for narrative has never lessened, and the hunger for it is as keen as it was on Mt Sinai or Calvary or the middle of the fens. (Morrison<sup>73</sup>)

At another time, Aladdin, who had not been used to such visions, would have been so frightened, that he would not have been able to speak; but the danger he was in made him answer without hesitation, "Whoever thou art, deliver me from this place, if thou art able." (Everyman, 1907, p.19)

Dorothy L. Sayers (DLS) began work on *The Nine Tailors* (NT) in 1932.<sup>74</sup> At that time, she had been working on her memoirs, writing of her early life.<sup>75</sup> DLS wrote to her cousin saying that she had abandoned her memoirs to write a novel "about a big church in the Fens" (letter to Ivy Shrimpton, 17 February, 1932). When writing to Victor Gollancz, her publisher, she called the work a "labour of love" (letter, 14 September, 1932). It took two years to finish as there was a great deal of research involved in its writing. In this novel, DLS returned to the landscape of her childhood: the Fens of East Anglia.

Far from being a nostalgic revelling in childhood haunts, *NT* is as vast as the East Anglian skies in its ambitions. As a hermeneutic scholar, DLS was interested in symbolic and poetic forms of literature. In this novel she attempted something

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Friedman (1998, p.216).

<sup>74</sup> Nine Tailors means nine strokes of the 'tailor' bell to signify the death of a man. Six tailors signifies the death of a woman. Following this message being rung out, the age of the deceased is tolled by strokes of the bell.

<sup>75</sup> 'My Edwardian Childhood', in B. Reynolds (ed.), (2002).

new. She called it 'poetic romance' but it was more than that. DLS harnessed the fenland landscape and pored over its terrain for the lifeworld that was so dear to her: the Christian faith. The narrative follows the Christian liturgical year, from New Year to Christmas. The church of Fenchurch St. Paul sits loftily at the centre of the story. Its bells and angel roof preside over events in the novel, constantly personified in the imagery used by DLS. DLS uses the imagery of distortion and reflection to tease out ideas of redemption, good and evil and salvation. And in the end, the author asks for enlightenment and hope: 'lighten our darkness' is the prayer she whispers to the reader near the end of the novel.

Her personal circumstances were troubling during the writing of *NT*. Her marriage was in difficulty, her parents had both died a few years earlier, her son, born to her when she was single, was a concern to her. She wanted to 'adopt' him and have her husband (not the boy's father) adopt him officially but her husband continued to delay putting this plan into action. At this point, DLS was also looking beyond writing detective fiction and this brought with it difficulties as her fiction provided her with the means to support her family, both immediate and extended. So in some ways, *NT* is a crossroads novel.

This chapter explores the geoliterary terrain of *NT* and the lifeworld of its author. An initial examination of the novel's plot and its publication is followed by a discussion of the fenland landscape in terms of the novel and its author's engagement with the region. A study of the novel and the detective form of the interwar years follows, with particular attention paid to the characters of *NT*. Symbolism and the interrogation of the spiritual is discussed; a methodological examination of spiritual landscapes and their cultural and religious implications is treated in light of the novel. Finally, there is a more personal look at the lifeworld of DLS with a review of her reflections on theology, the status of women and the act of writing. Included in this is a discussion of attempts to suppress DLS as writer and as a woman.

This chapter begins with a novel that has a broad canvas. The breadth of the canvas is borne out by the range of discussion that *NT* continues to engender, as wide as the fenland skies and as brimming as the landscape.

### *The Nine Tailors: Plot, publication and reception*

On New Year's Eve, after four o'clock in the afternoon, Lord Peter Wimsey, DLS's detective hero, has an accident in his car in the middle of a snowstorm. Wimsey and his manservant, Bunter, are invited to seek shelter in the rectory of the parish of Fenchurch St. Paul in East Anglia (see Box 6.1 for a plot summary). Asked to be a last minute replacement for one of the local bellringers, Wimsey rings in the New Year. Once his car is repaired, he leaves the district. At Easter time it is discovered that the dismembered corpse of a man is found buried in a recently deceased woman's grave. Wimsey returns to Fenchurch St. Paul after being invited back by the Rector, Theodore Venables. Wimsey's investigations and those of the police uncover the story of the deceased, Geoffrey Deacon. Deacon was a butler in a local house, convicted and gaoled some years earlier for his part in a jewellery robbery. He had escaped from prison during the Great War and what was supposed to be his body had been discovered. He had, in fact, murdered a soldier on leave, taken on his identity and, post-war, had lived in France. He returns to Fenchurch St. Paul to recover the stolen jewellery, hidden in the roof of the church and the following events unfold.

A local man, Will Thoday, encounters Deacon. In a plot twist worthy of Thomas Hardy, Thoday has married the woman to whom Deacon is married, Mary Thoday, it being assumed that her first husband had died. Thoday, distraught to think that his marriage is invalid and that his children are illegitimate, wants Deacon to go before Mary sees him. He ties up Deacon in the belltower, leaving him food and drink, intending to return for him later. Will falls ill with influenza on New Year's Eve and is delirious. During this time, the full peal of the church bells is rung (Wimsey taking Will's place) for nine hours. Will's brother later discovers Deacon in the belltower, dead. Deacon has died from heart failure after enduring the earsplitting noise of the bells for nine hours. It is only when Wimsey is subsequently subjected to the noise of the bells at close quarters that he realises what has happened. Will Thoday confesses to tying up Deacon in the belltower. He later drowns, trying to save another man during a Fen flood. The book ends just before Christmas, with the inhabitants of the village sheltering in the church as the floodwaters rise.

### Box 6.1

#### *The Nine Tailors* by Dorothy L. Sayers (1934)

The novel is set in the Fens of East Anglia, in the fictional village of Fenchurch St. Paul. When Lord Peter Wimsey, DLS's detective hero and his manservant, Mervyn Bunter, are stranded near the village in a snow storm on New Year's Eve, they are taken in by the Venables, a clergyman and his wife, Theodore and Agnes. Theodore is the rector of Fenchurch St. Paul and he persuades Wimsey, to join the church bellringers as they begin a nine hour peal to ring in the New Year.

Wimsey is a last minute substitute for Will Thoday, a local man who has been taken ill. At Easter, Wimsey returns to the village at the invitation of the rector. In the grave of a recently deceased woman, a man's headless body has been found. It subsequently turns out to be the body of Geoffrey Deacon. Deacon had worked some years previously as a butler at a local house and had been convicted and imprisoned for his part in a jewellery robbery. During the Great War he escaped from prison. He murdered a soldier and took on his identity. It was believed that Deacon had died and his supposed widow, Mary, had married Will Thoday.

Deacon returned to Fenchurch St. Paul on New Year's Eve to collect the stolen jewellery he had hidden in the church many years ago. Will Thoday, distracted to find that his marriage was bigamous and his children illegitimate, tied Deacon in the belltower to keep him from public view. Will was then taken ill and unable to release Deacon, who died of a heart attack, having endured the noise of the bells at close quarters for nine hours. It was not until Wimsey experienced something similar that he was able to understand how the man had died.

At the end of the novel, a flood engulfs the village and the inhabitants take refuge in the church, Wimsey included. Will Thoday drowns trying to save the life of his friend.

The novel is rich in imagery of the landscape, the church and its bells. DLS draws heavily on both landscape and church for symbolism and imagery to draw out Christian religious themes.

When the novel was published, it "immediately ran to three impressions", sold almost 100,000 copies in seven weeks in the United Kingdom and its author moved from the realm of the well-known author to the celebrity (Hone, 1979, p.9). The writer and poet, Charles Williams, wrote to Victor Gollancz:

Present her [DLS] with my profound compliments. It's a marvellous book; it is high imagination - and the incomprehensible splendours of the preludes to each part make a pattern round and through it like the visible laws and the silver waters themselves ... and you won't do a greater book in all your serious novels this year. The end is unsurpassable. (I daresay I exaggerate, but I've only just finished it and I'm all shaken). (Reynolds, 1993, p.242).

The book was reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1934, with the anonymous reviewer remarking that “Miss Sayers has now given us what we have long awaited.” (TLS, 11.01.1934). “We commit ourselves to the author, and she, telling us a good deal more than we can understand, produces the feeling of wonder at which she aims”. Robertson also reviewed the book. In the *Saturday Review of Literature*, she wrote of DLS weaving “unobtrusively the sure local touches” into the narrative, and also praised the use of fenland dialogue (24.03.1934). Later critics were keen to praise the work. Rendell, who is also critical of DLS’s work in general, called it one of the “finest detective novels ever written” (Perriam, 2001). For a number of other commentators, *NT* is undoubtedly DLS’s best novel (Mann, 1981, p.176).

Not everyone was pleased with the work. Wilson (1950, p.75) in his essay, *Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?* said that *NT* was the “most boring” detective novel ever written (1950). In attempting to write a detective novel that was more than simply a puzzle, DLS was seen by some as pretentious. Leavis was particularly scathing about DLS’s work and “in the pages of *Scrutiny*, fulminated against Dorothy Sayers for the pretensions to literary merit when she was only writing vulgar bestsellers” (Byatt, 1991, p.269). After the publication, DLS was sought after by some in the literary world and by her detective writing colleagues (Reynolds, 1993).

The tale owed a great deal to Falkner’s tale, *The Nebuly Coat* (1903), and DLS herself admitted as much (Hall, 1980). Falkner was an author who was “committed to Victorian Gothic Revivalism” (McEvoy, 2004, p.49) and DLS attempted to capture an essence of the Gothic in her work, particularly in her portrayal of the fenland landscape.

### *The Fens, DLS and NT*

Although DLS altered the topography of the Fens to suit her structural aims, the country portrayed is that of DLS’s childhood. As she wrote in her poem, *Lord, I Thank Thee*, she knew the landscape well:

I was brought up in a swamp  
Carved, caged, counter-checked like a chessboard  
By dyke and drain,  
Running from the Great Ouse to the Wash,  
Where the wind never stops blowing;  
I know all about the smell that comes off the drowned land  
When the waters turn home in the spring. (1942, in Hone, 1996, p.123)

DLS comments many times throughout *NT* on the flatness of the landscape. The bells on New Year's Eve ring out "over the flat, white wastes of fen" (*NT*, p.39). The flat road reels away, "mile after mile" and as Wimsey drives along the fenland roads, it flattens out more, "if a flatter flatness were possible" (p.170).

The landscape is also described in the novel as "Looking-Glass Country" (*NT*, p.215). This is a reference to Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass* (1871), whose "ghost haunts these pages" (Kenney, 1990, p.62):

For some minutes Alice stood without speaking, looking out in all directions over the country - and a most curious country it was. .. 'I declare it's marked out just like a large chessboard!' (Carroll, 1917, p.35)

This passage is referred to in *NT*:

'Yes, said Wimsey. 'It's like Looking-Glass Country. Takes all the running we can do to stay in the same place.'

The Superintendent glanced about him. Flat as a chessboard, and squared like a chessboard with intersecting dyke and hedge, the fen went flashing past them. (*NT*, p.215)

The surreal and yet bizarrely ordered nature of the landscape (as perceived by Wimsey and the author) is mirrored in the investigation of Deacon's death. Nothing is ever quite what it seems. The water, ever-present in the fenland landscape, acts as a looking glass, distorting perspective. When the landscape floods, Wimsey looks down at it from the belltower:

An enormous stillness surrounded him. The moon had risen, and between the battlements the sullen face of the drowned fen showed like a picture in a shifting frame, like sea seen through the porthole of a rolling ship, so widely did the tower swing to the relentless battery of the bells.

The whole world was lost now in one vast sheet of water. (*NT*, p.344)

The “shifting frame” distorts the landscape, distorts perspective, as a looking glass does. Wimsey, unable to see into the detective problem he has been asked to solve, within a community that is not his own, is seeing things from a different perspective. The chessboard landscape adds to his frustration and this will be discussed in greater depth in other contexts. Here, in the discussion of the fenland landscape, we see the terrain through Wimsey’s eyes: a distorted, “lost” world. The physical presence of the Fens (see Figure 6.1), never far from the narrative, also demonstrates the importance to DLS of what she termed “setting”. For DLS, the setting of a novel was “integral to the structure of the book”. In her assessment, if the story “might equally have been worked out against another background”, then the setting was “exterior to the structure and the book, as a work of art, is incomplete” (*The Sunday Times*, 10.02.1935). In *NT* the setting is integral to the narrative. That may seem simplistic but in this case, it is fundamental to every aim of DLS as author, as child of the Fens and as a Christian. Although she knows the Fens intimately, DLS is also aware of the continuity of texts about the fens, drawing on them in the passages devoted to fenland drainage, the isolation of the Fens and the ‘otherness’ of the landscape (Perriam, 2005).

The Fens of *NT* are the landscape of Hereward the Wake, the Fens that Daniel Defoe describes as “the soak of no less than thirteen counties” (Sly, 2007, p.11). The history of the Fens is one of religious settlement, drainage and agriculture. It is also one of resistance, as evidenced in the ‘Fen Tigers’, the fenlanders who resisted the drainage of the Fens in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The Fens of *NT* are also the Fens of countless works of fiction, poetry and non-fiction.

They exert a fascination that few counties of England can match. They abound with tales of the “cunning folk” (Rowlands, 2004), the witch-hunts of Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne, the landscape of Tony Martin (see Figure 6.2), the marginal and marginalised Norfolk farmer jailed for killing a burglar, described as weird, strange and loony in his “remote” farmhouse on the edge of “nowhere” (Gillan, 2000). Storey attributes this ‘otherness’ of both landscape

and its inhabitants to the struggle “against water” (1985). For Earwaker and Becker (1998), its isolation and spiritual independence (1998, p.10) set it apart from other areas of Britain: you do not “pass through” the area on the way to somewhere else, you “arrive” there (1998, p.10). Beyond Norfolk, is the sea.



**Figure 6.1** A fenland landscape (Ford, 2007, p.71)

Ford calls it a landscape “for murder”, citing examples of fictional and actual murder. She asks:

So what is it about this landscape and the people who inhabit it? What makes East Anglia different? What is the relationship between people and land? Do the tales we read in our favourite authors resemble or mirror reality in East Anglia? (2007, p.66)

A lifelong inhabitant of East Anglia, Ford finds it difficult to be in “a house, close to a high hill” (2007, p.67). Used as she is to flat expanses of land and big skies, the proximity of a high hill near flat land is unnerving. For detective author, Andrew Taylor, a childhood in the Fens led him to choose hills and trees as his adult environment (Perriam, 2005, p.41). There is a fascination with the

Fens, and with East Anglia in general, that seems to draw writers, whether native or not, to the landscape. An entire book has been devoted to the “literary heritage” of East Anglia (Earwaker & Becker, 1998, p.11).

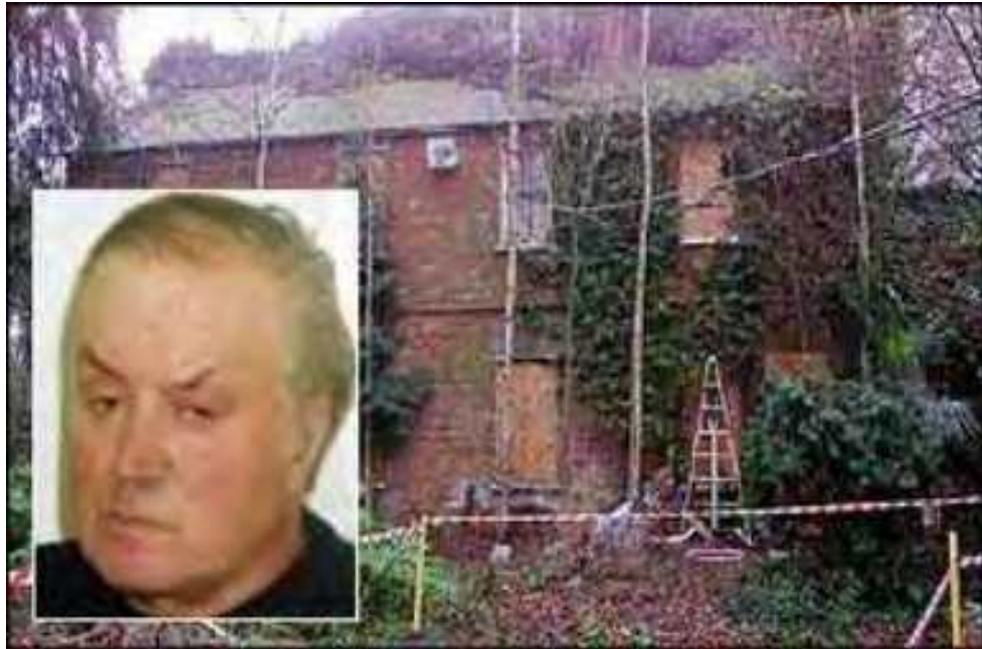


Figure 6.2. Tony Martin and his house (Perriam, 2005)<sup>76</sup>

The continuity of fascination is most recently seen in evidence in the crime fiction of detective author P.D.James and the fiction of Graham Swift in his novel, *Waterland* (1983). Swift finds the landscape of the Fens “peculiarly foreign” and “hauntingly strange” (1989, p.7). The “paradoxical quality” of the Fens, for Swift, is the “central fascination”. They are “both empty and brimming, both cultivated and tenaciously wild, apparently ‘open’ and ‘obvious’ yet profoundly mysterious” (1989, p.7). In his novel, the Fens are described as a “fairy-tale place” (1992, p.1) and yet the landscape is also “the great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality” (p.170). James, who has set some of her novels in East Anglia comments that “[i]t is not a comfortable landscape.” As such it is “ideal for a detective story”. For James, the landscape is eerie and evocative, with “dramatic skies” and a “sense of isolation” (Hurren & Moore, 1995). For DLS, the mythology of the landscape blended with her own memories of it: it became both an “evocative” landscape (Philo, 2002, p.31) and a spiritual one, one that DLS would eventually harness for what some consider to be her finest detective novel.

<sup>76</sup> This is a composite picture, both images drawn from Gillan’s article in *The Guardian* (April 20, 2000).

### *Detective work in the Fens*

To understand NT as a work of detective fiction it is necessary to explore the context of the genre in which DLS was writing. Prior to the interwar years, detective fiction was a male bastion. Arthur Conan Doyle, Wilkie Collins and Edgar Allen Poe had written in the mystery/detective vein. After the Great War, women moved into the genre. The first notable woman crime writer was Agatha Christie, shortly followed by Margery Allingham and DLS, who, along with Ngaio Marsh and later, Josephine Tey, came to be known as the 'Queens of Crime' Other women followed suit but Christie, Allingham, DLS and Marsh were the best known writers of what has been called the Golden Age of crime fiction. As is usually the case, the lumping together of these writers hides a range of differences. Christie, asserted by Rendell to be a "plotter of genius" (Perriam, 2001, p.3), has come to be associated with conservative middle England. At the time, she was seen as largely modernist in outlook, challenging the *ancien regime* of her Edwardian upbringing. "In the early 1930s," according to Light (1991,p.75), "the 'suburban idiom' of the whodunit was found offensively modern in its taking liberties with the pieties and forms of the past". Christie's choice of sleuths was far from conventional: a foreigner (Hercule Poirot) and an elderly, single woman (Jane Marple).

Allingham adopted the form of the fairy tale for her fantastical novels, in which characters and settings cut across class and gender divides. DLS, credited with writing the first overtly feminist detective novel, *Gaudy Night* (1935) was one of the women detective writers of the interwar years who sought to reverse the accepted narrative traditions that "undercut" women and their characterisation (Pyrhönen, 1994, p.109). Both Allingham and DLS wrote about women as professionals, women with intellects and ambitions who were good at their jobs and who were able to stamp their personalities on the page. Allingham's Amanda Fitton is an aeroplane engineer. DLS's Harriet Vane is a university graduate and a successful novelist. Both characters continued to work after their marriage, very much as did their creators.

In the case of DLS, the development of her craft as a writer of detective novels reached its height in the production of *NT*. DLS had taken to writing detective fiction when she was unemployed. Her literary instincts had led her to poetry but she found that poetry did not pay (Hone, 1979) and turned to crime writing instead, after studying the genre and its conventions:

Having established her essential characters, her settings, and the principal themes, Sayers still had to address the matter of style - no small consideration for an Oxford-educated woman with a degree in modern languages. In her own mind, as well as in the estimation of her social group, Sayers was "slumming" to attempt popular detective fiction at all. Surely she was more at home with poetic forms, if not with the 'high' literature of Europe's last thousand years. To write popular literature was to enter a different kind of world altogether, one her training would identify as a much lower form. (McGregor & Lewis, 2000, p.32)

Yet DLS was not ashamed of having written popular literature; quite the reverse. She gave several talks on the detective genre and wrote articles on the detective narrative form. As a self-confessed "scholar gone wrong" (Coomes, 1992) DLS became a scholar of crime fiction, editing and introducing two volumes on mystery fiction (1928, 1931). For Sayers, the researching and writing of detective fiction required a scholarly approach and intellectual rigour (Perriam, 2006), down to the technical details of bell-ringing, which required two years of research. Investigating and learning campanology for *NT*, DLS took great care over the mathematical form and patterns of change-ringing, which were essential to the plot.<sup>77</sup> This meant that she was required to write another novel (*Murder Must Advertise*, 1933) to fulfil her publishing contract, while she continued her research. In the end, campanologists were only able to detect three minor errors in the novel, which, she said, made her "sinfully proud" (Reynolds, 1993, p.241).

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<sup>77</sup> See also, Johnston's (1991) fascinating paper dealing with change-ringing and issues of place and identity. The author points out that "[u]nder canon law, only one bell is required for every church, so a ring of bells is a luxury and a status symbol, of use to the ringers to exercise their hobby but of very marginal additional value to the church community" (p.135). This changes the account of this remote church in the Fens. The Fen churches were the product of prosperity from the wool trade in earlier times, their structures and their bells reflecting the economic status of the community. For DLS, of course, the bells were not of marginal value but crucial to plot, setting, structure and themes of *NT*.

The creation of her amateur detective hero, Lord Peter Wimsey, became something of a problem for DLS. In the Golden Age of crime fiction, the detective hero was central to mainstream works. Initially, Wimsey was part Sherlock Holmes and part silly-ass, with some of the attributes of P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster. He used the clerk's slang (Carey, 2002) of Bertie Wooster and the deductive reasoning of Holmes. At the time of his creation, DLS was living in cramped lodgings and unemployed, as many were at that time.<sup>78</sup> The writing of the first Wimsey novel *Whose Body?* (1923) was an attempt to earn a living. DLS decided to live vicariously, creating for Wimsey the material pleasures that she did not have: a comfortable flat, money, good food and wine and ample leisure. DLS came to believe that the public

had had their fill of stories that were more than clever enough in plot but were prosaically told, devoid of depth, and peopled with infallible detectives and other, one dimensional, predictable, stock characters. (Elkin (in Stone Dale), 2005, p.101)

DLS's creation of Wimsey was an attempt to provide a detective hero who was fallible, within narratives that had some depth; and it proved to be popular. She was unable to foresee a time when she would want to kill the golden goose of Wimsey, when she would be heartily sick of him, when she would be earning enough as a writer to dispense with him and when world events (World War II) would change her attitude to many things, the writing of detective fiction included. Christie commented in an article written for the Russian press in 1945, that:

Dorothy Sayers, alas, has wearied of the detective story and has turned her attention elsewhere. We all regret it for she is such an exceptionally good ... writer and a delightfully witty one. (2008)<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> There were and are, charges of snobbery levelled against DLS. Rendell calls her a "crashing snob" (Perriam, 2001, p.3). In choosing an aristocratic sleuth, Sayers was able to furnish him with means and leisure to pursue his amateur detecting. The charges of snobbery are reasonable but they do not stand alone without an understanding of context, not merely DLS wanting to live vicariously but also in her quest to write a bestseller. Both Allingham and Marsh chose their detectives from the upper-middle class, as did most of the writers of the Golden Age. Charges against the Golden Age in general regarding snobbery also stand, as Watson demonstrates (1979).

<sup>79</sup> Details of the original publication are unclear. The manuscript, long thought to have disappeared, was recently re-discovered by Christie's family. Very little is unfortunately known about this piece. Anecdotally, I have heard from those who knew DLS that she once asked Christie, "Agatha, don't you ever get sick of Poirot?". At the time DLS was apparently fed up

By the time she came to write *NT*, DLS had fleshed out the character of Wimsey but from the first she presented the reader with a flawed character. Some understanding of this is necessary in order to understand *NT* and its setting. In the first Wimsey novel, he is presented initially as a wealthy amateur sleuth, babbling in Wodehousian slang. By the end of the book, however, it becomes evident that Wimsey's apparent insouciance hides a troubled character. As the novel progresses, it is clear that he suffers from shell-shock. In the works of DLS, the Great War is a presence that moves its way through characterisation and plot. Although it can be used as a device, it is more than that. One of DLS's later novels, *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928), turns on the events of one Armistice Day and many of the characters are returned or retired soldiers. DLS scrutinises the effects of shell-shock and gas poisoning at close quarters, portraying the effects of the war on the men themselves and also on their families. In many of the Wimsey novels, there is at least one episode of shell-shock for Wimsey, often as a reaction to his investigations. In *Whose Body?* (1923), Wimsey suffers from a bout of shell-shock, waking his manservant, Bunter in the night, reliving his experience of being buried in a collapsed tunnel in France during the Great War:

'Listen - over there ... can't you hear it?'

'It's nothing my lord,' said Mr. Bunter. ... 'it's all right, you get to bed quick and I'll fetch you a drop of bromide. Why, you're all shivering ...'

'Hush! No, no - it's the water,' said Lord Peter with chattering teeth; 'it's up to their waists down there, poor devils. But listen! Can't you hear it? Tap, tap, tap - they're mining us ... we must stop it ... Listen! Oh my God! I can't hear - I can't hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can't they stop the guns?'

'... No, no - it's all right, Major, don't you worry.'

Mr Bunter, with his stiff black hair ruffled about his head, sat grimly watching the younger man's sharp cheekbones and the purple stains under his eyes.

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with Wimsey and wanted to 'finish him off'. DLS was a prolific reviewer and reviewed Christie. She was invariably generous in her reviews and it seems that Christie is equally generous judging by the above comment.

‘Thought we’d had the last of these attacks,’ he said. ... An affectionate note crept into his voice. ‘Bloody little fool!’ said Sergeant Bunter. (1947, p.98)

DLS’s conception of a detective hero was not the unflinching, stiff-upper-lipped Alpha male of the ‘shilling shocker’ novels. She was not, however, uncritical of her creation.

In a later novel (*Strong Poison*, 1930), DLS tried to ‘kill off’ Wimsey (she was heartily sick of him) by having him marry. In the event, she created a situation which could not be neatly disposed of in a chapter. As she told Eustace Barton in a letter:

I could not marry Peter off to the young woman he had ... rescued from death and infamy, because I could find no form of words in which she could accept him without loss of self-respect. I had landed my chief two puppets in a situation where, according to all the conventional rules of detective fiction, they should have had nothing to do but fall into one another’s arms; but they would not do it, and that it was in every respect false and degrading; and the puppets had somehow got just so much flesh and blood in them that I could not force them to accept it without shocking myself. (letter, 7.05.1928)

In *Strong Poison*, Wimsey falls in love with a woman, Harriet Vane, who is tried for murder (and acquitted). Throughout the novel and two further novels their relationship develops and Wimsey’s character also develops in this context. In the middle of writing these three novels, DLS wrote *NT*. Commentators have observed that in *NT* Wimsey acquires “a soul” (McGregor & Lewis, 2000, p.81), that he is given depth and understanding allowing him to be acceptable to Harriet Vane (Kenney, 1990); and that an honest relationship can be built out of their encounter with each other (DLS, 1935). In *NT*, in which Harriet Vane has no part at all, Wimsey is not ‘put in his place’. Rather, he is taken out of his familiar surroundings and his material comforts and placed in a shabby Norfolk rectory, surrounded by ‘Looking-Glass’ country and a spiritual landscape that baffles and defies his secular attempts at rational thought.

## *The Spiritual Landscape of NT*

Every land and every sea  
Have I crossed, but much the worst  
Is the land of Norfolk cursed.  
That the land is poor and bad  
I the clearest proof have had  
If you plant the choicest wheat  
Tares and darnel you will meet.  
Satan on the road to Hell  
Ruined Norfolk as he fell. (Anon. 12<sup>th</sup> C)

From the first, Wimsey is taken out of the world with which he is most familiar. He wrecks his car on New Year's Eve and must make his way on foot. Although he has his manservant, Bunter, with him as evidence of his life of comfort, both Wimsey and Bunter must make do with what they find, which is a church and a down-at-heel rectory in the middle of the Fens of East Anglia:

As [Wimsey] spoke, the sound of a church clock, muffled by the snow, came borne upon the wind; it chimed the first quarter.

'Thank God!' said Wimsey. 'Where there is a church, there is civilisation.' (*NT*, p.10)

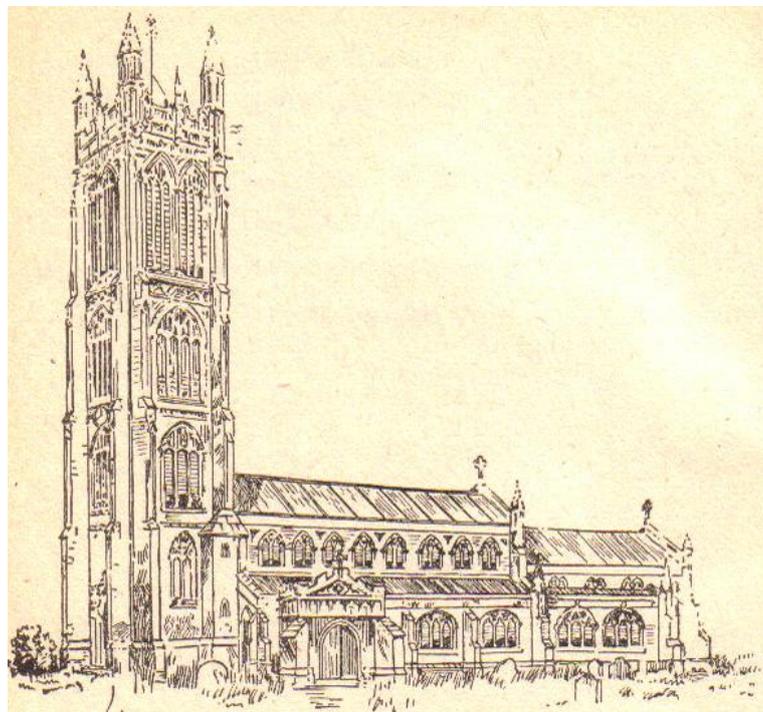
Wimsey, a child of the late Victorian/Edward age, with a conventional upbringing, understands Christianity and its rituals but he is not a practising Christian in any real sense. He may sometimes attend church services but, unlike his creator, he does not hold strong Christian beliefs. He is welcomed into the rectory by the rector and his wife. These two characters, Theodore and Agnes Venables, are affectionate portraits of DLS's parents (Kenney, 1990; Reynolds, 1993; McGregor and Lewis, 2000; Coomes, 1992), hard working, committed to the parish and far from grand. The church, however, is less shabby (see Figure 6.3), soaring above the fenland landscape with a tower of one hundred and twenty-eight feet and boasting a full 'ring' of eight bells.<sup>80</sup> On

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<sup>80</sup> Change-ringing, or campanology, involves the ringing of differently sized and tuned bells to produce various notes in patterns that form mathematical sequences. Originating in England, it is also practised in former colonies such as Australia, U.S.A. and Canada. The art of change-ringing usually involves between six and eight bell-ringers, each of whom stand at the bottom of the tower, pulling the sallies, or ropes, in sequence. The room in which the change-ringers stand is well below the bell chamber as the noise in the bell chamber itself is deafening. The plot of *NT* turns on the ringing of the bells and much more. The coded messages leading to the hiding place of a stolen necklace is written out as a peal, or sequence of bell ringing. One bell takes the lead and is 'hunted' by the other bells that follow it. Each of the chapter titles draws

New Year's Eve, the change-ringers of the parish intend to ring in the New Year with "no less than fifteen thousand, eight hundred and forty Kent Treble Bob Majors" (*NT*, p.17) which will take nine hours. Wimsey is called in to take the place of Will Thoday, who is ill.

As the New Year peal begins, the bells take centre stage (see Figure 6.4). They remain there throughout the novel. They are named. They are treated as characters, as agents of events, as the 'mouths of God' as they are sometimes known. The following passage, one of many in the novel concerning the bells, is the reader's introduction to them in full voice:



**Figure 6.3.** Fenchurch St. Paul, designed by W.J. Redhead and used as a frontispiece for *NT*.

The bells gave tongue: Gaude, Sabaoth, John, Jericho, Jubilee, Dimity, Batty Thomas and Tailor Paul, rioting and exulting high up in the dark tower, wide mouths rising and falling, brazen tongues clamouring, huge wheels turning to the dance of the leaping ropes. Tin tan din dan bim bam bom bo - tan tin din dan bam bim bom bo - tan dan tin bam ... every bell in her place striking tuneably, hunting up, hunting down, dodging, snapping, laying her blows behind, making her thirds and fourths, working down to lead the dance again. Out over the flat, white wastes of the fen, over the spear-straight, steel-dark dykes and the wind-bent, groaning poplar trees, bursting from the snow-

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on campanological terms, for example, "Dodging", "The Slow Work" and "Lord Peter is called into the Hunt".

choked louvres of the belfry, whirled away southward and westward in gusty blasts of clamour to the sleeping counties went the music of the bells - little Gaude, silver Sabaoth, strong John and Jericho, glad Jubilee, sweet Dimity and old Batty Thomas, with great Tailor Paul bawling and striding like a giant in the midst of them. Up and down went the shadows of the ringers upon the walls, up and down went the scarlet sallies flickering roofwards and floorwards, and up and down, hunting in their courses went the bells of Fenchurch St. Paul.” (NT, p.39)

DLS’s depiction of the noise of the bells ringing out over the flat, snowy landscape has the bells firmly at the centre of the action. As it turns out, they are in the process of sending Deacon, tied up in the bell tower, to his death. Towards the end of the novel Wimsey ascends the bell tower to look out over the landscape.



Figure 6.4 Detail of bell and cage (Collins, 2007, p.92)

Unaware that he is up there, the bell ringers start to ring a peal, warning the villagers of the flood and Wimsey, deafened and momentarily stunned by the noise, discovers how Deacon has died:

The belfry heaved and wheeled about him as the bells dipped and swung within the reach of an outstretched hand. Mouth up, mouth down, they brawled with their tongues of bronze, and

through it all that shrill, high, sweet, relentless note went stabbing and shivering. (*NT*, p.344)

Wimsey eventually makes it onto the roof and out of the bell chamber, his nose and ears bleeding, to gaze over the flooded landscape. Throughout the novel when the bells are ringing, they are both rejoicing and menacing. They exult and yet they warn. One of the characters in the novel finds the silent upturned bells eerie, commenting that he expected “all the time for them to speak” (*NT*, p.317). For Wimsey, the intimations of the transience of life are stronger in this narrative than they are in any of the other novels. Not since the Great War has Wimsey been so confronted with his own mortality. The continuity of the ancient church and its bells, ringing out of the landscape, highlights the presence of God, not simply in material form in the church building but through its symbolism. The roof has large angels carved on its beams. Sitting in the church for the New Year’s Eve service, Wimsey encounters the angel roof for the first time:

there mounting to the steep pitch of the roof, his eyes were held entranced with wonder and delight. Incredibly aloof, flinging back the light in a dusky shimmer of bright hair and gilded outspread wings, soared the ranked angels, cherubim and seraphim, choir over choir, from corbel and hammerbeam, floating face to face uplifted. (*NT*, p.36)

The roof is depicted as supernatural, with the angels watching over the congregation, seeing all, with their eyes and mouths permanently open (see Figure 6.5 for an example of an angel roof from the area). The whole fabric of the church, including the bell tower is portrayed, like the angel roof and the bells, as alive, sometimes exultant, sometimes forbidding. One of the minor characters, Cranton, a criminal connection of Deacon’s, says:

‘Every time I see a church tower now it gives me the jim-jams. I’m done with religion, I am, and if ever I go inside a church-door again, you can take and put me in Broadmoor.’ (*NT*, p.287)<sup>81</sup>

It is interesting, too, how this character and Wimsey are both wary and uncomfortable in this setting, if for different reasons. Just as Wimsey rails

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<sup>81</sup> Broadmoor is a prison/asylum for the criminally insane.

against the landscape when his car runs into a ditch, so does Cranton when he has a similar accident while travelling on foot:

the rain was something cruel. And it's a hell of a country. Ditches and bridges all over the place. ... I missed my footing and rolled down the bank into a ditch full of water. Cold? It was like an ice-bath. (NT, p.286)

Wimsey, like Cranton, is “dwarfed by his surroundings and subjected to the torments of the seasons” (Kenney,1990, p.69). Here, in this setting, his wealth and status count for very little. His class may be recognised but that is all and it seems to be of little account to most of the inhabitants of the village.



**Figure 6.5** The roof of St. Wendreda's Church, March, Cambridgeshire, on which the angel roof of Fenchurch St. Paul is modelled. (Collins, 2007, p.93)

He is, as Kenney (1990, p.69) points out, “rendered childlike” in his relationship with the Venables; “he thankfully shares their oxtail stew and courteously helps Mrs. Venables with chores in the parish”. In Fenchurch St. Paul, Wimsey encounters a world where the spiritual has the upper hand. Brunsdale (1990,p.205) comments that “*The Nine Tailors* throws the pride he [Wimsey]

took in his brilliant detection and throws it back in his face, making him pay for it in body and spirit.”

The material manifestation of Christianity and spirituality, the church, provides sanctuary, not only for Deacon, Wimsey or Cranton but for the inhabitants of the village when, (with DLS writing in deliberately biblical terms) “for fourteen days and nights the Wale River ran backward in its bed and the floods stood in the land” (*NT*, p.347). Theodore Venables literally gathers his flock into the church, where they remain until the flood waters recede. Betjeman, writing about churches in 1938 called English churches “islands of calm in the seething roar of what we now call civilization” (p.234). Drawing on watery symbolism, Betjeman remarked that English churches are “not backwaters ... but strongholds.” Sayers also draws on this imagery, giving the church a central role as a place of refuge and comfort in time of flood. Outside, the waters rage and Will Thoday drowns trying to save a friend caught in the flood. In an echo of George Eliot’s *The Mill On the Floss* (1860), tragedy manifests itself as redemption, or, as DLS writes, the Fen reclaims “its own” (*NT*, p.345). Weighed down by his inadvertent responsibility for Deacon’s death, Thoday manages to redeem himself by trying to save the life of another.

Wimsey, shocked and stunned by his own brush with death after being caught in the bell tower during the peal, descends the tower and although he can hear what is happening, he is not within the church itself. He is caught, on the stair, listening to the Rector praying with the flood survivors at Evensong:

The Rector’s voice, musical and small, came floating up, past the wings of the floating cherubim:

‘Lighten our darkness ...’ (*NT*, p.346)

The full prayer is:

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is an ancient prayer, one that is used at both Evensong and Compline, the last office or prayer service of the day. It would have been well-known to the

British reading public at the time of the book's publication. The Anglican Church, at this time, despite a decline in attendance, still played a central role in the life of rural villages; and, since church and state are not separate as they are elsewhere (Kenney, 1990, p.74), the portrayal of the church reflects its place as a social institution as well as its role in spiritual and religious institutional matters. The image of Wimsey, not one of the congregation taking refuge and seeking comfort but listening on the stairs, is heightened by the context of the 'noises off'. While there is no effort on the part of the community to exclude him, Wimsey is not at home in any sense. Despite the warmth of the Venables, Wimsey and Bunter are alien. Bunter, a reasonably rounded character so far forgets his Jeeves-like imperturbability to become angry with Emily, the rectory servant, when she inadvertently tampers with evidence.<sup>82</sup> He is clearly unhappy in these surroundings too; the urban Bunter and the wide, flat vistas with their abundance of sky and treacherous weather conditions, do not seem compatible.

The wide, open spaces of the fenland landscape and the "spacious world" (Kenney, 1990, p.79) of *NT* offer DLS the opportunity to explore the Christian spirituality that was so deeply held by her, but it also reflects the regional spirituality of the landscape, the "solidity and certainty of hundreds of churches ... bastions of religious expression, representing continuity and remembrance" (Earwaker & Becker, 1998, p.11). These churches, with their large towers, sit in the "stoical" landscape, among the "fierce winds and scouring tides," representing the long and contentious religious history of the area: Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, the heretics (Tanner, 1977) and the "writing rectors" (Earwaker & Becker, 1998, p.11), such as Parson Woodforde. The continuity of religious worship permeates the pages of *NT*; the history of the Fens and its inhabitants resonates throughout the narrative, linking church, landscape and people.

It is no mistake that in the novel there are also echoes of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1942, fp. 1922), since all symbolism and references to other texts

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<sup>82</sup> DLS was, in general, rather sketchy in the creation of domestic servants and had a tendency to stereotype, often making servants into gormless or comic characters. She does, however, provide a more intricate portrait of a college servant in *Gaudy Night*. Bunter, however, demonstrates the crossover of the 'retainer', where lines become slightly blurred between employer and servant (Light, 2008). Bunter is guardian, a friend of sorts and the one person, until the advent of Vane, Wimsey's future wife, who knows him intimately.

are conscious choices. Eliot explored his own spirituality in his poetry, and his work contemplates various aspects of spiritual life and the theology of mystery and revelation.<sup>83</sup> DLS likewise explores the “persistent tension” in Christianity between the “local and universal dimensions of place”, the fact that place is both “*this, here and now*” and at the same time a pointer to “elsewhere” (Sheldrake, 2001, p.61). Foucault calls this ‘heterotopia’ (Lane, 2004, p.145), a location that has “a capacity to represent several different sites in one place” (Sheldrake, 2001, p.100).

There is the regional aspect of the landscape and its inhabitants, the social world it contains, the state-church institutional practice and the spiritual dimension, manifested in material form through the church and the bells. In exploring the spiritual dimensions of this place, DLS is presenting theological themes while also pursuing their meaning. She is asking questions “about the function of place in the formation of spiritual identity” (Lane, 2004, p.145). And yet, ‘this place’ is her creation, drawn from a childhood landscape, her own research and a creative endeavour to write a “poetic romance”.

*The Nine Tailors* was a shot at combining detection with poetic romance and was, I think, pretty nearly right, except that Peter himself remained, as it were, extraneous to the story and untouched by its spiritual conflicts. This was correct practice for a detective hero, but not for the hero of a novel of manners. (DLS, 1937, p.77)

Although Wimsey does try to puzzle out some of the “spiritual conflicts”, he remains largely untouched by them, if somewhat mystified. DLS was also concerned with “lived religious experience” (Harde, 2006, p.56), the experience of suffering, of worship - the narrative follows the church calendar - of lives lived within the Christian tradition. *NT* is an exploration of the “place of religion”, a recognition of how “the religious and the spiritual were and are

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<sup>83</sup> Many of the images and phrases DLS uses in *NT* echo Eliot. Below is an example of his imagery and its Christian symbolism (here, the torture and crucifixion of Christ). There are also echoes of the DLS’s descriptions of the bells:

After the frosty silence in the gardens  
After the agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and place and reverberation  
He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying.  
(Eliot, 1922, v. 325)

central to the *everyday* lives of vast numbers of people” (Holloway & Valins, 2002, p.5). Wimsey and his rationalist thinking lose their ‘place’ in this landscape.

DLS included other perspectives (Harde, 2006, p.51) through the writing of the landscape as a spiritual one: Wimsey’s unbelief, Deacon’s exploitation of goodness, Bunter’s and Cranton’s unfamiliar presence and perplexity within the setting. When the funeral for Deacon takes place after Easter, Wimsey, sitting among the congregation, muses on belief, questioning Christian dogma:

what does old Donne say? ‘God knows in what part of the world every grain of every man’s dust lies ... He whispers, he hisses, he beckens [sic] for the bodies of his saints’ ... do all these people believe that? Do I? Does anybody? We all take it pretty placidly, don’t we? ‘In a flash, at a trumpet crash, this Jack, this joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond is - immortal diamond.’<sup>84</sup> Did the old boys who made that amazing roof believe? Or did they just make those wide wings [of the angels] and adoring hands for fun, because they liked the pattern? At any rate, they made them *look* as though they believed something, and that’s where they have us beat. (NT, p.119)

DLS’s imaginative interrogation of spirituality in this setting is deeply personal and yet open to the wider manifestations of communal worship and belief. So while DLS’s writing is “rooted in the particular”, it is also rooted in the past and in Christianity as lived in the present. DLS sees this particular community as part of a wider belief, a shared spirituality. There is a sacred geography (Ball, 2002, p.462) being explored in the novel that, while not intended as universal, mirrors a wider community in the smaller one of Fenchurch St. Paul. The material manifestation of Christianity, the ancient church, its bells and worship, is shaped by and itself shapes a religious tradition (Ball, 2002,p.462). This is not merely “locating memories in space” (2002, p.463) but a form of place-making, an imaginative process that is both cultural and spiritual (and yet the spiritual owes much to the cultural and vice versa in this context). DLS is exploring the “ideas and practices” involved in the accomplishment of that place-making (Basso, 1996,p.7). Yes. She is privileging the Christian viewpoint above others, as all theological writings by believers (creative, imaginative or not) must do in explorations of faith and practice. Just as Native American nations articulate a

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<sup>84</sup> This is a quote from Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire* (1918).

spirituality of place, a spiritual geography (Norris, 2001) that is particular to their belief system, so do Christians, their place-making informed by revelation: “We did not make this up. This is how it was *given to us*.” (Lane, 2002, p.467).

Place-making in any spiritual sense cannot be articulated merely as cultural construction by an author whose religious sensibilities lie at the heart of her writing, although there is no doubt that the process of place-making in a religious context relies heavily on cultural construction. The rootedness of the community in *NT* can, of course, be exposed as a narrative of cultural construction and of dominance: of state and church over individuals, but this would be both simplistic and dismissive of DLS’s aims for the work. One could position the village, its inhabitants and its church as a microcosm of a singular ‘imperial’ structure but to do so would be to ignore the continual and overt insistence of the author on a multi-dimensional world, where perspective is distorted and where there is a strong sense of both here and ‘elsewhere’. The “metaphysical underpinnings” (Ball, 2002, p.475) of the Christian belief system move beyond the cultural when expressed by those who are committed to it:

Explaining cultures according to analyses that are not their own may help in producing an intellectual explanation of cultural practices, but it does not necessarily help to shed light on how the members of the culture themselves conceive of such issues. (Ball, 2002, p.475)<sup>85</sup>

For DLS, the landscape of *NT* is symbolised through water and reflections, the ‘Looking-Glass Country’ where there are other dimensions than a simply physical manifestation of ‘here’ and ‘now’. ‘Here’ is the Fens, a place of suffering, mirrored in the suffering of the inhabitants. Throughout the narrative, people are ill, they die and they experience the suffering of guilt and the need for expiation. This is reflected in the wider dimensions of the suffering of Jesus Christ, the middle section of the novel taking place at Easter; his suffering, for Christians, is seen as salvation for humankind.

The biblical overtones of the flood and the flooded landscape which leaves the ark of the church in the centre of the watery Fens symbolises sanctuary and

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<sup>85</sup> Ball’s discussion of Apache culture and spirituality also explores visionary topology (Irwin, 1994), the ways in which the Apache understand places to be “spiritually charged”, possessing their own agency and power (2002, p.465).

salvation. Will Thoday's attempt to save the life of his friend is a redemptive act and even Wimsey experiences redemption of a sort in the narrative, being humbled by both the surroundings and the bigger picture drawn with such care and generosity by Theodore Venables. There is a "moral" landscape to be encountered within the spiritual, that which acknowledges an 'appropriate' morality (Setten, 2004). In its most extreme form, that morality is understood in relation to the sanctity of life and the property of others. More subtly, the moral landscape throws up a conundrum for Wimsey: his investigations into Deacon's death have exposed Will and Mary Thoday to distress and suffering. Wimsey subsequently seeks counsel of Theodore Venables on the subject:

'So I think I had better go,' said Wimsey. 'I rather wish I hadn't come buttin' into this. Some things may be better left alone, don't you think? My sympathies are all in the wrong place and I don't like it. I know all about not doing evil that good may come. It's doin' good that evil may come that is so embarrassin'.' (NT, p.271)

The Rector will have none of it.

'My dear boy,' said the Rector, 'it does not do for us to take too much thought for the morrow. It is better to follow the truth and leave the result in the hand of God. He can foresee where we cannot, because he knows all the facts.'

'...Well, padre, I daresay you're right. ... I've got that silly modern squeamishness that doesn't like watchin' people suffer.' (NT, p.271)

There is a difference between the values held by the two men. Wimsey does not truly subscribe to the Rector's viewpoint, and his 'modern squeamishness' cannot square the Thodays' suffering and exposure with his search for the truth.

*DLS: theologian, Christian writer and woman*

DLS's own search for the truth took her in a different direction just a few years after the creation of *NT*. She became a religious playwright and was commissioned to write plays for various festivals throughout England in the post-war years. She left writing detective fiction behind as she explored another area of her life and one that became increasingly important to her, the Christian

faith. Her understanding of Jesus Christ from the scriptures was one she tackled in various ways, culminating in her controversial series of plays for the BBC, *The Man Born to Be King* (1943) in which Christ was given lines to speak that were not directly taken from the Bible. DLS had already written about Christ with robust forthrightness. In her essay, *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged* (1938), DLS articulated her understanding of Christ:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore - on the contrary; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended Him as a fit household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies. To those who knew Him, however, He in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; *they* objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand. True, He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as 'that fox'; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a 'gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners'; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth or social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humour that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb. He was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. (1938, pp. 15-17).

DLS's robust and often earthy vision of Christ and Christianity was accompanied by a strong intellectual and scholarly interrogation of the dogma, divinity and mystery of Christian theology. In 1942, DLS completed the above-mentioned cycle of plays, *The Man Born to be King*. An additional controversy was that the other characters, including the apostles, were given British regional accents rather than the received pronunciation, sometimes known (erroneously and quite ridiculously) as 'no accent', or, as DLS put it, in voices that were "plummy". She wrote to James Welch of the BBC:

nobody, not even Jesus, must be allowed to ‘talk Bible’ ... [The play] must be made to appear as real as possible, and above all ... Jesus should be presented as a human being and not like a sort of symbolic figure doing nothing but preach in elegant periods. (Reynolds, 1993, p.319)

DLS indicates in her ‘Notes to the Producer’ for the plays the sort of characterisation that she wants for the apostles and other characters, down to the accents they should use. DLS was asked to read a few extracts from the plays prior to their broadcast, as advance publicity. One of the scenes she chose, in which Philip is cheated of six drachmas, has Matthew telling Philip that he has been “had for a sucker”. As Reynolds (1993, p.321) comments, “this was jam for the journalists”. It caused an uproar. The press went to town, pamphlets were produced by various Christian groups condemning the plays and asking people to boycott them, and questions were asked in the House of Commons. DLS received letters of abuse accusing her of heresy. Sticking to her guns, she insisted that the plays be broadcast as she had written them. She was probably quite pleased that there had been some publicity for them because it meant that people would listen to the plays, if only for the shock value. As it turned out, the plays were an incredible success. I have spoken to several people who listened to them as children and young adults when they were first broadcast, and every one of them has said that the plays transformed their understanding of Christianity.<sup>86</sup>

All of which is key to understanding how DLS portrayed spirituality and religion in *NT*. Although it was some years later that she was to write *The Man Born to be King*, there is a resolute commitment to Christian spirituality both in the later plays and in *NT*. The particular form of this commitment to Christianity also led her to challenge the Anglican Church on its attitude to women. In an essay entitled ‘The Human-Not-Quite-Human’, DLS refers to the New Testament of the Bible to point out that the church and society were at odds with Christ’s own attitude to women:

God, of course, may have His own opinion [on women] but the [Anglican] Church is reluctant to endorse it. I have never heard a sermon preached on the story of Martha and Mary that did not

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<sup>86</sup> At the time of writing, the BBC is once again under pressure, not for its religious broadcasting but over the content and language used by Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross on Radio 2. In light of this, it may seem inconceivable that such a fuss was made of the religious plays of DLS.

attempt, somehow, somewhere, to explain away its text.<sup>87</sup> Mary's, of course, was the better part - the Lord said so, and we must not precisely contradict Him. But we will be careful not to despise Martha. No doubt He approved of her too. ... Martha was doing a really feminine job, whereas Mary was just behaving like any other disciple, male or female; and that is a hard pill to swallow.

Perhaps it is no wonder that women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man - there never has been such another. A prophet and a teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronised; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as 'The women, God help us!' or 'The ladies, God bless them!'; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously; who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unself-conscious. There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words and deeds of Jesus that there was anything 'funny' about women's nature.

But we might easily deduce it from His contemporaries, and from His prophets before Him, and from His Church to this day. (DLS, 1946, pp.121, 122)

Despite her claim not to be a feminist (1946), DLS, seen through the lens of contemporary feminism, was a feminist. The reason she chose not to be identified with the feminist movement was because of ideas associated with the word. She believed that "women cannot be bundled up into a single class who think and act the same way on everything" (Percy, 2006, p.336). DLS believed in equality and the right of the individual to develop as a human being according to her/his interests and talents. She wrote essays on the subject of the equality of women and her fiction is inhabited by women who are the equal of men, who work and who remain happily single (Simeone & Perriam, 2004). She commented that "we [society] will use women's work in wartime (though we

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<sup>87</sup> Mary and Martha were two sisters and friends of Jesus. When he came to their house, Martha went to the kitchen to prepare food and drink, while Mary sat with Jesus, listened to him and asked questions. Martha, quite cross at not having Mary's help, challenges Jesus about Mary's 'idleness'. Jesus comforts Martha and counsels her not to fret over things, replying that Mary has "chosen the better part" (Luke 10:38-42). It is a contentious reading, one that challenges conceived notions of women's roles. It unfortunately sets up a binary, in which women are sometimes referred to as *either* Marthas *or* Marys.

will pay less for it, and take it away from them when the war is over)” (1946, p.121). She is generally credited with having written the first feminist detective novel and, while charges of snobbery regarding her creation of Wimsey are valid, her views on the right of all women to do work that they find fulfilling and enjoyable are also valid.

Born in 1893, DLS received an education that was far from the norm for her contemporaries (see Box 6.2). She attended Somerville College, Oxford between 1912 and 1916 at a time when women who had read for undergraduate degrees were not awarded them (DLS had to wait until 1920 to be awarded hers). Despite later admission to degrees, whatever their scholastic achievement, women still had to wait for the men. Vera Brittain, a contemporary of DLS at Somerville, remarked that there had been “the establishment of a precedent, destined to continue for several years, by which all men were admitted to degrees, however minor, before all women, however impressive” (Leonardi, 1989, p.47). As well as the geographic isolation (both the siting of the colleges and the restriction of women to only a few of the colleges when so many were open to men) of the women students at Oxford there was also the intellectual isolation. Women students were frequently pilloried in Oxford publications and often ignored or dismissed by staff.

Coming down from Oxford, DLS worked at a variety of jobs in Oxford (for Blackwell), France and Hull before settling in London. During this time she had published poetry and translations. Initially unemployed in London, she wrote her first detective novel, *Whose Body?*, shortly after which she found work as an advertising copywriter. At this time she had an affair with another writer, John Cournos. She later skewered Cournos and their relationship in her novel *Strong Poison* (1930). DLS then had an affair with Bill White, a motor mechanic. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son, John Anthony but White left her when he found she was carrying his child. She told almost nobody about her child, who was fostered with a cousin and later ‘adopted’ by DLS.

After her death, friends were astonished to learn that she had a child (Reynolds, 2007). In 1926, DLS married Mac Fleming, who was a journalist of sorts. He had suffered from gas poisoning during the Great War. Initially happy, the marriage

became a struggle for DLS and at the time of writing *NT*, she was thinking of leaving her husband (Reynolds, 1993).<sup>88</sup>

#### Box 6.2

##### DOROTHY LEIGH SAYERS

was born at Oxford on 13th June 1893, the only child of the Rev. Henry Sayers and Helen Sayers (née Leigh). Her father was at the time headmaster of Christ Church Cathedral School, Oxford. “She was brought up at Bluntisham Rectory, Cambridgeshire, and went to the Godolphin School, Salisbury, where she won a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford. In 1915 she graduated with first class honours in modern languages.” \*

She then went on to work for Blackwells, the Oxford publishers. She also worked with “her Oxford friend Eric Whelpton at L'École des Roches in Normandy, and from 1922 until 1931 served as copywriter at the London advertising firm of Bensons.” DLS worked on the Guinness advertising campaign, coining the phrase, “Guinness is good for you” and inventing the rhyme that brought the Toucan into Guinness advertising. She was later to reject the advertising world and its ethos.

In 1923 she published her first novel, *Whose Body?*. “She also wrote four other novels in collaboration and two serial stories for broadcasting. Writing full time she rose to be the doyen of crime writers and in due course president of the Detection Club.”\* Her work was widely varied and included poetry, the editing of collections and introductions on detective fiction as well as translations of poetry, her most famous translation being Dante's *Inferno*. DLS was also a religious playwright, her most famous play being *The Man Born to Be King* (1943). “She admired E C Bentley and G K Chesterton and numbered among her friends T S Eliot, Charles Williams and C S Lewis.” \* DLS devoted herself to her work, writing with passion and dedication. She believed that “the only Christian work is work well done” and that “the only sin passion can commit is to be joyless” \*

After an affair with the author John Cournos, DLS had a relationship with Bill White, a motor mechanic, who left her when she became pregnant. DLS, working at this time for Bensons as a copywriter went into a private nursing home to have her son, John Anthony. He was brought up by a cousin of DLS, Ivy Shrimpton. DLS later ‘adopted’ him and he took the name of Fleming. DLS had married Arthur ‘Mac’ Fleming in 1926. They lived most of their married life in Witham, Essex.

DLS stopped writing detective fiction when the second World War broke out, turning her attention to religious plays and the translation of Dante's *Inferno*. She died in 1957.

\*<http://www.sayers.org.uk/dorothy.html>

DLS was also busy with extended family, looking after ageing aunts and her husband who suffered not only from liver trouble but “nerves” as DLS put it (Reynolds, 1993, p.243). DLS's mother had not long died (1929) and the author

<sup>88</sup> Bourdier's assessment of the marriage does not acknowledge the strain of the relationship on DLS. His patronising comment is that despite the difficulties, DLS was ‘humanised’ by her marriage to Fleming (“*malgré les difficultés at éclats 'humeur divers, cette union avait largement contribué à 'humaniser' la creatrice de Lord Peter*”, (1996, p.130)

continued to be the breadwinner for her extended family. Her relationship with Mac was not good at this point:

He was married to a brilliant and increasingly successful wife. He himself had talents ... but he was out of work and earning almost nothing. It was a classic situation. He bitterly resented being pointed out as the husband of Dorothy L. Sayers. He took petty revenge by making things difficult for her, insisting that meals always be punctual (he had long ago given up doing the cooking) ... He took consolation in whisky and this was often a problem. She took to writing late in the night in order to find uninterrupted time. He further distressed her by deferring his promise to adopt her son. (Reynolds, 1993, p.243).

On the one hand, we have the professional writer, working hard to meet deadlines and fulfil contracts, and on the other we have a woman who must see to the needs of her family, put off work in order to placate others, fill expected roles, manage the household, see to the bills, both earning the money to pay them and the actual paying of them while acting within the role of wife, daughter, mother, niece and so on. Such expectations and cultural practices have long been effective in excluding women from public life, and they have been effective in silencing women in other spheres (Evans, 1987; Tinkler, 2000; Turner, 1994; Olsen, 1993), including the creative arts.

The right of women to work and to be treated equally is something that exercised DLS throughout her life. She wrote several essays on the status of women while her fiction is firmly grounded in an interrogation of women's status. In *NT*, there appears the minor character of Hilary Thorpe, an adolescent said to be a younger incarnation of DLS. Her discussions with Wimsey centre on her choice of career and the expectations of family. Hilary Thorpe wants to become a writer, to study at university, articulating a clear desire for a career and an education while her guardian wants her to marry a rich man. In *Gaudy Night* (1935), set in Oxford at a women's college, one of the central themes is the status of women both within education and in the wider world.

*Strong Poison* (1930) ushers in a host of women who are clever, creative, hardworking and for the most part, single and leading fulfilled lives (Simeone & Perriam, 2004). Wimsey, in discussion with some of Harriet Vane's friends in the course of the novel is describing Harriet's relationship with her (now dead)

former lover. Harriet, a moderately successful novelist, had been earning more than her lover, Philip Boyes:

‘No, there never was much money, except what Harriet made. The ridiculous public didn’t appreciate Phil Boyes [in his view]. He couldn’t forgive her for that, you know.’

‘Didn’t it come in useful?’

‘Of course, but he resented it all the same. She ought to have been ministering to his work, not making money for them both with her own independent trash. But that’s men all over.’

‘You haven’t much opinion of us, what?’

‘I’ve known too many borrowers,’ said Eiluned Price, ‘and too many that wanted their hands held. All the same, the women are just as bad, or they wouldn’t put up with it. Thank heaven, I’ve never borrowed and never lent - except to women and they pay back.’

‘People who work hard usually do pay back, I fancy,’ said Wimsey, ‘- except geniuses.’

‘Women geniuses don’t get coddled,’ said Miss Price, grimly, ‘so they learn not to expect it.’ (DLS, 1930, p.65)

DLS was echoing here her relationship with Cournos. The affair had ended leaving DLS hurt and frustrated but her words could apply equally to the later relationship with Mac Fleming.

DLS understood very clearly the ways in which women are silenced. She was a well published and publicised novelist, a broadcaster, playwright and lay theologian. She had a full public life, so it may seem odd to talk about the silencing of DLS, a visible and public person, a formidable debater and speaker. There were those who found her fiction unspeakable. Yet they made strenuous efforts to denigrate it and to turn the reading public against her work. Leavis, as mentioned earlier, railed against DLS as an author for her pretensions to literary fiction (as Leavis saw it). Orwell condemned her (Clune et al., 1997) work, finding it middlebrow and a waste of time. Chandler called her work “arid”, according to Watson (1979).

In the case of DLS, it is clear that there was and is a practice of relegating her fiction to the corner marked ‘pretentious fiction by women aspiring to Greater Things’ or the ‘middlebrow and therefore not really up to scratch’ section of the bookshelf, where most fiction by women is placed. But DLS was either not paying attention or she was defiant, because she then broke the rules in her religious play, *The Man Born to be King*. So vociferous were her opponents and so keen to suppress the work (thereby silencing DLS) that questions were asked in the House of Commons and there were bids to have the BBC withdraw the play.

Was this because, as discussed earlier, the material was so controversial (regional accents and Christ being given ‘lines’)? Was it because she was not clergy and therefore had no authority to write such a thing? Or was it because she was a woman? The two latter questions can effectively be treated as one because, as a woman, DLS could *not* have belonged to the clergy even had she desired it. Women were excluded from being ordained priests in the Anglican church at that time, and so DLS committed two sins: she was both a layperson and a woman, could not be anything but a layperson because she *was* a woman.<sup>89</sup> Controversial as the work itself may have been, its authorship was firmly implicated in both its production and in the attempts to suppress it.

### *Conclusion*

While there were no attempts to suppress *NT*, the novel attracted some criticism for its endeavour to be ‘literary’ in style. The criticism crosses lines of gender and genre, both becoming blurred, so closely are they linked. In this novel, the theme of women and a space in which to write is featured, as it is in *Hostages to Fortune*, *A Charmed Circle*, and *High Rising*. Hilary Thorpe, a young woman who hopes to write and to attend university, is a portrait of the young DLS. The expectations of her guardian do not match her own ambitions. For

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<sup>89</sup> In the Anglican church in England (but not in Scotland), women may become priests but they are still barred from becoming bishops. One member of the female clergy told me of a time when she was mildly asserting her right to a full life in the church and was asked by a member of the male clergy where she had picked up her “bad ass lady cop” attitude. Rees (2000) and Ward (2008) explore attitudes to women and their role in the church in some depth in their work, which are two of a number of texts on the subject. The situation in DLS’s lifetime may have changed since but only so far and, it seems, no further. In Roman Catholicism, women are barred completely from being ordained as priests.

DLS in her own life at the time of writing, carving out a space in which to write was becoming increasingly difficult as her husband's demands grew and her responsibilities for family members increased. She wrote at night, trying to make space and time within the domestic space, to continue her career (upon which she and others depended materially).

In the writing of *NT* DLS wanted the work to be something more than a detective novel. She called it a 'labour of love'. The novel is closely woven with her lifeworld: her childhood, her spirituality, her professional life and her family. These threads are all present in the landscape of the Fens, in the middle of which sits the soaring and ancient building of the church, in which so much of DLS's life was embedded. The bells, a feature of the setting, are a labour of love in themselves. DLS worked hard on the technicalities and, true to her hermeneutic training, invested them with symbolism and connections with landscape, life and liturgy.

While the novel is firmly set within a regional landscape, that landscape also functions as an 'evocative landscape' (Philo, 2002), one in which DLS revisits her childhood. Primarily, though, the setting of *NT* is a spiritual landscape. DLS probes Christianity, her own spirituality and her heterotopic understanding of place: both 'here and now' and 'elsewhere'. She scours her faith much as the waters scour the countryside, scanning it, and scrutinising the meaning of redemption and salvation in human and divine terms.

In the examination of *NT*, its setting and its relationship to the lifeworld of DLS, some of the broader themes of this thesis come into play. The centrality of setting to the structure of the novel and its themes operate from the axes of the social, political, religious and cultural. Within the microcosm of village are larger themes of nationhood and identity, all filtered through the church, not merely the official site of worship but its manifestation in the lives and work of the Venables and the broader landscape of the Fens. The spiritual landscape, mirrored, reflected and distorted, disconcerts Wimsey who is 'out of place' in the setting. Nothing is quite what it seems. It is, as Kenney (1990, p.69) remarks, a meditation on "the riddle of the universe".

**Box 6.3****Major Works by Dorothy L. Sayers**

<i>Title</i>	<i>Year of Publication</i>	<i>Genre</i>
Op I	1916	Poetry
Catholic Tales and Christian Songs	1918	Poetry
Whose Body?	1923	Detective fiction
Clouds of Witness	1926	Detective fiction
Unnatural Death	1927	Detective fiction
The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club	1928	Detective fiction
Lord Peter Views the Body	1928	Detective fiction
Tristan in Brittany	1929	Translation
The Documents in the Case	1930	Detective fiction
Strong Poison	1930	Detective fiction
The Five Red Herrings	1931	Detective fiction
Have His Carcase	1932	Detective fiction
Hangman's Holiday	1933	Detective fiction
Murder Must Advertise	1933	Detective fiction
The Nine Tailors	1934	Detective fiction
Gaudy Night	1935	Detective fiction
Busman's Honeymoon	1937	Detective fiction
The Zeal of Thy House	1937	Religious drama
The Greatest Drama Ever Staged	1938	Religious essays

In the Teeth of the Evidence	1939	Detective fiction
The Mind of the Maker	1941	Religious essays
The Man Born to Be King	1943	Religious drama
The Just Vengeance	1946	Religious drama
Unpopular Opinions	1946	Essays
Creed or Chaos	1947	Religious essays

## 6.4

### Context

DLS often referred to political and cultural events as well as exploring the aftermath of the Great War in her fiction. She was forthright in her political opinions as well as in her religious convictions. She condemned the Treaty of Versailles and was scathing of what she saw as the lack of morals or ethics in the financial world. In some of her novels she depicts the consequences of financial mismanagement and double dealing.

<b>1934</b>
<b><i>Political and Other Events</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Birth rate reaches a “historically low point” in Britain as more women practise contraception=</li> <li>• The Unemployment Assistance Board introduces means testing for poor relief+</li> <li>• Scottish National Party founded+</li> <li>• Hitler purges Nazi party of opposition in ‘The night of the Long Knives’ +</li> <li>• Hitler becomes ‘Reichsführer’+</li> <li>• USSR admitted to League of Nations+</li> <li>• Stanley Baldwin takes over from Ramsay MacDonald as PM-</li> <li>• Radioactivity discovered-</li> <li>• Fascist and anti-Fascist demonstrations in Hyde Park, London-</li> <li>• Unemployed Hunger March#</li> <li>• 4,034 men in general executive positions in the Civil Service; 225 women in general executive positions^</li> <li>• 76 men in typing positions; 8,904 women in typing positions in the Civil Service^</li> </ul>
<b><i>Contemporary Culture</i></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Film: ‘The Man Who Knew too Much’ - Alfred Hitchcock+</li> <li>• Film: ‘The Scarlet Pimpernel’ - Alex Korda, st. Merle Oberon and Leslie Howard+</li> <li>• Film: ‘David Copperfield’ - George Cukor, st. W.C.Fields+</li> <li>• Film: ‘Triumph of the Will’ - Leni Reifenstahl’s film about the Nuremburg rallies+</li> <li>• Glyndebourne festival founded-</li> <li>• <i>Left Review</i> first published-</li> <li>• Benny Goodman’s swing orchestra established+</li> <li>• The ban on Joyce’s <i>Ulysses</i> is lifted in the USA+</li> </ul>

<b>Books Published</b>	
Agatha Christie, <i>Murder on the Orient Express</i> + J.B. Priestley, <i>English Journey</i> + James Hilton, <i>Goodbye Mr. Chips</i> + Jean Rhys, <i>Voyage in the Dark</i> + Dylan Thomas, <i>18 Poems</i> ~ Vera Brittain, <i>Poems of the War and After</i> Margery Allingham, <i>Death of a Ghost</i> Ngaio Marsh, <i>A Man Lay Dead</i> Dorothy Whipple, <i>They Knew Mr. Knight</i> Evelyn Waugh, <i>A Handful of Dust</i>	

### The Nobel Prize, 1934

Chemistry - Harold Clayton Urey

Physiology/Medicine - George Whipple, George Minot and William Murphy

Literature - Luigi Pirandello

Peace - Arthur Henderson

[http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/lists/1934.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/lists/1934.html) Last accessed 31.03.2010

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- = Thane, P. (2004), 'Girton Graduates: Earning and learning, 1920s to 1930s', Women's History Review, 13:3, 2004, pp.347-361.
- + Widdowson, P. (2004), The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and its Contexts, 1500-2000, Palgrave, Basingstoke, p.186



**Figure 6.6** An undated photograph of DLS when young. (Coomes, 1992)

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The Invaluable Mystery* and the politics of place<sup>90</sup>

We children of the nineteen-twenties and thirties didn't need to be told by our parents that the angel of death had been abroad throughout the land: We had almost heard the beating of his wings. (Adam-Smith, 1978, p.2)

'Ah, Morgiana!' said Ali Baba. 'what is this you show me? Explain the meaning.'

'I will,' replied Morgiana; 'do not excite the curiosity of our neighbours; for it is of great importance to keep this affair secret.' (Everyman, 1907, p.274)

Social relations are constructed spatially. Spatial relations are structured socially. The new geographical discourse. Geography matters. ... So does space, place. Coal resources. In mining towns where life is tough, where men are men, where shifts are long, where women's jobs are scarce, the meanings and possibilities of women's lives take on certain forms. Out in the bush, on the farms, away from the city, they take others. The interactions of individuals with their locality, with topography, with resources, with local economies, with distance, form distinctive multi-layered patterns across space. With each new layer, with each new shift, the parameters change and so do the outcomes. Canberra is not Wollongong is not Broken Hill is not Toorak is not Alice Springs is not Perth. Places make their mark. So do we. (Watson, 1989, p.7)

"This place is made by God: an invaluable mystery, it is without reproof". So begins Lesbia Harford's novel, *The Invaluable Mystery* (1987, p.19). The origin of the incongruous title remains itself a mystery, possibly a quotation linked to Harford's early Catholic upbringing.<sup>91</sup> Place in this novel reveals multiple geographical concerns. At its core, *The Invaluable Mystery* (TIM) is a domestic novel, following the life of Sally (Gisela) Putman, a young woman in her twenties. Sally's life at the 'wrong' end of the middle class Sydney suburb of Mosman is substantially within its limits, from the tram stop to the ferry wharf and the itinerant labourer's camp at Chinaman's Bend. Set during the Great War, the novel was written between 1921 and 1924 (see Box 7.1 for a plot summary).

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<sup>90</sup> The 'politics of place' is part of a title of the literary biography of another writer, Christina Stead (Blake, 1999), who was also a socialist activist. Unlike Harford, she travelled extensively. Harford never left the east coast of Australia.

<sup>91</sup> Despite numerous searches and inquiries, the origin of this quotation remains a mystery. Investigations continue.

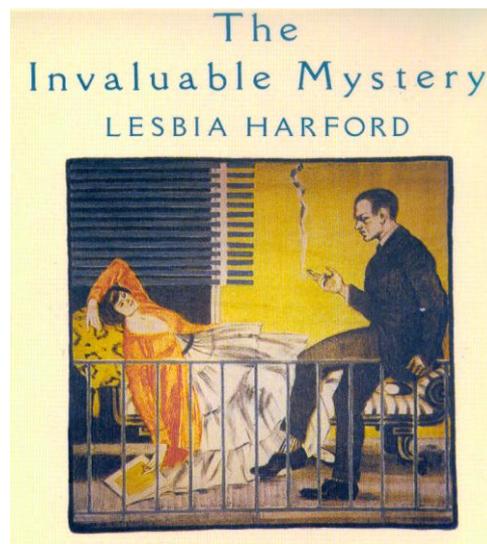
### Box 7.1

*The Invaluable Mystery*, Lesbia Harford, written between 1921 and 1924, published in 1987.

Sally Putman is the main character of this novel set in Sydney during the Great War (1914, at the start of hostilities). Sally is the daughter of a German immigrant who runs a confectionary shop on the Mosman side of The Spit in Middle Harbour. Sally's brother, Max, a socialist activist brings home a fellow socialist, Bob Stepanoff, to board with the family. Sally's sister Milly, married to an 'English' Australian, lives in Western New South Wales and tries to distance herself from the German-ness of her family.

Sally spends her time either working in the shop or in the house. When her brother and father are interned in a camp for 'aliens' Sally is left alone except for Stepanoff, with whom she develops a close relationship. They pretend they are married but when Stepanoff suggests to Sally that they marry in reality, Sally hesitates. Stepanoff, who truly cares for Sally, who also loves him, decides to leave since Sally will not marry him. The novel ends with Sally waking to find that the last of the three men she loves is gone.

The novel did not find a publisher in Harford's lifetime, nor, after her death in 1927, could her mother find a publisher. It was found in an archive in the early 1980s and published in 1987.



The cover of Harford's novel featuring Thea Proctor's painting 'The Balcony' (1919). Given the tenor of the novel, it seems odd that such an incongruous painting was used.

At that time Sydney Harbour was not crossed by the Sydney Harbour Bridge (see Figure 7.1) and the inhabitants of the north side of the city relied on ferries to take them across to the city centre. Beyond the city were national concerns which were tied to Australia's colonial relationship with Britain. The newly federated country, which, in 1901 had become an amalgam of states instead of individual colonies, had responded to the outbreak of the Great War by sending troops to form the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in France, Belgium and North

Africa. It is within these spheres that the narrative develops. This chapter examines the novel in the context of these geographical concerns which are not only at the heart of the narrative and the life of its author but also linked to the unusual circumstances of its production and reception. For *The Invaluable Mystery* was not published in its author's lifetime, despite her attempts to bring about publication. It was published in 1987 after it had surfaced in an archive.

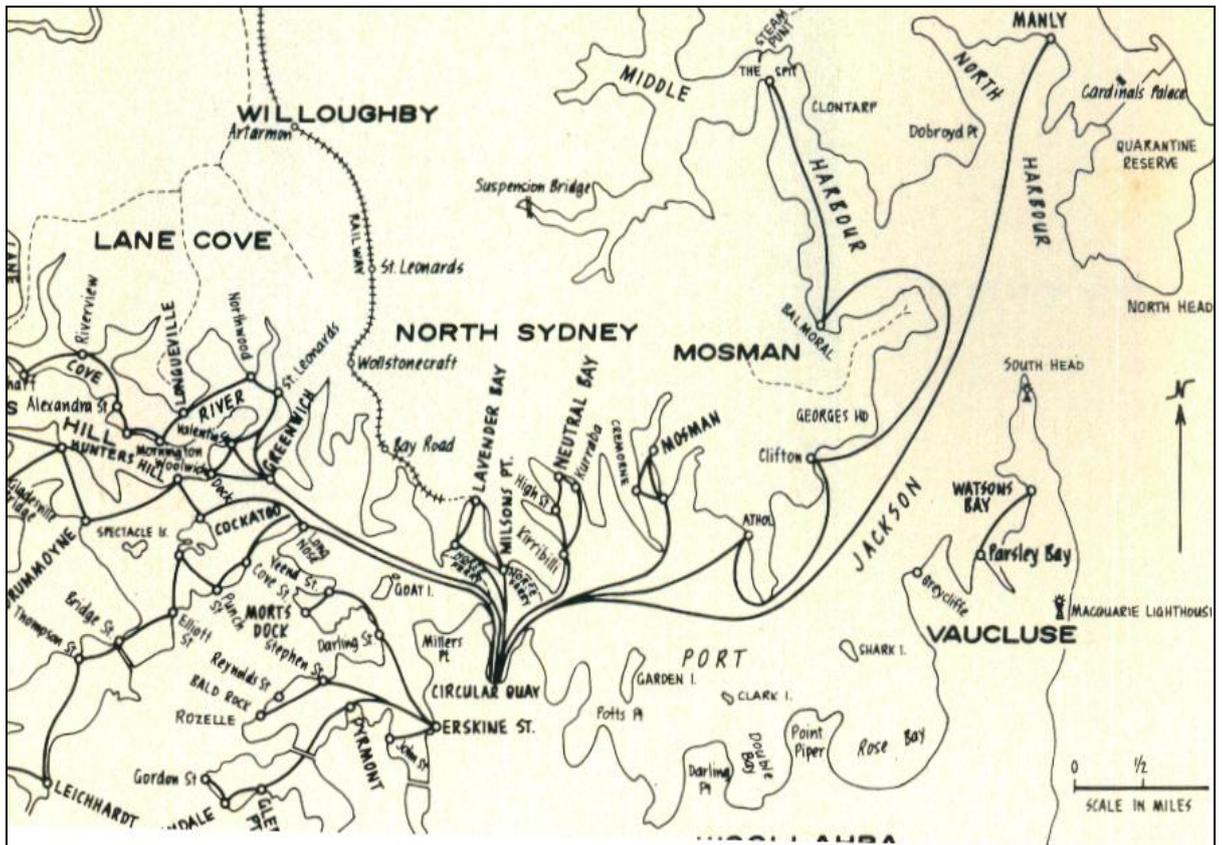


Figure 7.1 Map of Sydney, 1920, showing ferry routes. Mosman, Middle Harbour and the Spit are located just right of the centre at the top of the map. (Spearritt, 1978, p.149)

The first section of the chapter summarises the novel's plot and then examines the threads that Harford drew through the narrative. Broader political themes and those of space and place will be discussed in light of these. I also draw on the nature of Harford's politics in relation to the circumstances of the novel's earlier non-publication. In particular, the status of Australian women as writers and their writing will also be examined in relation to Harford's position as a writer. Linked with these are the author's life both as writer and political activist. The geoliterary terrains of the novel are embedded in the politics of the novel and its author.

It seems an appropriate juncture to gather in a few stray and tame thoughts. As Tristram Shandy tells us, it is important to know something of one's own country before travelling abroad (1849, Book VII, Chapter II) and a pause for reflection seems appropriate before returning to the place, if not the time (perhaps a contradiction in terms) of my own birth and upbringing.

Harford's political concerns and experiences are closely bound to the narrative of *TIM*. I have argued elsewhere in this work for an integrated approach to fictional texts while also expressing some caution about how *much* and how *far* criticism and research can deduce from the relationship between author, text, context, publication and reception in investigations of the nature of place in imaginative work. I remain cautious, particularly in relation to Harford because textual traces are relatively few. It can be said, however, that both *TIM* and Harford's life are interwoven with explicitly political actions. Of all the texts examined in this work, *TIM* has the most direct engagement with political concerns. These are clearly stated throughout the novel. Of course, as with all texts, there are political themes threaded throughout the narrative but in the case of *TIM*, there is an explicit engagement with left-wing politics. This engagement on the part of the author is not uncritical, particularly as it concerns Sally Putman as the main character. The politics of gender and the gendered nature of the politics in *TIM* will be discussed later in the chapter. For the moment, the text itself is the focus.

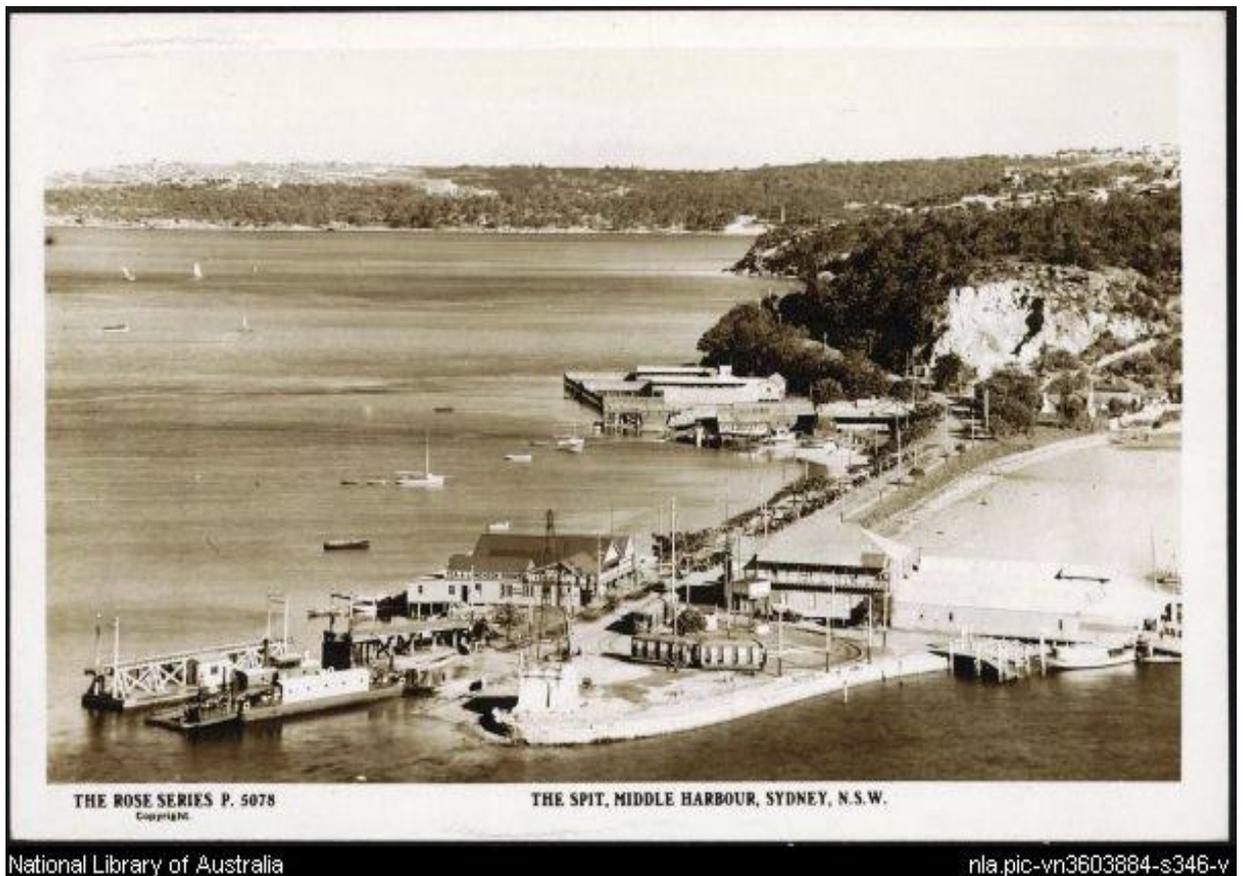
The novel begins in 1914, with a description of Sally Putman's immediate world:

Sally Putman lived in Sydney, down by the Spit. The Spit is a piece of low-lying land something like a peninsula, something like a delta, something like an isthmus - not in the least like any of these as they exist in nature, but very like them as they are pictured in a geography book, or as they are constructed by a conscientious modern teacher of geography in the sand-tray which is included in her up-to-date equipment; the Spit is like an isthmus because it nearly, very nearly, joins the towering tree-covered shores of Middle Harbour. It does not quite join them, however; a channel of water a quarter of a mile wide remains even where the longest finger of land points out across the harbour. (*TIM*, 1987, p.19, see also, Figure 7.2)<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> The Spit was joined to Middle Harbour in 1924 by the Spit Bridge. The Sydney Harbour Bridge did not open until 1932.

The family home is behind the confectionary shop they run but it is significant that when describing the shop and the house, Harford designates the shop as belonging to Sally's father, not to her or to her brother Max, who also lives there. Sally works in the shop, particularly when her father wants to socialise with his friends. At other times, she works in the house. It is clear that Sally and her family see themselves as markedly different from their neighbours and not merely because they are German (or, in the case of Sally, of German descent). They live opposite the tramline and up the hill a little from where the punt or ferry docks.



**Figure 7.2** The Spit – 1920s postcard, National Library of Australia, ID 3707383

Sally's father is proud of the verandah he has constructed in front of the shop, with a red and white striped canvas blind:

which could be lowered to protect the lollies in the shop window from the glare of the sun. It was never lowered very far, indeed, lest the tramway passenger might be misled into thinking the shop a private house and so omit to purchase the chocolate, ginger beer or milk-shake with which Mr Putman was

prepared to satisfy the needs of a hungry and thirsty nation.  
(*TIM*, p.20)

But despite

the distinction conferred by the verandah and the verandah blind, it was undeniable that Sally lived on the less picturesque side of the tramline. ... On Sally's right hand ... an ugly bank of mud shelved into the harbour. (*TIM*, p.20)

Sally does not mix very much with the other shopkeepers and neighbours:

Sally had never spoken to Mr and Mrs Denman [owners of one of the shops], but then, she hardly knew the friendly grocer or his wife. In fact, Sally was not a neighbourly person and fortunately enough for her, her neighbours were not friendly people either. ... If she stood [at the door of the shop] she would have encouraged chaff from the tram-men; but Sally was a dignified girl with a low voice and no gift for repartee. (*TIM*, p.21)

At the start of the novel, Sally is sitting on the verandah when the postman brings a letter from her sister Milly, now married and living in the west of New South Wales. There is a letter for Sally and one for her father. Milly is anxious to distance herself from her German family and her German roots (unlike Sally, she is German-born). She writes to Sally:

They are all so anti-German here in the West. Tom [Milly's husband] says that he can get away with having a German wife. After all, I never did like being German and I was brought up in Australia .... I haven't put any address on the top of this letter even although Mr Healy is going to deliver it ... because it is no good letting the authorities get it all carded up that Tom has a German wife and then make a fuss whenever he tries to get a better position in the union. ... I do hope Max keeps away from all that Socialist crowd he seemed to be taking up with. It is a good thing you and he don't have German sounding names.  
(*TIM*, p.23)

A central concern of the narrative is the Great War but unlike other Australian novels written or set during this time, none of the major characters in the book is in military service. Sally's brother Max is German-born and as the novel is set in 1914 in the early days of the war, there is, as yet, no conscription. In any

event, Max would not be eligible to serve in the Allied Imperial Force (AIF) as he is German and not British.<sup>93</sup> Max, an apprentice engineer, brings home a friend to board with them. He is Bob Stepanoff, a Russian and fellow-socialist who knows Max through his political activities. Bob and Sally develop a close relationship. When Sally's father and her brother, Max, are interned, Sally and Stepanoff pretend to be married, in part because they hope that being married to a non-German will keep Sally from internment and also so that their staying in the house together is not seen as improper.

The focus of the novel is the effect of Mr Putman's and Max's internment in the 'Camp' out at Long Bay Gaol on the fringe of Sydney's south-eastern suburbs. Although the soldiers who come for Sally's father are not violent, the act of his internment violates the domestic space. Sally is furious with the soldiers for their invasion of the house and their searches through the family papers. She is also worried and fretful for her father, who is frail. When Max returns from a trip, he too is interned. He is drunk when this happens and puts up a fight but he too ends up the Camp. It seems as though the authorities' interest in Max is because of his political activities, although officially it is his German nationality that is the cause of his internment. Once they have left, Sally must run the business and keep house for Stepanoff. As their relationship deepens, Sally also finds friendship with two other women in the street but her exchanges with the women remain distant. Sally is reserved and quiet. She feels the difference between herself and the others to be significant, particularly after her father and brother are interned as 'aliens'. Stepanoff asks Sally to marry him and is making plans to do this. Sally, despite loving Stepanoff, is unsure. She is hesitant about committing herself, saying that she wants to be independent and she is worried that her father will disapprove. Stepanoff feels that he cannot stay with Sally if she does not marry him, so, after watching over her sleeping for hours, he leaves the house for good. The novel finishes with Sally waking to find Stepanoff gone:

Sally awoke, very late, from a sleep of exhaustion, to find that the last of her three loved ones was already lost to her.

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<sup>93</sup> All Australian citizens at this time and for decades afterwards, were officially British. My father, a third generation European Australian, was issued with a British passport when he first travelled out of Australia in 1967. All of my great uncles, who fought in the AIF in the Great War, were listed as British.

Stepanoff, too, had gone. (*TIM*, p.190)

Sally's real motive for withdrawing from Stepanoff's suggestion of marriage is unclear. Although she says she wants to retain her independence, she also indicates that her father may not like the marriage. As she refuses Stepanoff's suggestion she is visibly upset and tearful. Is she, in some way, renouncing him in the manner of heroines in Victorian novels? Some of the novel's prose is reminiscent of this trope. Garner (1987), a staunch admirer of the novel and its "psychological acuteness that appears artless because it is so casual", nevertheless finds some of the writing rather fligid:

Embarrassing purpleness stains the book's few romantic passages: like a writer of novelettes [Harford] changes style with a flourish and begins to invert: over goes the sentence, bottom up and barnacle-encrusted: 'His was the incarnate presence of swift air and glittering sunshine' - no! stop now! I wonder which would have given the mature Harford, had she lived, the worst shudders of retrospective dismay: the flowery diction of her early poems, or the clangers she drops in this novel? And yet the relationship with Stepanoff is written with genuine tenderness and psychological truth ... I see how calmly and undefensively, way back then, she gave true weight to the smallest events of women's lives. (1987, p.2)

In *TIM*, the "smallest events" are given weight, such as Sally's work in the shop, her feeding of the hens and her reorganisation of bedrooms and furniture. Harford ensures that these details are present, not merely as a backdrop to Sally's life but as the everyday practices that make up Sally's lifeworld.

### *Sally Putman's world*

Sally's world is domestic; its physical boundaries are not extensive. She remains largely unconcerned by events beyond the confines of her life apart from the distressing circumstances of her father's and brother's incarceration. Harford outlines Sally's quiet daily life, changing beds, feeding the chooks, shelling peas, minding the shop, carrying out the various duties that have been assigned to her or assumed by her, or, more importantly, assumed to be her domain, by her male relatives. The casual manner in which Sally agrees to change rooms so

that Stepanoff and her brother have the larger bedroom and the labour this causes her, is told through Sally's eyes:

“She did not like giving up to Max the room she had shared with Milly, but Max's room would not be large enough for two boys. After all it was at her own suggestion that Max was bringing his friend to board with them. She would be glad every Thursday night to receive double the amount of money. (*TIM*, p.48)

Sally hands over her own space, the one place in the house that is in any way truly hers: her bedroom. The domestic space is shared and even her bedroom must now be handed over. In addition to handing it over, Sally is required to effect the changes.

Sally's domestic life is punctuated throughout the novel with signs of her containment. Her life is more restricted than her father's or Max's. First, Sally is confined to this space because there is nobody else to run the shop or the house when the two men are absent. Second, it is *expected* of her to remain in the shop and the house, to take care of things, even when both men are there. The men go off on the ferry to the city, Mr. Putman to the German Club and Max to work. Sally remains, confined to the other side of the harbour, precluded from this mobility by her gender. Gender, as Mackenzie (1999, p.420) observes, is a “space-structuring force”.

Max's indifference to domestic chores is documented, almost without rancour. For Sally, this is woman's work but even the supposedly masculine side of domestic life, decorating, or moving furniture, is either done by Sally or, as Sally recalls Milly's wanting the bedroom wallpapered when she lived there, contracted out to someone else:

Milly ... had had the room papered at her own expense, when she found that Max could not by scolding, coaxing or bribing be induced to do it for her. (*TIM*, p.49)

Sally is, however, admiring of Milly's forthright manner and her refusal to allow men to hold the floor. It is via Milly's contrasting attitude that Harford exposes the gendered nature of domestic life at the Putmans, adding a cultural inflection to reflect their German heritage:

Stay-at-home Sally had retained a little of the old fashioned feminine habit of listening while her men talked. Perhaps for this reason, or perhaps because they were German males with a gift for conversation, Max and Mr Putman often made long speeches to which Sally listened in a silence which did not necessarily imply acquiescence. As a matter of fact, neither of the men required or were accustomed to acquiescence from women. In the old days, whenever Milly (who described herself as a 'business girl') had not agreed with their speeches, she had broken in on them. And, as Milly's outlook had differed greatly from that of her father and brother, she had always disagreed almost at once, so that they had never had time to get very far. Milly was very sensible.

... But even in nineteenth Century Germany, Milly would have been able to break in on men's speeches, because she was so very pretty. (*TIM*, p.45)

Sally's gently wry observations indicate that she is dismissive and yet complicit in the outward manifestations of gender inequality in her life. She is also hesitant to express her own views, lest they betray what she sees as her "ignorance" (*TIM*, p.37). Sally decides that her "custom" of giving "utterance to the least expressive" thought when conversing has "not led her into practical difficulties, since it affected only her emotional life and was not a habit of lying." (*TIM*, p.37).

In her intellectual life, Sally is hampered by her lack of mobility. Since Max is out all day and her father often away also, Sally must stay behind to run the shop. This means that she has to make do with the small lending library at the stationers:

Max and Mr Putman belonged to the Sydney Municipal Library where Sally also had tickets. But Sally seldom went across the harbour, so that she had not much chance of changing her Municipal Library books herself and neither her brother nor her father often brought her home books that pleased her. (*TIM*, p.38)

Sally prefers *Jane Eyre* and would have liked *The Mill on the Floss* "had it not ended so badly" (p.38). She reads no Australian literature, nor do her father and brother. All of the novels and plays mentioned are by British authors. The fact that her father and brother rarely bring her any book that she would like to

read shows that Sally either does not specify her desires or that her relatives ignore her wishes. In other texts discussed in this thesis, the writing space is foregrounded as each novel (excepting this one) features a woman who writes or who has aspirations to write. Here, Sally is featured as a reader. The geography of her reading is as restricted as her mobility. Her brother or father could bring books for her but as they do not consult her wishes as a reader, she is left to make do with a small lending library that operates locally. Sally, the reader, is unable to exercise a breadth of choice and her father and brother, have little interest in seeking out her desires as a reader.

Throughout the novel, despite a few moments of camaraderie between Sally and Max, neither her brother nor her father takes much account of her needs, views or interests. When she works to change the bedrooms about for Stepanoff's arrival, Max arrives home only to change things again:

Every arrangement she had made during the afternoon had been set aside. ... She would have to polish the floor again tomorrow. (*TIM*, p.60)

She then contemplates making new curtains for Max's and Stepanoff's room, deciding that her own old curtains will do for the bedroom she now occupies. Frieda, the daughter of one of her father's German friends also keeps house for her father. Mr Baum has decided "that her period of usefulness to him should be as lengthy as possible" (p.65) This is contrasted by Fanya, a woman who is a fellow-Socialist with Stepanoff and Max. Slightly tongue in cheek, perhaps having a sly dig at her own earlier days, Harford explains that Fanya is different from Sally and Frieda:

[S]he might have had pleasant occupation in dignified surroundings. She chose to work as kitchenmaid in a poor restaurant. She would not even accept the comparatively refined position of waitress. She was a great revolutionary. She threw her lot in with the proletariat. (*TIM*, p.76)

When Sally is asked to go out with Viv, another of Max's friends, she decides against going but is unable to go anyway as her father brings Herr Weidenbach home and Sally is "obliged" to stay at home (*TIM*, p.90) because her father has a guest. When she attends the play *Bunty Pulls the Strings*, Sally contrasts her

life with that of Bunty, the lead role. She decides that she is “not clever enough to treat her menfolk as puppets” but also reflects that “their profound ignorance of womankind led them to believe that she really ruled them with an iron hand” (*TIM*, p.92). There is, of course, the undercurrent of the power wielded by women in the domestic space but Sally’s power is limited by her relationship to the two men. She is the youngest of the family and she does not occupy the matriarchal role of wife and mother which, in some cases, gives added authority to domestic empowerment. Sally is self-aware enough to realise that her power is limited, even within the confines of her domestic world.

Sally’s distress when both her father and her brother are interned is exacerbated by her domestic world being violated by the presence of the soldiers. Her father has already warned her of the behaviour of the authorities in their treatment of the German nationals when Mr. Putman’s German Club is raided by them. Sally wonders if fellow club members will have seen the news in the papers. “The English do not publish their tyrannies” he remarks (*TIM*, p.32).<sup>94</sup> The soldiers are reasonably polite and slightly embarrassed but to Sally, their presence is profane. She refuses to make them tea or anything of the kind. When her father is taken away, two of the soldiers remain to wait for Max. She feels impotent and unable to devise practical plans to save her brother, although she does manage to enlist the help of one of her neighbours, Mrs Kerrigan. When Max returns, however, it is too late to save him. As Garner (1987, p.1) remarks, “her sense of propriety is so strong that she can’t run out of the house to warn her brother that soldiers are waiting to arrest him” because she is unable to go back for her hat and without it, she cannot ride on the tram.<sup>95</sup> Convention overrides other concerns. Sally’s powerlessness as her menfolk are taken away is extended to the world outside the domestic sphere.

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<sup>94</sup> Throughout the book, the Australian authorities in general are referred to as the ‘English’. It certainly struck me reading this work and other contemporary texts, how very British I found the cultural import of much of the work, how speech patterns matched those of contemporary British (particularly English) texts. This is discussed later in the chapter in a broader context but, having grown up under the remnants of Empire myself, even I am struck by the use of the word English in relation to Australian soldiers and government officials. This echoes my earlier observations about the hybridity of culture from the colonial/postcolonial angle.

<sup>95</sup> Such conventions are echoed in the way that dress restrictions operate for women today in societies where women are still obliged by religious or civil law, to be covered when they are in public spaces. For Sally, it is unthinkable that she should ride on a tram without her hat, even in a potentially critical situation.

Conversely, the politics that have permeated her home life have now forced her to engage directly with them, in the presence of the soldiers.

The world of politics is brought home and the political views of mostly men in the novel happen in Sally's presence, but she does not contribute to or debate them, even when she feels that either her father or Max (or his friends) are being absurd. When Milly's letter arrives for her father and he reads it, Sally and Max dread his reaction, for they know that Milly will denounce the Germans as being 'on the wrong side':

Max and Sally watched him in silence ... This was no personal crisis; this was a national affair. Here, in Mr Putman's heart, was Flanders. Germany was being beaten back. (*TIM*, p.29)

Max and Sally feel themselves "to be subject of no country, partisans of no race". This is the "ambivalence of migrancy" (Sharma, 2001, p.596) that often results in feelings of hybridity, of 'belonging' everywhere and nowhere. It is common, particularly among migrants and their children, their global and cultural mobility 'displacing' feelings of rootedness.

Sally and Max cannot:

sympathize with their father's fierce unreasonable anger at an action [the raid on and closing of, the German club] which he interpreted as an insult to Germany. They could not sympathize with Milly who had written in German to say that she hated Germany. (*TIM*, p.30)

For Max, what he sees as his father's outmoded attachment to Germany is of less interest than the class war. His socialist activities and his friends are all committed to bringing about revolution and the overthrow of capitalism. "[N]o one ever gets the chance to choose the good under capitalism," says Frank, one of Max's friends, to Sally when she asks if the internees will become bored at the Camp. Sally changes the subject as she sees Frank "preparing to plunge into a discussion of economics" (*TIM*, p.177). When Sally accompanies Max and Stepanoff to the Sydney Domain (a place, like London's Hyde Park Corner, where speakers congregate on a Sunday), she decides that the religious speakers are "faddists" and that the political speakers assume that their listeners to be as

abreast of European politics as themselves. She remains unimpressed (*TIM*, pp.84,85).

Harford herself was an activist, campaigning against conscription, promoting the rights of women factory workers and was herself a factory worker. Her observations on the political activities of the men are sympathetic and yet wry. As a campaigner and speaker herself, she would have been on the receiving end of some of the exclusion experienced by women in this sphere (Ferrier, 1985a). Sally is emphatically *not* Harford but perhaps some of the themes of Sally's life are drawn from Harford's own and from lives observed among women whom Harford knew.

### *Lesbia's world*

Lesbia Venner Keogh Harford (1891-1927) waged a class war for most of her adult life (see Box 7.2). She was not, however, born into the working class. Her father came from a strongly capitalist and moneyed background and her mother, Helen Beatrice Moore, was the daughter of a clergyman and the granddaughter of the Earl of Drogheda. Her early life was spent in an "elegant" house (Modjeska, 1985, p.9) in Malvern, a middle class suburb of Melbourne.<sup>96</sup> Much of the information on Harford's early life comes from various interviews and privately written material, most notably an essay and notes (unpublished) by her brother Esmond Keogh, held by Australian writer Marjorie Pizer, whose interest in Harford fortunately coincided with a time (1960s) when those who knew Harford were still alive. Harford's father became bankrupt, began drinking heavily and abandoned his family, although he did return from time to time and was known to have worked on the construction of the rabbit-proof fence that was built in outback Australia.<sup>97</sup> Harford's mother, Helen, began looking after four children who had been orphaned by their parents' early death in an accident. The children are thought to have been well-provided for, because the

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<sup>96</sup> Thirkell also spent her time in Melbourne in Malvern but in a small bungalow.

<sup>97</sup> The rabbit-proof fence was a fence that stretched vertically down the state of Western Australia. It was designed to keep out the rabbits, introduced by European settlers to remind them of 'home'. The rabbits quickly reached plague proportions and dogged the lives of farmers and other producers. The population of rabbits went into decline after the introduction of myxomatosis, a disease introduced in the 1950s to control rabbits. Some control was evident but rabbits are still considered to be a pest in Australia.

four children of the Keogh family lived reasonably well during this period (Modjeska, 1985, p.10).

Harford's mother was determined, according to Harford's brother, Esmond Keogh, to ensure that her children received a good education. Harford was educated at two Catholic schools in the state of Victoria, one of them a boarding school. Her brother later speculated that they may have been helped by other relatives, although Keogh himself won a scholarship to the prestigious Melbourne Grammar while at the same time, Harford's mother ran a small boarding house for nurses.

#### **Box 7.2**

##### **Lesbia Venner Keogh Harford (1891-1927)**

Lesbia Harford was born in comfortable circumstances in Melbourne. She lived there with her parents and three siblings until her father was declared bankrupt in 1900, when he began drinking heavily and then left the family home. Harford's mother Helen then made ends meet by first bringing up four orphaned children and then by running a boarding house for nurses in the countryside of the state of Victoria. The children were all privately educated by one means or another and Lesbia Harford studied Law at the University of Melbourne alongside the future conservative Prime Minister of Australia, Robert Menzies. While there, Harford became interested in the politics of the Left and enamoured of her tutor, Katie Lush. They had a brief, physical affair but remained friends once the affair was over.

Upon graduating, Harford worked in a clothing factory as a machinist rather than practising law. She joined the International Workers of the World (IWW) and campaigned for workers' rights, as well as speaking on a number of issues, including campaigning against conscription. Her brother Esmond served in the armed forces, so this may have been the motivation from a personal angle – her feelings about this are not recorded but a photo exists (see Figure 7.3) of her beside Esmond in uniform.

Harford had a long relationship with fellow activist Guido Barrachi but this ended, to Harford's chagrin and disappointment, when Barrachi married someone else. Harford moved to Sydney where she campaigned for the release of fellow activists who had been jailed due to the perjury of witnesses in order to suppress their activities for the IWW. She also worked as a machinist, a university coach and a domestic servant. She then married an artist, Pat Harford, whose drinking and violence precipitated Harford's leaving him to move back to Melbourne. Harford died in 1927 from heart disease which she had suffered from all her life. After her death her mother tried to have Harford's novel published without success.

During her lifetime, Harford had a small number of poems published in literary journals and one issue of the journal *Birth* devoted an issue to her work in 1921.



Lesbia Harford, undated (Modjeska & Pizer, 1985)

Harford graduated in Law from the University of Melbourne but did not practise. She went instead to work in a clothing factory as a machinist. This was tiring work and Harford stuck at it for several years despite a debilitating congenital heart condition that left her breathless from most exertion. It eventually killed her in 1927.

Through her contact with others of like mind at university, Harford joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWWF), often known as ‘the Wobblies’, which was the “mainstay of the Melbourne Left” (Question Mark Collective (web), 2006). As a member of this organisation she was a committed speaker, particularly against conscription, which was introduced during the Great War.<sup>98</sup> She began a close friendship with her tutor at university, Katie Lush and the two were briefly lovers but after the physical affair subsided, they retained a close friendship. After this, Harford began a long affair with fellow activist, Guido Barrachi. He remembered her as a “very straightforward kind of girl” who would not “concede anything that she did not thoroughly agree [with]” (Barrachi, 1941, in Question Mark Collective, 2006). In 1921, a literary journal, *Birth*, devoted one issue to her work (Modjeska, 1985, p.31).

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<sup>98</sup> In Figure 7.3, there is a photo of Harford with her brother Esmond showing him in uniform. Whether he was a conscript or a volunteer is not known. If he had been conscripted, this may have framed some of Harford’s antipathy.



**Figure 7.3** Lesbia Harford and her brother Esmond Keogh, during the Great War. (Photo, Modjeska & Pizer, 1985)

Her poetry touched on the harsh life of the underpaid workers:

All day long  
We sew fine muslin up for you to wear,  
Muslin that women wove for you elsewhere,  
A million strong.

Just like flames,  
Insatiable, you eat up all our hours  
And sun and loves and talk and flowers,  
Suburban dames. (Harford, 1915, in Modjeska and Pizer, 1985,  
p.65)

According to Barrachi (1941, in Question Mark Collective, 2006), Harford “realised ... the far reaching implications of Marx’s words about the entanglement of peoples in the net of the world market”.

In 1916, Harford moved to Sydney where she lived with the wife of a fellow ‘wobbly’ who had been imprisoned.<sup>99</sup> He and eleven other men were convicted of arson on what turned out to be unreliable evidence (Modjeska, 1985, p.26) and Harford campaigned vigorously for their release. In 1920, the radical left lobbied the new state Labor government for an investigation into the perjury that they alleged had convicted the IWWF men.<sup>100</sup> All but two were released (Modjeska, 1985, p.28). At this time, Harford met and married an artist, Pat Harford, who was loosely connected with the IWW. It seems that the marriage was happy for a time but Harford must have found it galling that he had enlisted in the AIF during the war. Her family disapproved of her husband: “Pat Harford was working class, lived in Redfern [an inner city slum area], was a drunk and prone to violence” (Modjeska, 1985, p.28). Barrachi (1941, in Question Mark Collective, 2006) said that:

Lesbia said that two of her chief achievements in the working class movement were to bring me from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat, and Pat Harford from the proletariat to the bourgeoisie.

Harford sometimes worked as a university coach and it was this occupation that she listed on her marriage certificate in 1921. She also worked in factories and as a domestic servant when she was employed as a maid for the newspaper-owning Fairfax family.<sup>101</sup> In a poem, Lesbia wrote about the gulf between women such as Miss Mary Fairfax and her servants:

Every day Miss Mary Fairfax goes her rounds,  
Through the splendid house and through the grounds,

Looking if the kitchen table’s white,  
Seeing if the great big fire’s alight,

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<sup>99</sup> Barrachi also moved to Sydney but their relationship had ended, which greatly upset Harford although they remained in contact with each other.

<sup>100</sup> The Australian Labor Party is always spelled without a “u”.

<sup>101</sup> The Fairfaxes and the Murdochs controlled most of the newspapers in Australia at that time and continued to do so throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Finding specks on shining pans and pots,  
Never praising much, but scolding lots.

If the table's white, she does not see  
Roughened hands that once were ivory.

It is fires, not cheeks, that ought to glow;  
And if eyes are dime, she doesn't know,

Poor Miss Mary! Poor for all she owns,  
Since the things she loves are stocks and stones.  
(Harford, 1919, in Modjeska & Pizer, 1985)

In a few years, Harford was back from Sydney, living in Melbourne in 1925 with her mother and articulated to a firm of solicitors. Her contemporaries indicated that Pat's alcoholism and violence towards her took its toll on both her frail health and her emotional state. In 1927 she died. After her death, her mother tried, unsuccessfully, to have her novel, *The Invaluable Mystery*, published.

The novel eventually surfaced in the Australian Archives in Canberra and was published in 1987.<sup>102</sup> In a letter that is undated but is thought to have been written about 1925, Harford wrote:

I wrote a novel but have not had any success with it so far, even to getting it published. I think it is good, but I have to admit it is not striking. I think it is original, but a casual reader would only think it artless. (Nile & Darby, 1987, pp. 7-8)

In 1939, her mother wrote to Australian writer Nettie Palmer:

I hope you like the novel. I think it is beautiful, but Mr Felstead [Halstead?], who read it, thought the subject unsympathetic and that it would not have success on that account.<sup>103</sup> The same would apply now I am afraid - we would be very glad to have your opinion and Mr Palmer's. (in Nile & Darby, 1987, p.8)

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<sup>102</sup> There are no details available of how the novel ended up in the archive. My own speculation is that Harford's mother, or executors after the death of Harford's mother, placed the novel there or donated a set of papers including the novel, to the Australian Archives. This is an invaluable mystery in itself.

<sup>103</sup> One assumes this person, whose name is presumably difficult to read in the original, is a publisher's reader or someone known to Harford's mother, who had some claim to authority on publishing. Consulting Nettie and Vance Palmer, Harford was tracking down two writers of socialist politics who were well-known at the time.

So, why was the novel not published? Harford was known as a poet and had connections to the literary and the publishing world through her poetry. In 1939, her mother wrote that the novel was deemed to be “unsympathetic”. The discussion of the non-publication of the novel (Coates, 2002; Nile & Darby, 1987; Modjeska, 1985) differs in its interpretation on this point. What follows is my own conjecture, drawing on that discussion but also offering a synthesis of my own.

First, the novel does not feature any soldiers apart from the three who come to intern Sally’s father and brother and a few guards at the Camp. What is missing is the Anzac, the Australian soldier known affectionately as the ‘Digger’. Much has been written about the mythology of the Anzac and his status in Australian culture, history and political rhetoric. It permeates themes of national pride, identity, postcolonial politics and the cultural life of Australia to the present. The Anzacs were the first troops to fight as part of the newly federated Australia. The first landings at Anzac Cove at the start of the Great War and the subsequent death toll (around 7000 casualties), seen by Australians generally and forever after as wanton sacrifice of the ‘Wild Colonial Boys’ by incompetent British officers, began a story that was to be told over and over during the Great War and World War II and never forgotten (Clark, 1981; Adam-Smith, 1978; Coates, 2002).<sup>104</sup> Sadly, the women who saw active service as nurses and doctors have not been remembered with great clarity. Few Australian war memorials depict any women and most are remembered in terms of their ministering to the Anzac male (Inglis, 1987). Harford’s novel, featuring as it does, the perspective of women and one woman in particular, is at odds with this representation and memorialisation.

When Anzac troops ‘saved’ the small town of Villers-Bretonneux in Picardy in 1918 from the advancing German troops, their international standing as valorous and dogged was assured. The primary school and the local museum in Villers-Bretonneux carry plaques and banners saying: “*N’oublions jamais l’Australie*” (Figure 7.4), assuring the many Australian tourists who now visit that the Diggers have not been forgotten (see Figure 7.5).

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<sup>104</sup> References to the Anzac legend are too numerous to mention. The ‘Wild Colonial Boys’ refers to an Australian poem and ballad.



Figure 7.4 A sign above a door in the school at Villers-Bretonneux

The word *Anzac*, protected by law from profanation, was central to the rhetoric of those who spoke about returned soldiers and was regularly used by veterans themselves. An official war historian considered it a male word. (Inglis, 1987, p.53)

At the same time as blaming the British (in particular, Winston Churchill and General Haig), most Australians were proud of their contribution to the ‘mother’ country’s war against Germany (Adam-Smith, 1978; Inglis, 1987; Clark, 1987; Dunlap, 1993).

In 1918, the Prime Minister of Australia, Billy Hughes (the instigator of legislation for conscription) sent a secret cablegram from London to Canberra, addressed to the then Acting Prime Minister advocating that there was “a unique opportunity of securing right type of immigrant”: that is, white and British:

The glorious exploits of our soldiers have given Australia magnificent and priceless advertisement. Tens of thousands of men in the prime of life who would make most desirable settlers on soil, and who will be disinclined to remain in

Britain, will soon be released from army. (1918, National Australian Archive, ref: A3934, SC23/1)

With the war barely over, the architect of conscription sees here the opportunity to market the Anzac legend (65% of all Australian males who embarked for overseas duty became casualties compared with 50.71% of British males: Adam-Smith, 1978, p.359).

The cult of the Anzac was well-established by the time Harford wrote her novel. According to Coates:

*The Invaluable Mystery* violated all of the rules of the Australian literary Great War campaign, which permitted only one view of war: the Anzac's glorious participation in combat. In making the bold decision to dismiss the almighty Anzac ... Harford made it unlikely that her book would see publication. (2002, p.158)

Coates maintains that, unlike *TIM*, other (published) works by women set during the Great War featured the Anzac. Capel Boake's novel, *Painted Clay* (1917) which is critical of the gendered nature of Australian society and largely focuses on the domestic and working lives of women, nonetheless ends the novel with the loving George leaving Helen to go to war:

'George,' she said passionately. 'Why is it? This war I mean. What is the meaning of it? Why has it come?'

'God knows,' he answered. ... 'A man has got to go.'

'A man has got to go,' she repeated slowly.

...' I wouldn't say this to anyone but you, Nelly. A fellow feels a fool if he talks patriotic stuff, but - well, I'm glad we belong to Britain.' (Boake, 1917, p.343)

Although Boake questions the consequences of this for Helen, it is still given a romantic and heroic slant. As Rich (1984, p.18) comments, the armed forces are the "extreme embodiment of the patriarchal family". There was very little place for Harford's dissent or questioning in this 'extreme' family.



Figure 7.5 The cemetery outside Villers-Bretonneux where many Anzacs and other allies are buried.

Harford, on the other hand, had Stepanoff leaving Sally to go and fight his own battles against capitalism. This would certainly have been seen as “unsympathetic,” as would the depiction of how German nationals were treated, but it is the *absence* of the Anzac that is probably the most significant reason for the novel’s rejection for publication both in Harford’s lifetime and in 1939 when her mother attempted to have it published.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> On a personal level, my own attitude is one of ambivalence. Several of my great uncles fought in the Great War. One was killed on active duty and his brother died later of gas poisoning. According to their military records, they were courageous, these two country boys from Western New South Wales. On the other hand, I am a child of the Vietnam War, a war my family opposed. The Mei Lai massacre is writ large on my ten year old memory. Visceral opposition to warfare sits alongside a recognition of courage and a family story.

Second, Harford's politics and outspoken pacifist, anti-conscription views would have been relatively well-known. As one of a handful of women writers who were known socialist activists (Ferrier, 1985a), Harford's politics and their manifestation in her novel could have been too much to swallow. The main Australian publisher at the time, Angus & Robertson, was known to be conservative (Nile & Darby, 1987). Only one "socially conscious" writer was published by them at the time, Frank Dalby Davidson and only after he had privately published two novels and had been awarded a literary prize (Nile & Darby, 1987, p.13). Fellow socialist and writer, Jean Devanny was eventually expelled from the Communist Party on grounds of immorality (this does not appear to have happened to any of the male Communists) (Ferrier, 1985c, p.110). Still, this notoriety did not prevent her from being published. Nor did the socialist activities of Katherine Susannah Prichard prevent publication. Her fictional works were read by both men and women and were popular (Modjeska, 1981; Ferrier, 1985b;). But Prichard's work conformed more strongly to the prevailing taste for frontier adventure and the working class "bush hero" (Giles, 1987, p.2). Modjeska (1981) points out that Prichard's best-known work, *Working Bullocks* (1926), while celebrating sexuality, is "portrayed absolutely from the male point of view" (1981, p.234). The male protagonist, Red, is depicted in terms of his "struggle to come to terms with himself as a worker, as an Australian and as a man in relation to the bush, his mates and the strike" (p.243). On the other hand, the female protagonist, Deb, "endures, patient and ready, like the forest, to receive him back" (p.234).

Frontier societies, women have long observed, enshrined masculine values and interests. In frontier societies, white men roamed free, but men's mobility seemed to spell women's misfortune. (Lake, 1998, p.123)

This is connected with the third possibility related to the non-publication of *TIM*. The novel does not conform to the Australian ideal of the frontier: the 'bush', mateship and the working class hero. Although Sally is portrayed as fairly passive (if not uncritical) in the novel, other women, such as the waitress, Georgina and Fanya, the socialist, do not conform at all to the prevailing stereotype.

The novel itself is set in a run-down commercial area of suburban Sydney and despite its broader setting of the harbour, much of the action takes place near

the Putman shop and the tram depot. So the setting, the depiction of gender roles, the fact that the main male characters are not Australian or British and the lack of subscription to the prevailing ideal of 'mateship' may, in combination with its politics and the absence of the figure of the Digger, have been deemed as both unsympathetic to the then cultural ideal and also, more prosaically, because it would not sell to a public both in Australia and in Britain that seemed to express a preference for outback fiction. Whether or not they had much opportunity to decide otherwise is one of the quirks of the publishing world, which tends to be reactive rather than proactive in the case of most fiction and in this case, the publishers decided that their readers preferred the status quo of the outback novel. Novels set in the outback were written by men and women. The city-dwelling Australians and British readers also, were keen to read these sweeping epics that were, presumably, far removed from their own lifeworlds. The more mundane setting of *TIM* was perhaps too close to the 'reality' of the lives of many readers. Although the novel is set on the harbour, a superb natural landscape, the claustrophobic and containing spaces of Sally's world do not reflect this. Living a tram-ride away from the harbour, Sally rarely sees it and is confined to the more suburban area up the hill.

The urban Australian novel eventually made its way into Australian readership, at least, though not without some controversy. In post-World War II Australia, a significant proportion of the reading public were eager to read the work of Ruth Park, whose stories of a family living in the slums of inner city Sydney, *The Harp in the South* (1948) and *Poor Man's Orange* (1949) (followed in 1985 by *Missus*, to form a trilogy) dealt with the effect of deprivation on the lives of the Darcy women and their domestic concerns. It has never been out of print since its publication. Teather (1991) points out that none of the other social realist novels up to that point had dealt with the working class and "underclass" (1991, p.471). The unpublished novel had first won an award from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (*SMH*), a broadsheet owned by the Fairfax family. When it was serialised in the *SMH* there was some debate about the tastefulness of its subject matter. Most letters to the paper praised the work but the letters condemning it were, if not on a par with those in praise, certainly numerous enough to provoke the paper's proprietor, Warren Fairfax, to publish an article discussing the relationship between art and the 'real' world. A later editorial claimed that the

novel could “well do more to arouse the community’s conscience than any number of sociological reports, however carefully compiled” (*SMH*, 17.01.1947).

What those who complained objected to was its setting and the depiction of that setting. Cultural cringe and a supposedly more post-war cosmopolitan outlook (Teather, 1991) did not sit well with a story that showed the appalling conditions in which the poor were living: with bugs, soot, poor health, pitiful wages and an alarming rate of infant mortality. “Residents [of Surry Hills] lived, worked and played in the small part of the inner city familiar to them and knew virtually nothing from first hand of the rest of Sydney, let alone of Australia as a whole” (Teather, 1991, p.471). The outback spaces, ubiquitous in imaginative renderings of Australia, were more likely to be read by people in wealthier suburbs that were just a few miles from the slums of Darlinghurst and Surry Hills. Perhaps the proximity of the slums and their conditions were too ‘close’ for some readers. Nonetheless, Park’s novels gained, Post World War II, a growing readership. One could speculate that if the novel had not won the award from the newspaper and had it not been serialised, it, too, might not have been published. Clearly, the more liberal *SMH* was supportive of the novel. It is ironic that the unpublished *Harford* should earlier have worked as a domestic servant for a previous generation of the Fairfax family who controlled the paper.

*The Harp in the South* became, despite the critical voices, a ‘classic’ of Australian literature. Although the ‘classic’ Australian novel of the post-Great War period did feature the working class man and broadly socialist ideals, the egalitarian nature of the Australian male hero was of more importance than the overthrow of capitalism. That said, Park’s work centres on the female characters and their lives, mostly domestic and within the confines of the slum but that was nearly thirty years later.

Justice had been a theme of earlier texts, written quite often about shearers and other rural workers. A ‘fair go’, the Australian concept of justice, was tied to notions of decent working conditions, a reasonable rate of pay and recognition of one’s work - for men. Women were secondary to the trade union movement (Crosby, 2007, p.33; Brigden, 2005), to politics (despite having been

given the vote in 1902 - white women only; indigenous Australians were to wait another 65 years for the same right), to the cultural life of the nation. Yes. There were some strong women depicted in frontier fiction. Henry Lawson, the son of a feminist campaigner and writer, invoked the stoic, practical bush woman in his fiction and Miles (Stella) Franklin and Henry Handel Richardson (Ethel Richardson) also gave their female characters a more active role; but these characters existed alongside the heroic Australian male.<sup>106</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century as more of the European population was native born, the development of the rugged frontier life (most people actually lived in cities) and the bush hero took hold and was perpetuated as texts, biographical, fictional and non-fictional, circulated among the population in books, periodicals and poetry. One poet, A. B. ('Banjo') Paterson, encapsulated the outback hero in verses such as *The Man From Snowy River* and *Clancy of the Overflow*.<sup>107</sup> It is virtually impossible to separate the strands of mateship, bush mythology and the Anzac, all of which excluded women and which dominated (and dominates) national consciousness. Today in Australia, the 'Aussie battler' - the working man doing his best and the sporting hero, continue to be venerated in much the same way.

Each of these strands is absent from *TIM*. The rituals of mateship and the working class hero are invisible in the narrative. The working class hero as extolled by the men in *TIM* is an international Leninist hero, not a frontier bush hero. And the frontier hero is certainly not female. Post-Great War, the areas of exclusion for women were increased. Already the pub, sport and the races were zones of exclusion (Conway, 1986). In addition there were now the club rooms of the Returned Soldiers' League (RSL) (Inglis, 1987, p.52), where men could gather to drink and talk. The women who had taken on 'men's' jobs during the war were sent back to kitchen and hearth while the men were given "the world's most generous system of military pensions, and [legislated] preference in public service employment" (Inglis, 1987, p.52). There was no such

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<sup>106</sup>Both writers made a point of developing strong, female characters but both women chose to be known professionally by male names.

<sup>107</sup> My country-bred maternal grandfather knew most of Paterson's verse by rote, not uncommon among his generation. Both the resonance and the romance appealed to Australians. The reality, for my grandfather as a police inspector in outback towns, was rather different, according to my mother, who vividly remembers life during the Depression and the hardship, drunkenness and violence that were commonplace. Living 'over the shop' in a small country town, she saw much that was unedifying in the behaviour of frontier man.

legislation for the nurses and women doctors who returned, apart from one nurse, who was granted assistance to become a farmer (Inglis, 1987, p.53).

In Australian national life and in its texts, the bushman, the Anzac, the working class hero and the mate were celebrated. Very few frontier women depicted in these texts, even if stoic and active, were allowed textual space to demonstrate their own 'battler' status. There is little celebration of the women who "rode buck jumpers and fought bush fires but were still expected to dedicate themselves to the interests of the home" (Giles, 1987, p.6). As Kingston (1994, p.63) points out, in tales of mateship, there is no place for women.<sup>108</sup>

It was texts that celebrated the frontier life that were being published, not only in Australia but also in Britain. Many of the novels written by Australians or set in Australia that were circulating at that time that *TIM* was written were published in Britain for both the Australian and the British market. According to Nile and Darby (1987, p.13):

British dominance of publishing may, in part, explain why *The Invaluable Mystery* did not reach the bookshops. English publishers generally preferred Australian books which dealt with the outback and presented a sense of bush and farming life. They were not particularly interested in novels which grappled with urban affairs, much less the doings of city radicals. (p.13).

And perhaps, unlike the later novel of Park's *The Harp in the South*, which did not really feature any radicals or overt radical politics, the political activities of the characters in *TIM* as well as their situation and the setting, added one on the other, to the absence of the Anzac. None of this was, given the nature of British and Australian publishing, likely to induce a sympathetic reading. At this point, European Australia was strikingly British at its cultural core. The fictional bush heroes might ride off to the outback with little more than a Matilda, a swag and a billycan but their words and attitudes were a hybrid of Britishness, immigrant culture and a newly emerging Australian identity.<sup>109</sup> The resulting hybridity

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<sup>108</sup> "Tandis que l'historiographie australienne se penchait sur le theme de la 'cameraderie' (mateship), et sur les stereotypes nationaux, elle n'octroyait aucune place à la femme, sans toutefois vraiment l'exclure" (Kingston, 1994, p.63).

<sup>109</sup> A Matilda, is the bag/rucksack that holds the swag, 'bluey' or bed roll. A billy can is a small metal bucket with a lid that is used to carry water, boil it, make tea and cook stew. My own

meant that these images for the reading public on both sides of the equator held fascination and familiarity in equal measure. Rushdie (1992, p.18) identifies this hybridity, talking of his own upbringing in Mumbai with an intimate knowledge of things British, from test matches to Enid Blyton. Australians are “haunted” by the cultural heritage that they share with Britain (Craven, 2004,p.48). A fraction of this is nostalgia for a dream-Britain/England that has never existed; a fraction is a smug and slightly superior affection for the quirkiness of the British way of life (I once overheard an Australian comment: “God love them, they call that bit of pebbly shingle a beach”). Another fraction is a reverence for cultural institutions such as parliament (not the monarchy, however), the invention of cricket (so long as Australians are victorious) and the greener than green landscape - the English pastoral; the third fraction is an ill at ease chippiness that provokes feelings of cultural ‘cringe’ along with an egalitarian offence at the perceived hierarchical, class-ridden and hidebound nature of British society.<sup>110</sup> All of these elements can be found in the outback literary tradition. The circulation of texts and ideas between the countries fed notions of belonging as well as hybridity and distance.

Only some of this substance is to be found in *TIM* and not to any great degree. The hybridity that Harford explores is that of the German/Australo-British Max and Sally, the immigrant ambivalence of Stepanoff and Fanya. Although Harford does not touch on the additional contentious issue of the treatment of the indigenous inhabitants of Australia, the canvas of the novel and its echoes of Harford’s own activism are similar to that of feminists (British and Australian) who, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, campaigned for the rights of indigenous people in Australia. Their interpretation of “contemporary imperial issues involved a critique of Australian frontier gender and race relations” (Paisley, 1998, p.79). Like Harford, they saw their struggle in international terms and, like Harford, they struggled to have their voices heard.

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childhood is saturated with the bushwalking and picnic ritual of watching my father make “Billy Tea” - a specialised craft of the bushman that differs from the making of a pot of tea. Even one who is sceptical of the Australian masculine ideal cannot escape carrying with her some of the bushman’s lore.

<sup>110</sup> Australia is, of course, bound by its own class-ridden and hierarchical society. It is simply that the boundaries are more fluid and class consciousness is less overtly expressed.

Harford, however, was not forgotten. Not only was her novel published but it was part of a broader cultural recognition of the contributions of Australian women writers who had, like their British counterparts, struggled to be taken seriously, despite the steady growth in the publishing of women's fiction throughout the twentieth Century (Modjeska, 1981). Critics of this period took an interest in her work, especially her "exploration of the experience of gender-determined tensions in the spheres of political activism, writing and sexuality" (Strauss, 1999, p.305). In addition to the difficulties of a male-dominated literary, political and economic landscape, Australian women had also to contend with the cultural production of the newly emerging bush/frontier working class/Anzac hero.

At the time Harford's novel was published, so was her poetry (1985) and later, the Lesbia Harford Annual lecture was instituted to celebrate women's participation in Australian politics. In addition, in 1991, the play *Earthly Paradise* was produced, written by Darryl Emmerson, who said that Harford was, "an absolute idealist, not only in her private life, where she often came to grief, but also in her political thinking... She belonged to a group of people who believed if you really worked hard enough you could improve the lives of everyone" (Daly, *The Melbourne Age*, 05.06.1991). Perhaps it was, in combination with the prevailing culture, Harford's own politics of place and gender, her idealism, that enabled her to write the book she had wanted to produce but which conversely prevented its contemporary publication.

Yet the politics of place in Harford's case are those of many women; then and now, they are the politics of the periphery:

Women are practised on the peripheries. Our memories, our stories, like the ways we live, are formed in movement between inner and outer, past and future, centre and margin, between the physical environment and the social world. We shape our cities and re-shape them from the edge ... We live in houses that weren't built for our dreams, in suburbs connected by transport systems we can't control. We fit the stories to the worlds we inherit. Or do we? (Modjeska, 1989, p.2)

Did Harford? Or did she fashion something in between her inheritance and her ideal? Had she lived, what else might she have created in her pursuit of the politics of place?

### *Conclusion*

There is no way of knowing what Harford's lifeworld would have become had she lived longer. The politics of place, for Harford, were directly influenced by her observations of the spaces inhabited by women: the constrictions, the containment and the peripheral spaces that women occupied in a culture that valued the imaginative rendering of outside, frontier spaces more than the interior, domestic spaces; where what women did within those interior spaces was accorded little recognition. Such spaces were seen as banal and commonplace, as were the suburbs where the majority of the population lived. All of that said, the specific geoliterary terrains invoked by Harford demonstrate a more located and localised feminist narrative (Friedman, 1998, p.226). While *TIM* shares some of the more general claims represented in a wider feminist history, it is also embedded within a cultural matrix that specifically *excludes* some of the dominant renderings of masculinity (the Anzac, the frontiersman) that were circulating at the time of the novel's writing. The choice to exclude these and to centre the narrative on a more interior lifeworld for the central female character is a deliberate sidelining of the period in which the novel is set. The politics of place, for Harford, were entangled with the politics of migration, 'foreignness', the power of the state and, most importantly, the politics of 'placing' women within Australian culture and of women knowing their 'place'.

Sally's restricted life in the small area of Mosman where she is located and, equally importantly, contained within the domestic sphere, is everything that the more popular novels of frontier life were not: it is centred on a woman and her domestic lifeworld; it is suburban in its setting and radical in its politics, all of which would have been deeply unsettling for many in the early years post-Great War. There are no soldier heroes and no wide open spaces (or at least none that Sally has any access to during the course of the novel). There is Sally, bearing witness to the 'home front' (in all its permutations) from within the

contained, interior space of her lifeworld. According to Rich (1984, p.8) a place on the map is a place in history. It all depends on whose history is being told and who is telling the tale.

### Box 7.3

#### Context

#### Australia, 1891-1927 \*

- 1891 - Lesbia Harford is born  
The shearer's strike begins and precipitates the foundation of the Australian Labor Party.
- 1899-1902 - The Second Boer War in which Australian soldiers take part
- 1901 - The federation of the colonies of Australia into one nation of six states.  
Miles (Stella) Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* is published.
- 1902 - Women are allowed to vote in elections.
- 1910 - The Royal Australian Navy is founded.  
Henry Handel (Ethel) Richardson publishes *The Getting of Wisdom*
- 1914 - War is declared and the first of the troops of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) leave for overseas.
- 1915 - Australian troops suffer immense casualties at Gallipoli
- 1916 - Lesbia Harford graduates from the University of Melbourne
- 1917 - Henry Handel Richardson's *Australia Felix* is published, the first in the series of novels later to be collected as *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*.
- 1918 - The Armistice is signed and hostilities cease.
- 1920 - Harford moves to Sydney  
Louisa Lawson, feminist writer, mother of Henry Lawson, writer, dies.
- 1921 - Harford marries Pat Harford. She begins to write *The Invaluable Mystery*.
- 1925 - Harford moves back to Melbourne after separating from her husband.
- 1926 - Jean Devanny, writer and activist has her first novel, *The Butcher Shop*, published.  
*Working Bullocks* by Katharine Susannah Prichard is published.
- 1927 - Harford dies.  
The first parliament sits in Canberra, the newly created capital of Australia.

\* Rather than giving an overview of the year 1922, in which the novel is generally thought to have been written (it was published in 1987), I have given details of events throughout Harford's life in order to give some idea of the Australian context. These are taken from Clark (1981), Ferrier (1985a), various accounts of Harford's life, Modjeska (1981; 1989), Murrie (1998) and Paisley (1998).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Escaping to Barsetshire: Angela Thirkell's therapeutic landscape

'...it's delightful to have you home again. And how was London?' he asked, in the sort of tone in which he might have inquired after the health of a poor relation who was not likely to recover.

She smiled rather sadly.

'Terrifically busy about nothing,' she said. (Benson, 1922, p.15)

She turned another page and read, entranced, 'Be sure to look well every morning to your pickled pork and hams'. She sighed to have such things.

Nature's Prozac. *Country life...* (Cheek, 2000, p.142)

*Vita*: Rebecca West wrote an article about *The Land* which succeeded in annoying me; I resent being told that my feeling for the country is not genuine, but only what I think people *ought* to feel about the country ...

*Virginia*: Damn Rebecca - who doesn't know a poem from a potato. (Atkins, 1995, p.26)

The end of a novel, like the end of a children's dinner-party, must be made up of sweetmeats and sugar-plums. (Trollope, 1870, p. 436)

Harford and Angela Thirkell (AT) were contemporaries, both living in Melbourne at the same time and both writing.<sup>111</sup> Both of them knew what it was to be married to men who drank more alcohol than was good for them and both knew what it was to live with a violent spouse. Their politics, however, were as far apart as they could conceivably be. Harford was a socialist and AT a conservative. The threads of the domestic concerns and lives of women, however, run through their work. These are more observations than comparisons. This thesis does not aim to set the work of one author against another but it does acknowledge that texts and authors form part of a material culture in which other texts circulate.

This chapter is concerned with the novel, *High Rising (HR)* and more specifically, the landscape of the narrative, for this novel was the first in a series of novels about the everyday lives of the inhabitants of Barsetshire, first created by

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<sup>111</sup> AT was and is the common acronym for Thirkell.

Anthony Trollope, whose works AT greatly admired.<sup>112</sup> She adapted Trollope's Barsetshire to her own design and it was to be a successful landscape; one that enabled her to work professionally for many decades, providing both material and emotional comfort (see Box 8.1 for a plot summary).

Concern with the novel does not preclude discussion of its successors, for this novel is a part of a series, one carrying with it "the notion of the everyday as immanent, replete, in excess of any end ... that distinguishes the series from other forms of fiction" (Langbauer, 1999, p.236). This is the only one of the novels discussed that formed part of a series. Although Wimsey appears in many of Sayers' novels, he is a serial character rather than part of a series. The interpretation of the text as part of a series differs from a stand-alone text. Since characters have the space to develop over the course of the series, there can be more familiarity with them and their place within the geoliterary terrains. In the case of AT's series of Barsetshire novels, the setting itself also develops. These and other issues related to the series novel will be discussed later in the chapter, including my response to this novel, which I read out of sequence. By the time I came to read *HR*, I 'knew' Barsetshire fairly well.

Although she had no idea that this novel would begin such a long and successful series, AT did know, as a writer, that the form of the book and its intent was both a pleasure to her and a style of writing that she enjoyed. Part of that enjoyment came from the ability of the author to escape her personal difficulties and set them aside for a therapeutic visit to Barsetshire. In this chapter, I explore the therapeutic landscape as the written emotional territory of the author in light of this particular novel and those that followed. I also discuss the characterisation of the novel as a key element of the landscape, as well as the narrative structure which forms the basis of Barsetshire and its later expansion.

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<sup>112</sup> Anthony Trollope created the fictional country of Barsetshire for a series of 19<sup>th</sup> Century novels that centred on the clergy and their lives. The Barsetshire novels also had a political theme, chronicling the activities and lives of the ruling elite and the gentry. Some of the novels explore themes of social inequality. *The Warden*, a personal favourite of mine, is a gentle and moving account of old age, death and economic hardship set against a broader backdrop of clerical ambition. AT wrote an introduction to the 1955 edition of the novel.

### Box 8.1

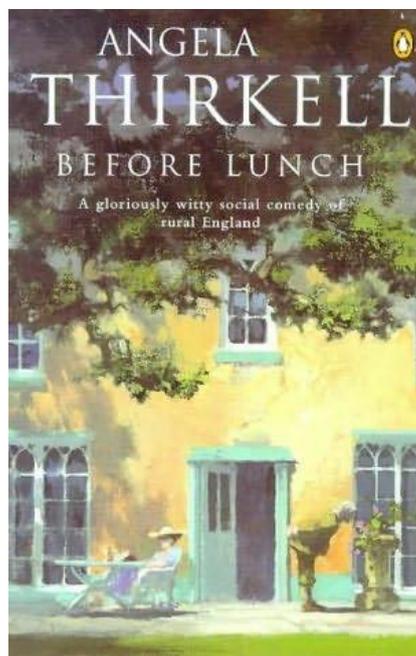
*High Rising* by Angela Thirkell, published 1933.

*High Rising* is the first of the Barsetshire novels written by AT. Laura Morland, writer, divides her time between a flat in London and a cottage in Barsetshire. She is a widow who has brought up her four sons, the youngest of whom, Tony, features in the novel as a primary school-age child. Most of the action takes place in the village of High Rising. Laura's friend and fellow writer, George Knox, lives in Low Rising. He is widowed and has a young adult daughter, Sybil. He has recently employed a new secretary, Miss Una Grey and it is Miss Grey's presence in the Knox household on which much of the narrative turns but Laura is the central figure of the novel. Miss Grey is disliked by most of George's friends, including Dr Ford and Anne Todd, a woman who looks after her frail and dementing mother.

Tony's presence and that of Laura's housekeeper, Stoker provide much of the comedy in the novel as well as the idiosyncratic manner in which Laura and George talk to each other.

Miss Grey begins to send poison pen letters and to cause mischief in the village. She is packed off to a single woman as her secretary. This enables the narrative to be wound up with the pairing off of two couples: Sybil Knox to Adrian Coates, Laura's publisher; and Anne Todd to George Knox.

This sets the tone and structure for future Barsetshire novels. Although Laura is depicted here as a part-time resident, she does appear in many of the other novels and later, as a full-time resident. Laura is said to be a portrait of AT herself.



A cover from one of the later Barsetshire novels (1939)

In addition, I explore the material and cultural territory of Barsetshire, questioning its reflection of the author's own biographical situation and her relationships with her family. With some hesitance about the risks of over-speculation, I examine AT's conscious choice of setting and what it meant to her

in material, political and emotional terms. The study of characterisation also includes the depiction of servants. Fiction during the interwar years showed an increasing awareness on the part of writers about domestic servants, perhaps, in part because the relationship between employer and servant was then beginning subtly and then dramatically to change. In AT's novels, servants have particular prominence, and with their depiction come the difficulties of characterisation and the problematic outcomes of such portraits.

The latter half of the chapter explores the author's relationship with her fictional landscape, offering an altered perspective on notions of therapeutic landscapes. Finally, the critics' perspective on Barsetshire and its creation as well as its re-creator are examined.

### *High Rising*<sup>113</sup>

In 1933, AT wrote *High Rising (HR)*, the primary subject of this chapter. In *HR*, Laura Morland, a writer, widow and mother of four sons, including a small boy, Tony, divides her time between her cottage in Barsetshire (during her youngest son's holidays from boarding school) and a small flat in London. Laura is not *true* Barsetshire but she is part of it at the same time. Laura and Tony live in a cottage in the village of High Rising with Stoker, the housekeeper/cook. Further down the road at Low Rising, lives George Knox, who writes historical biographies (said to be modelled on the writer, E.V. Lucas, who was a friend of AT: Strickland, 1977, p.81), a widower with a twenty year-old daughter, Sybil. Their main domestic help comes from Annie, often known as "Mr Knox's Annie", who is connected to many local families and who is a friend of Stoker's.

Also living nearby is Anne Todd, an early middle-aged single woman who looks after her mother, who has a bad heart and some form of dementia. A good friend to them both is Dr Ford, who is the local GP. Into this small community comes Una Grey, an attractive Irish woman who acts as George Knox's secretary. Miss Grey, as she is generally referred to in the text (when the characters are

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<sup>113</sup> Please see Box 8.1 for a summary of the plot. Box 8.2 gives a brief biography of the author. The contextual details for 1933 are to be found in Box 4.3. Both *Hostages to Fortune* and *HR* were published in 1933. Appendix 3 contains a full listing of AT's works and their respective reviews. Of all of the authors in this thesis, AT was the most widely published and prolific.

not calling her the 'Incubus'), is interested in attracting George Knox and generally shows herself to be manipulative, insecure and a torment to Sybil Knox. As the story progresses, Miss Grey's behaviour becomes more noticeably aggressive and vindictive and includes writing poison pen letters, until Mrs Birkett, a headmaster's wife who is staying with Laura Morland, recognises Miss Grey as a former school secretary, "the one who went mad" and who had to be "sent away" from the school (*HR*, 1933, p.272). Miss Grey is neatly dispatched to work for a single woman (where, it is believed, she can do no harm) and the loose ends of the narrative are tied up, with Laura's publisher being paired off with Sybil, Dr. Ford being rebuffed by the now orphaned Anne Todd, who instead marries George Knox.

Although this is the first of the Bassetshire novels and the characters re-appear in several of the later novels, Bassetshire is not mentioned. The characters are more specifically outlined than their surroundings. There are the 'gentry', impoverished and otherwise and then there are the servants.<sup>114</sup> The relationship between the servants and their employers is often mentioned and developed, particularly in the case of Stoker and Laura but it is Laura who is the star turn of the novel. She is eccentric, well-read, funny, generally kind, a doting mother and the confidante, it seems, of most of the village. The portrait of Laura Morland is generally taken to be a fictional portrait of AT herself (Collins, 1994; Strickland, 1977, pp.78-8; Gould, 1993, p.58), although, as with all autobiographical fictional writing, adaptations and imaginative renderings of circumstances and characterisation are made to suit the narrative and the author's personal preference, subconscious as well as conscious. AT admitted, however, that she thought Laura was "nicer" than she was (Strickland, 1977, p.81).

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<sup>114</sup> *Gentry* is a useful term here (particularly in relation to the provincial setting) for it covers that elastic grouping of people during this period who come from the middle and upper classes. Not all members of the middle class necessarily belonged to the gentry during the interwar period, although this does change throughout the course of the Bassetshire novels. Gentry, for the purpose of this discussion, means those who are members of the professional classes and the landed gentry: doctors, lawyers, civil servants, dons, members of the armed forces and the established church, landowners of substantial properties and estates, peers and statesmen and women. They are distinguished by their accents, their choice of clothes and the way they conduct themselves in private and in public. Gentry may not necessarily have large disposable incomes and, in the case of some women, are unlikely to have such unless they marry.

Adrian Coates, her publisher, is somewhat smitten by Laura and relishes her domestic life. Adrian collects Laura for a dinner party and witnesses Tony, sitting up in bed, reading her a tragic poem he has written about a moor hen:

Laura laughed. Adrian laughed too, but very affectionately. He had liked the picture of Laura hugging her poetic son. He had been vaguely conscious for the last week of a surge of domestic feeling in him, and Laura fitted perfectly into the picture. Laura, with her tempestuous brown hair, her shabby black velvet, to which she somehow gave an air of sceptred pall, her red silk shawl falling off her shoulders, tears in her eyes, clasping the elegist to her. (*HR*, p.99)

Adrian later proposes to Laura. She is, however, brisk and business-like after a slightly tipsy Adrian declares himself:

‘When I think of you so brave, all alone, and what I have been, I could kill myself. Laura, couldn’t you marry me, and let me bear your burdens, and be a father to your boys?’

Laura ... poured out a large cup of black coffee, and handed it to Adrian.

‘Sit down and drink this at once,’ said she, not unkindly. ‘While I tell you all about yourself.’

... ‘You may be a good publisher, ... but you are the world’s most blethering ass, Adrian Coates. If I really wanted to punish you, I’d accept you on the spot. Do you think I want a husband, and if I did, do you think I’d want you? I’m old enough to be your mother, or at least, I would be in India. And as for being a father to my boys, do you think three independent young men who are earning their own livings need a father? Bah! As for Tony he doesn’t require one. We get on very well, thank you. Bear my burdens indeed. You great mass of incompetence and conceit, you revolt me. You really do. Here, drink that coffee.’ (*HR*, p.114)

Laura’s businesslike but humorous dressing down of Adrian continues with Laura telling Adrian that he is not in love with her but with Sybil Knox. Adrian agrees.

‘[Y]ou are to promise me you’ll get engaged to Sybil as soon as she’ll have you. Shake hands. And now,’ she continued, ‘eat some sandwiches and pour out coffee for us both.’ (*HR*, p.115)

Laura is not a romantic, except in her fiction. As a writer, she deals with the subject very differently from the way she treats Adrian. The portrait of Laura in *HR* is revealing in its representation of her as a novelist, of her writing and of how she views her work. Laura may look charming and have tempestuous hair that falls down when she is in a highly emotional state, but she is a business woman. The rival publisher Johns might call her a “heavenly fool” (*HR*, p.75), but Laura is astute enough to know just what to do to make her books sell. She is also hardworking. In a later novel, her hard work is praised:

No one could have accused Mrs Morland of being a dreamer, for she wrote and delivered her books with punctuality and despatch and her publisher Adrian Coates said she had never been a best seller and never would be, but he wouldn't mind having a few more steady sellers like Mrs. Morland who could be relied upon to deliver the goods ... on the dot. Which winged words made no impression at all upon the gifted writer herself, who though she rather enjoyed her own Madame Koska thrillers and often re-read them, had no particular belief in them or herself, and only hoped to be able to go on supporting herself and helping her family and grand-family. (Thirkell, 1955, p.240)

She is deprecating of her work and does not rate it highly as literature but she does work hard and ensures that she researches any new subject well. She also answers all letters sent to her by fans on the grounds that “if people take the trouble to write to you, you like to show your gratitude” (1956, p.180). Her career mirrors that of AT:

Laura had written for magazines for some years past in a desultory way, but now [after the death of her husband] the problem of earning money was serious.” (*HR*, p.22)

For AT, the problem of earning a living became serious when her (very much alive) husband was out of work and she had three children to support as well (see Box 8.2).

Having decided that, “next to racing, murder and sport, the great reading public of England (the female section) like to read about clothes” (*HR*, p.22), Laura, who is not particularly interested in them or knowledgeable about them, sets about learning, with “real industry” (p.22). Employing Anne Todd as a typist and advisor helps, as Anne explains that owning so few clothes herself, she loves to read about them. She it is who checks details.

## Box 8.2

### Angela Mackail Thirkell 1890-1961

AT's early life was one of much remembered happiness to her in later life. She was the granddaughter of the painter, Edward Burne-Jones and Georgina MacDonald Burne-Jones. Her mother, Margaret, was their daughter. AT's father, John Mackail, was a Professor of Poetry, as well as a civil servant. AT had a brother, Denis, who was also a successful novelist between the wars and a sister, Clare.

After the completion of her education, AT spent time in Europe after which she returned to England. Against her parents' wishes, she married James Campbell McInnes, a professional singer. Initially happy, the marriage became more difficult as McInnes drank more heavily and had affairs with other men and women. He was also violent to AT and to one of the domestic servants, whom he raped. AT took her three children, Graham, Colin and Mary to live with her parents. AT sued McInnes for divorce, citing cruelty and adultery. The divorce was public and harrowing for AT. Close upon the decree *nisi* being granted, the baby, Mary, died.

In 1919, AT married Captain George Lancelot Allnut Thirkell, an Australian engineer recently engaged in the fighting of the Great War. AT, 'Thirk' as he was known and the children journeyed by troopship to Australia, where they eventually settled in Malvern, a suburb of Melbourne, in 1921. A son, Lance, was born to AT and Thirk in 1922.

Thirk's attempts at running two businesses failed successively, the last when he was the victim of fraudulent practice. AT became the household breadwinner, working as a freelance writer. Increasingly homesick and unhappy in the marriage, AT left Melbourne and Thirk for good, going back to England and her parents, taking Lance with her, in 1929. The necessity to earn money and to be independent was paramount and AT began working on novels and other works. By 1961 when she died, AT had written 37 novels, the most well-known being the Barsetshire series. Her relationships with her two elder sons were rocky, particularly with Colin MacInnes, who also became a writer of fiction. Graham wrote four volumes of autobiography.

AT's final years were difficult because of her genuine dislike of the changes she witnessed in society and in her life (these were the years of post-war austerity). She was also suffering from a painful and rare blood disorder. She died leaving an estate of £80,000, a measure of her success as a writer.



Angela Thirkell, by Thea Proctor (the same Melbourne artist whose painting is featured on the cover of Lesbia Harford's book, *The Invaluable Mystery*).

Information from Collins, 1994; Gould, 1993; McInnes, 1965, 1968; Strickland, 1977; Thirkell, L. (1983).

After educating her three eldest sons on the proceeds of her series novels featuring Madame Koska the dress designer, Laura is contented. There is little creative angst about Laura. She also never takes herself seriously (p.23), calling herself a “potboiler” (p.44), albeit taking a “lot of trouble over her books” (p.23). She is able to afford [to rent] a small flat in London, a cottage in the country and a “middle-class car” (p.23). We are told that if she were more introspective, “she might have wondered at herself for doing so much in ten years” (p.23). When she first shyly discusses her work with the publisher, Adrian Coates, he asks to see her work.

‘You mightn’t like it,’ said Laura, in her deep voice. ‘It’s not high-brow. I’ve just got to work, that’s all. You see my husband was nothing but an expense to me while he was alive, and naturally he is no help to me now he is dead, though, of course, less expensive, so I thought if I could write some rather good bad books, it would help with the boys’ education.’

‘Good bad books?’

‘Yes. Not very good books, you know, but good of a second rate kind. That’s all I could do,’ she said gravely.

So in time her first story went to Adrian, who recognising in it a touch of good badness almost amounting to genius, gave her a contract for two more. Her novels had been steadily successful ... (*HR*. p.42)

Like AT, Laura writes first in longhand into three-penny exercise books (p.53) and then types them up (after a comic struggle with typewriter ribbon) or pays Anne Todd to do so. Although Laura thinks her writing is illegible (p.53), AT’s work was meticulous. Having seen a Thirkell manuscript, I can vouch for this. The text is written on the right-hand side, leaving the left-hand side free for notes, additions and queries. The work is written in pencil in a clearly legible hand and almost looks like anyone else’s ‘fair copy’.<sup>115</sup>

Laura tells one of the characters that “practically all of us write to educate our children, or help our grandchildren, or supplement our small incomes, or to be able to travel. Not for the sake of Literature” (1956, p.77). For Laura, as for AT, writing is a practical matter, one that is bound up with educating her child

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<sup>115</sup> Ms of *Miss Bunting* (1945), from the manuscript collection of the British Library, MS 69036

and earning a living. Although self-deprecating of her industry and her application, Laura is still precise about details and takes professional pride in the finished product, even if she is slightly dismissive of the value of her writing.

Laura's dismissal of her work is contrasted with the respect she has for the works of her neighbour George Knox, who writes historical biography. Laura tells George that her work "doesn't matter, as you very well know. It is a literary hack's day labour." (*HR*, p.59). In a later novel, when Laura is well and truly part of the Bassetshire scene (she appears, sometimes, very briefly, in sixteen of the novels), she discusses her writing with Lord Crosse, who mentions that his late wife commented to him that Laura "made [words] do everything" she wanted "with no apparent effort". Laura replies:

'Blood, tears and sweat,' said Mrs Morland in her most Mrs Siddons [a Regency actress famous for her tragic roles] tones. 'I don't believe in taking a year to write one page... but there are times when words are like a road block. You can't move it and you can't pass it and you can't go back.'  
(Thirkell, 1956 p.78)

AT's blood, tears and sweat are evident in her letters and the few papers that she kept. Due to paper shortages in the post-war years, she had also to watch the number of words she wrote for each book and often editors would suggest more cuts to the text in order to save on paper. In one of her letters, AT mentions the advice of one of the staff at Hamish Hamilton, her publisher (every 50 pages of typescript as 10,000 words), and decides to write first and cut back later (letter to Margaret Bird, 28<sup>th</sup> November, 1956). Even when she is in the final stages of her illness, she battles on to make deadlines (Bird & Aldred, 2002).

By contrast, George Knox of Low Rising is adversarial with his publishers, pompous, prepared to talk about himself and his work, to monopolise conversation and to take his work and himself as a writer very seriously. For all that, the portrait of George is affectionate and his character also hints at AT's attitude to men. Fond as she is of George, Laura knows him to be weak-willed in many cases, ignorant of his daughter's needs and concerns, and generally focused on himself. George expands at length on any topic, adding a dash of

charm for his listeners, as he does to Laura, who tells him to be quiet, or that he is “disgusting” (*HR*, p.63) when he talks about publishers and money. While George has a keen sense of humour, which Laura positively encourages, he can be a bore, ready to hold the floor on any subject:

‘You laugh at me Laura. Richard [III] was, of course, so essentially an uncle himself that we cannot think of him in the capacity of nephew, but I fear you cannot claim him [as one of the kings who did not suffer from the tyranny of uncles]. As for Canute and Alfred, I used the expression English kings, of course, in its usual connotation; that is, meaning all kings who were not English, or all kings since the Conquest, at which date, as you are aware, the kings and queens of England begin. And, mark me, Laura, none of the royal uncles, so far as we know, ever tipped a nephew... The more I see of uncles, the better I like aunts. And you, my dear Laura, are the aunt incarnate, perfection.’ (*HR*, p.61)

George can be put out, too, such as when Laura steals his limelight, contradicts him or “outtalks” him (*AT*, 1959), or when she shows a grasp of practical matters like the workings of central heating (1959, p.15). Later, Anne Todd, now his wife, is grateful to Laura for “being as it were a shock-absorber of some of his ponderous divagations” but, even so, “sometimes the snip-snap of their conversation” is too much for her (*AT*, 1959, p.7). Affectionate as *AT*’s portrait of George Knox appears, there is also kindly contempt from the author in her portrayal of George’s vanity.

The no-nonsense character of Dr Ford decides that an ailing George Knox (in bed with influenza) is melodramatic enough to have a “death-bed marriage” at one point in the novel. George is fond of Laura and they are foils for each other, the one self-deprecating and down to earth and the other overly dramatic and self-important. As minor characters, Dr Ford and Anne Todd are more inclined to Laura’s point of view, although this does not prevent Anne from marrying George Knox.

Dr Ford is a classic Thirkell creation: male, stoic, single and a character who operates as a connection between the characters in the narrative as he does his ‘rounds’. He dispenses good sense and comfort to his neighbours. Another such character is Mr Wickham, the agent for one of the larger estates in West Barsetshire. He is most prominent in the novel, *Private Enterprise*, one of the

wartime novels (published in 1947 but still very much a part of the wartime landscape). He dispenses common sense and precious bottles of almost forgotten pre-war spirits such as whisky. An ex-naval officer, he is received warmly by everyone in the district. He has no real romantic liaisons, as Dr Ford does (albeit one-sidedly) with Anne Todd.

Anne - “don’t touch me, I can’t stand sympathy” - Todd (*HR*, p.290) is not wealthy and is devoted to nursing her mother. With the help of Dr Ford, who is in unrequited love with Anne, and with the assistance of the housekeeper/cook, Louisa, Anne looks after her mother and tries to minimise the impact of her mother’s dementia on the local tradespeople. Mrs Todd is inclined to order goods and then forget about them, as well as forgetting about paying. The single, early to late middle-aged woman, often with little money, with responsibilities such as those of Anne Todd, is a character to which AT returns in other books. Sometimes they have careers as carers, governesses or secretaries and sometimes, as is the case with Miss Merriman and Marjorie Phelps, they marry later in life.<sup>116</sup> AT remarked in an introduction to a Jane Austen novel (*Persuasion*, 1946) that it seemed to her that “women novelists are far more interesting than men; as indeed, with the greatest respect for men, they so often are.” (p.xii). Many of AT’s women characters are memorable, particularly older women.

The younger women tend to be divided between two ‘types’ for AT: shy, gentle and a little timid, tending toward the romantic, like Sybil Knox or hearty, jolly hockey sticks, no-nonsense women who breed pigs and work the land, like Emmie Graham and Lucy Marling. They are not cloyingly romantic but AT manages to direct these characters towards romance and marriage without too much in the way of the lover-like conversation she employs with women like Sybil Knox. Two younger women stand out among these groups: Clarissa Graham (who does not appear in *HR* but in a number of other novels in the series) and Una Grey. Clarissa is an attractive, artistic, slightly waspish young woman who finds herself at odds with her surroundings. She earns a degree from Cambridge in engineering draughtsmanship (one of the few younger Bassetshire women to have a university education). She is talented but troubled, affectionate and yet

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<sup>116</sup> As the characters mentioned appear in several of the Bassetshire novels, no single text has been identified.

affected. Clarissa's difficult emotional life is 'tidied away' by her marriage to Charles Belton, who is seen as 'taming' her.

Like Clarissa, Una is 'tidied away' after her emotional life runs out of control and has a damaging effect on the inhabitants of High and Low Rising. Dr Ford concedes that she is good at nursing, "a curious mixture ... as jealous and neurotic as they make them, but she is a wonderful nurse" (*HR*, p.183). Miss Grey is attractive and can be pleasant but is quickly seen (by Laura and others) to be manipulating the Knox household with a view to annexing George as a potential partner. She is jealous of both Laura and Sybil and writes poison pen letters. Her emotional instability is recognised by the other characters but for the purposes of the plot, this realisation develops slowly and Miss Grey becomes the 'wicked witch' figure whom everyone can discuss and dissect in private conversation. Crucially, she is not only capable of making others unhappy and being unhappy herself, but she is also an outsider.<sup>117</sup> She is not a Bassetshire woman, she is not even English. Although Laura at this stage is not fully Bassetshire, she is a resident and gentry. Una Grey is seen as being gentry(ish) too, but she also occupies that amorphous stratum of servant/not quite servant populated by secretaries, governesses and land agents. When a confrontation occurs, Laura, who has suffered a great deal at Una Grey's hands, is more sympathetic than her friends. Laura's kindly meant gestures, such as efforts to calm Una Grey, are met with verbal abuse. While AT's portrayal is not unsympathetic, Una Grey is very much a 'type' and is seen as such by everyone except Laura, as this passage demonstrates:

'But Anne, what have we done?' said Laura, still ... bewildered. 'She's only a girl after all ... I don't know why she thinks I hate her. I don't like her ... and she has made a lot of trouble, but it was awful to see her on the floor crying. It was something we had no business to see.'

'It was something she had no business to do. If Mrs Birkett hadn't been here, she would probably have got round you again, and you'd have probably asked her to stay with you till Mr Knox married her. You mustn't worry, Mrs Morland. ...

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<sup>117</sup> Philo & Parr (2004) observe that tolerance can be less likely to be extended to 'incomers' whose behaviour is manifestly different from local people. The authors' study of people suffering from mental ill health while living in the Highlands of Scotland shows that, while some sufferers find the landscape therapeutic, others can feel ostracised for being 'other' rather than the perceived 'norm'.

She will be perfectly all right in a few days. She is that unfortunate type who must be in love with someone - any doctor would tell you about it. She will be quite happy with Miss Hocking. ... If you meet her again in a few months, you'll find her quite friendly again and quite forgetting all these rampages. (*HR*, p.281)<sup>118</sup>

Thus is Miss Grey tidied away (the women dedicate themselves to organising this as George has been found to be incapable of, or too frightened to, 'dismiss' her from his service) and finds employment with a single woman who will, apparently not present a problem to Miss Grey's troubled emotions. Laura's doubt remains but the plot is now ready to be redirected to some matchmaking and happy ever after. Of Miss Grey, we hear very little apart from one or two recollections in two other works (1934b & 1939) of her stay in Low Rising. But, not being of Bassetshire, she is soon forgotten in the final matching up of pairs and talk of marriage.

There are a number of older married and widowed women in the Bassetshire novels. Laura is one of the fuller characterisations but there are others such as Lady Graham, Mrs Crawley and Lavinia Brandon. Rare among the older married or widowed women, Laura's income is derived from the work she does, rather than an allowance from a husband or an inheritance. As Lee (2005, p.180) remarks, "[Thirkell] is certainly no feminist, but her most interesting character types are women with a skill or a profession." Miss Sparling, a headmistress in *The Headmistress* (1943), who appears in other books in the series, is attractive and competent, a woman of whom one takes notice. As Fritzer (1999, 90) points out, "Thirkell's attitude toward her female characters is complex. Always the dichotomy between conservative society and her identification with her accomplished female characters creates a kind of tension," one that would have been felt generally at the time of AT's writing and still is in certain circles: the

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<sup>118</sup> Una Grey ends up on the floor after succumbing to strong emotions when she is confronted by Amy Birkett. The tone of the scene in which Una Grey collapses is very much one of the 'mad' perpetrator's explosive confession, full of vitriol and irrational claims. These were often used in crime fiction of the time as a way of exposing the mechanics of a crime. Here, it is more than a plot device. It conveys the totality of Una Grey's unsuitability in the Bassetshire milieu. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) claim that the acting out of madness by female characters in fiction is the way in which authors extend women characters' ranges beyond the stereotype. They cite the first Mrs Rochester (Bertha), in Brontë's (Charlotte) *Jane Eyre*, as a female character who is free to act out emotions that other female characters, particularly Jane Eyre, are too repressed to exhibit. Although I am not entirely in accord with the authors' reading of Brontë's (Emily) *Wuthering Heights*, I find their interpretation of the 'madwoman' one that continues to be arresting and challenging.

‘womanly’ woman versus the career-driven woman (and which is still played out in popular culture in such films as *Working Girl* and *The Devil Wears Prada*). As a ‘career woman’ herself, AT perhaps had a great deal of sympathy with both Laura and Miss Sparling, who were obliged to earn their money. Neither of these characters is seen in any way as a drudge or as unfulfilled in their work. Laura, while deprecating of her novels, also works hard and cares about the standard of her writing. She may call them ‘good bad’ books alluding to their content but there is a pride taken in crafting them. Miss Sparling is also someone who takes her work seriously and does it well. When she marries an Oxford don later in the series, she is still regarded as someone of distinction. Rather than ‘fading’ into her role as wife, part of her husband’s milieu, Miss Sparling is still regarded and portrayed as she was prior to her marriage.

There is no class distinction between Laura, Miss Sparling and the other ‘gentry’ of Barsetshire. Despite being working women, they are regarded as gentry. Class is both overt and subtle in *HR*, particularly in relation to gender. Una Grey is seen as being gentry(ish) but her position is slightly unclear. As mentioned earlier, secretaries, land agents and governesses are portrayed by AT as occupying an in-between position in that they are gentry and yet employees of gentry. This is also a feature of the ‘Provincial Lady’ novels by Delafield. The Provincial Lady is the wife of the agent for ‘Lady B.’s estate. While the Provincial Lady and her husband, Robert, are of the same class, they are subject to Lady B.’s wishes. When invited as guests to Lady B.’s house, they are uncomfortably aware of their position as her dependants, living as they do in a ‘tied’ house (tied to the estate and its owners). The Provincial Lady is in a more difficult position than her husband because she is not an employee and yet is dependent on her husband’s employer for a house.

Una Grey, being Irish and being an employee as well as a ‘mad’ and/or scheming woman occupies a position in which both her gender and her class (as well as her ‘incomer’ status) affect the way people react to her. For Anne Todd, who is also a secretary, gentry status is assured as the work brings in extra money, rather than being her sole income (Anne and her mother live on some limited form of private means). While not exactly ‘pin’ money (disposable income on top of earnings), it sets Anne apart from Una Grey in that Anne is not obliged to do the

work. The less subtle distinction is, of course, between the women servants and their employers, which will be discussed later.

The older women's class and their age give them additional status, despite there being gender differences in material terms (they are mostly dependent on their husbands for money) and in their status in public life. Their activities in public are generally confined to organisations like the Women's Institute. The conversation of the older women is sometimes described as "gnomic" (Thirkell, 1959, p.15) but it is generally they who manage their households, children, extended families and, in wartime, show themselves to be stoic, forbearing and capable. Their style of conversation, often regarded with patronising amusement by the men of Barsetshire, nonetheless excludes the men and some of the younger women. Barsetshire, as configured by AT is strongly matriarchal, while at the same time, allowing the gendered economic status quo to prevail. These matriarchs are also supported by servants, who are mostly women.

### *Servants*

Servants are, as Light maintains, "everywhere and nowhere" in history (Light, 2008, p.2). Servants are also everywhere and nowhere in fiction, often completely invisible, or, at best, faithful retainers or comic turns. AT's portrayal of the servants in her Barsetshire novels is more nuanced than mere caricature. To be sure, they are often comic turns but AT does show some sympathy with the demands made upon them. The Barsetshire novels are often as much a social history of the domestic servant as they are chronicles of the decline of the provincial gentry, for the lives of both weave in and out of their histories, blending dissonance with harmony.

Think of Stoker: we never learn her first name, unlike "Mr. Knox's Annie" or Louisa but she seems to occupy a slightly elevated status as does Dr. Ford's housekeeper, Mrs. Mallow. Stoker is, like Laura, a matriarchal linchpin. She it is who helps out at the Knoxes' house, who keeps an eye on the happenings of the local area, who advises Laura, looks for a husband for Anne Todd and keeps a watchful eye on Miss Grey. She manages Tony and ensures that her presence is felt one way and another, such as when Laura and Tony are having dinner.

Stoker does not eat with them but remains standing in the dining room, talking to them. Laura finds this unnerving:

When they got to the dining room, Stoker was standing before the fire with her arms folded. Laura often wished that Stoker didn't feel it due to herself to wait at table ... (HR, p.35)

Despite this and Stoker's intimidating manner, Laura does not regret employing Stoker, who had come for a job when Laura's eldest son was born:

with a very lukewarm reference from her former place and nothing but her air of good-nature to recommend her... She was an excellent cook, a devoted slave to the boys, and absolutely trustworthy. Manners she had none. Of her mistress's housekeeping powers she had no opinion at all, and Laura had long ago given up any attempt to control her ... By good fortune, she took a liking to Miss Todd, with whom she commiserated loudly on her unmarried state, bringing to her notice the various bachelors of the neighbourhood, none of whom Miss Todd had the slightest wish to marry.

'Now, how about Dr Ford, miss?' She would say, as if she were recommending a cut from a good joint. 'You won't do much better, and neither of you are getting any younger, as they say. Or Mr Knox over at Low Rising? He's been a widower these four years now, and there's Miss Sybil needs someone to look after her, for we all know her poor mother wasn't much to boast of, lying ill on her back till death her did part. Think of it miss.' (HR, p.37)

Despite her forthright ways, Stoker observes the conventions of calling young women Miss and young men Master. Most of the servants depicted in the novel express their feelings and concerns as well as their observations and, even if they are an added, comic element, there are nonetheless insights on the part of AT into the work that servants are obliged to undertake. As a householder who found it difficult to obtain help in Melbourne, AT undertook (almost certainly for the first time in her life) many of the household duties that would normally be allocated to a servant. She expected her sons to help as well (Strickland, 1977; McInnes, 1965, Thirkell, L., 1983). When Sybil Knox says that Miss Grey has pleased George with her coffee-making ability (in a bid to win him over), Stoker points out that this means extra work for the servants:

‘Listen to me, miss,’ said Stoker impressively, wrapping her arms up in her apron as she spoke, ‘a young lady like you doesn’t know what coffee made in the dining room means. Extra trays to carry and twice the washing up. You shouldn’t let her [Miss Grey] do it.’ (*HR*, p.44)

Although the servants are visible in the narrative, they nevertheless know their place, even if they are outspoken. The fact that ‘Mr Knox’s Annie’ is rarely simply Annie, even if for comic effect, demonstrates the implied ownership. Servants ‘belonged’ to their owners and the properties they inhabited. But the reality if not the attitude of some of the provincial gentry was to change as the twentieth Century progressed. The *Barsetshire* novels chronicle the demise of the English country house and the changed circumstances for the upper and middle classes, particularly in provincial life. In 1921 the total number of women in service was 1.1 million in Britain but as women were moved on from their war work to make way for the men who had returned, and as their dole money was likely to be withdrawn if they did not take up domestic service (D’Cruze, 1998, pp.51-83) the number grew to 1.4 million in 1931. But this was a relatively short period of increased numbers of domestic employees, partly linked to the deepening Depression.

By 1951, the number had fallen to 790,000 (James, 2006, p.532). Labour-saving devices, opportunities for much shorter hours and better pay (D’Cruze, 1998, pp.66-70), as well as social and welfare changes, meant that women were less likely to seek a position as domestic servant and often, if they did, it was part-time or transitory. The faithful retainer was becoming a thing of the past. Herbert-Hunting (1986, p.104), also points out that as staff numbers decreased in country houses, there was loneliness to confront but it is misguided to say that the nature of the work was “not so much” of a problem. As servants became fewer per household, less specialism was called for. Employers now looked for a reduced staff, for a Cook General, rather than a cook, a kitchen maid, a parlour maid and a housekeeper (Herbert-Hunting, p.105; Girouard, 1978, p.308). This meant that domestic employees increasingly took on more tasks which, inevitably, took more time. Servants could, however, command higher wages. By 1925, the wages of a maid or a housekeeper could consume “as much as 45 percent” of a middle class family’s budget (James, 2006, p.532).

Servants such as Stoker could stand and chat in the dining room with their lower arms bare and advise the local gentry about their marriage prospects both because their services were valued and because finding new staff was becoming harder as it became more of a seller's market. But, as Light (2008, p.2) points out, domestic service was always something "more, or less, than a purely financial arrangement"; it is also an "emotional territory". Living intimately with others in a domestic space, uneven power relations and the tug of familiarity, not to mention the supposedly inherent 'reward' implied by the word service (to one's country, one's family, one's employer) precludes a simple exchange of goods/labour for money.

In the novels of AT, the servants are emotionally engaged with their employers while occupying an inferior position within the household. They nevertheless wield power, as Delafield chronicles in her Provincial Lady novels, with Cook often threatening to leave and having to be appeased:

Home yesterday and am struck, as so often before, by immense accumulation of disasters that always await one after any absence. Trouble with kitchen range has resulted in no hot water, also Cook says the mutton has *gone*, and will I speak to the butcher, there being no excuse weather like this. (Delafield, 1934, p.6)

The texts covered in this thesis highlight differing awareness of and attitudes to, domestic service. In *Hostages to Fortune*, Catherine's relationship with Irene, the young woman who works for her, is one of admiration, gratitude and a desire for Irene to do more and 'better' for herself. In Kavan's work, domestic servants barely exist and are merely shadows performing a particular function. They are not characters in any real sense. Sayers depicts a strong emotional relationship between Wimsey and his manservant, Bunter but other domestic servants are more sketchily drawn and often negligible, as with Emily, the rectory maidservant in *The Nine Tailors* (1933). Her visibility is part of a plot device more than anything else when she wipes the fingerprints from the bottle found in the bell tower. Harford does not depict any employed servants in *The Invaluable Mystery* for Sally is the unpaid servant of her father and brother. Harford's own life experience, working briefly as a domestic servant, did prompt her to write some poetry about the invisibility of the servant and the unevenness

of the situation. AT's depiction of servants is extensive compared to other novelists, partly due to the series nature of her work but also because the characters are employed by AT as part of the plot as well as comic turns and as characters in their own right. Stoker is still in service with Laura 26 years later in *Love At All Ages*, (1959) and still freely giving her opinion and still bullying Laura and her friends. Servants are of the house, often *at home*, sometimes even one of the family, but they are always of a different class, however much they may be part of the Bassetshire scene.

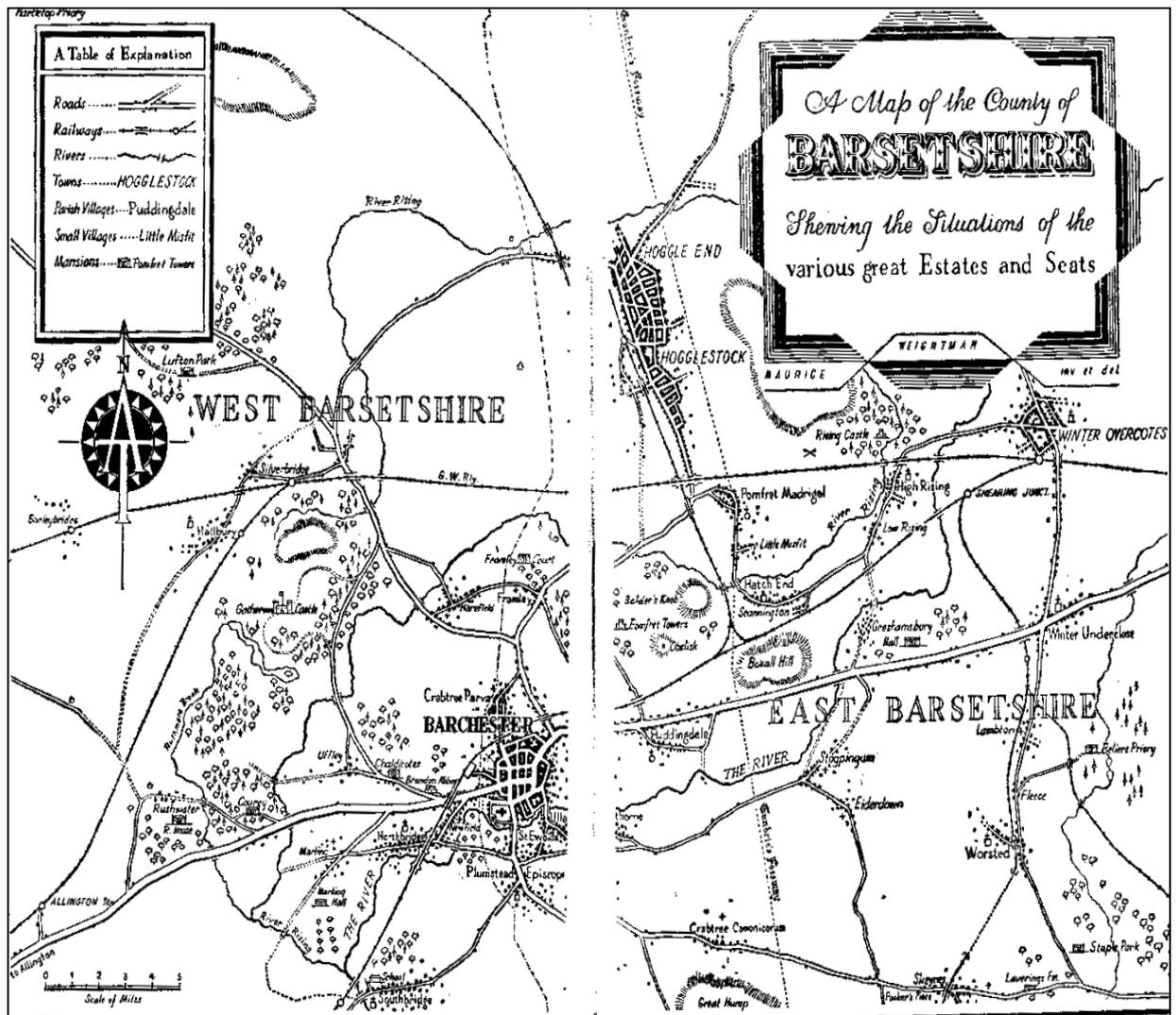
### *Going to Bassetshire*

So to what does this first foray into Bassetshire amount? It is hard to draw *HR* away from the rest of the Bassetshire series as Bassetshire is integral to my reading of the novels. As the novels were first read out of sequence, the picture I have formed of Bassetshire cannot be distinguished between the novels to any level of clarity. That said, there are a number of observations to be made on this text in particular as well as more generally, as it relates to the other, later texts.

First, the setting and its description is in keeping with the later novels. Although AT expands considerably on the Bassetshire scene in later books and draws more consciously from Trollope's topography and characters, this first novel sets both tone and structure for future works. The number of characters is small, drawn from two small villages. This novel, however, marks the beginning of the series and the outline of the structure that AT was broadly to follow for all of the other Bassetshire novels. There is some description of the topography but it is general, rather than specific:

High Rising was a pretty, unpretentious village consisting of one street, whose more imposing houses were vaguely Georgian. Laura's house stood at the end, so that she had no more than a mile to walk to Low Rising, which was only a church, a vicarage, a farm and a handful of cottages. The Knoxes' house stood apart, down a turning of its own which led nowhere in particular, and behind it fields stretched away to the slopes of the hills. (*HR*, p.56)

The villages of High and Low Rising are below Rising Castle and slightly West of the larger habitation of Winter Overcotes (see Figure 8.1). Most of the action takes place in one house or other and much of the ambience is domestic in tone. Sybil and Tony follow the hunt on foot at Christmas and later in the year, go out to watch the shooting but apart from that and a few glimpses of London, the novel is focused on the life of the village which centres on three or four houses.



**Figure 8.1** Thirkell’s Barsetshire, a map that appeared as endpapers in several editions of the novels.

There are no extensive descriptions of the landscape, although George Knox’s house is described in some detail. “So much for scenery,” as Lee (2005b, p.178) dryly remarks. AT does, however, put a great deal of effort into railways and stations, demonstrating, as Lee remarks, “a romantic passion for humdrum detail almost amounting to genius.”

Second, the Bassetshire scene is firmly provincial. Although Laura lives for part of the time in London and there are one or two scenes set in London in *HR*, it is a provincial setting. Country pursuits such as shooting and hunting are mentioned but very little of the text is specifically rural/agricultural in tone or in plot. For the most part, the characters do not involve themselves in rural/agricultural affairs, nor do most take an active part in the management of the countryside.<sup>119</sup> Characters introduced in later novels are often considerable landowners but it is generally their ‘county’ or provincial activities about which we hear most.

Third, the development of the plots of each novel, much of the narrative and much of its revealing tone are played out in the domestic space. Although there is some activity in public, most of the action takes place in one house or another and mostly via conversation rather than long descriptive passages. AT likes her characters to reveal themselves through their conversation as much as through their actions. As Lee (2002b, p.178) remarks:

Thirkell’s material is the doings of a few country families, the interplay of the aristocrats in the big house with the village gentry, the habits of the country doctor and the vicar, the confrontations of locals and incomers, the comic idiosyncrasies of the servant class. Her pleasure is in the ordinary, the everyday and the recurrent.

Often the recurrent is the reiteration of everyday household tasks, or the rearing of children, the planning of meals, the pouring of tea, the arrival of visitors and the myriad other duties that belong to the domestic sphere. It is this world that AT sketches more vividly than the surrounding landscape. The wider world that which exists particularly outside Bassetshire, is viewed through the lens of activity within the domestic sphere, the repetitive tasks that impose order within (Briganti & Mezei, 2004, p.160). Felski (2000, p.20) argues that in understanding the repetition of household tasks as ritual, the individual can be situated “in an imagined community that spans historical time,” transcending “one’s historically limited existence.” In the same way, the main character in Carol Shield’s novel *Unless* (2002) finds pleasure in the repetitive nature of cleaning (Briganti & Mezei, 2004, p.161), likening it to the way Buddhist monks

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<sup>119</sup> The exceptions are some of the members of the Graham family who farm at Rushwater. In addition to farming, the family also derives income from Sir Robert’s work in the City.

go out and clean walls and fences, “whatever presents threat and disorder” (Shields, 2002, p.61). With her damp dust cloth, Shields’ character is keeping herself “going” (2002, p.61). By enshrining domestic ritual in her work, AT is also keeping at bay the disturbing changes to the ‘Old Order’ that she sees being eroded in her own life and that of the nation, particularly after World War II. It is often these rituals, however, that “bury” women (Briganti & Mezei, 2004, p.160) particularly single women, in the novels of this period, in their homes. They are seen as being walled up, as Rhoda is, in Lettice Cooper’s novel of 1936, *The New House*, kept at home as unpaid housekeeper to her domineering mother, echoing the Gothic novels of the Nineteenth Century where women are often immured by the tyranny of a man (Briganti & Mezei, 2004, p.160). This is a core theme of the thesis, that of entrapment and containment and each of the novels explores this theme, from Kavan’s explorations of physical and psychological containment to the character Hilary’s (*The Nine Tailors*) potential entrapment into a marriage deemed suitable by her guardian. This is also a concern of AT, who often ‘rescues’ immured women through marriage, as she does with Anne Todd in *HR*.

There are, however, domestic and social rituals that are maintained, no matter what is happening outwith Bassetshire. “[T]ea at four with the silver teapot ... is totally natural and never to be missed, as far as the inhabitants of Bassetshire are concerned” remarks Crosland (1981, p.90) who also says rather tartly that if AT’s “continual references to the social pattern are intended to be ironic, only a fellow ironist is likely to notice.” There is escape, here too, for AT and her characters, in the unvarying pattern of the tea ritual, despite wartime (in later books) food restrictions, the diminishing servant population and ‘Them’, the post-war socialist government that all well-thinking Bassetshire folk learn to loathe.

The rituals of the social pattern also reveal Bassetshire as a landscape of class, where the traditional ruling class, as its power declines, slowly evolves as a diminished force, to be followed, as AT presciently, if peevishly, foresees what other pundits will later remark, by the pantechicon of bureaucrats and professional politicians who are deemed to have little connection with the rest of the populace and, in the case of Bassetshire, with the provincial and the

rural.<sup>120</sup> Observing it all with an ironic and cynical eye, AT, living in London and without the cushion of a devoted Stoker, admires and yet shakes her head over the remnants of her perceived childhood idyll (of which more later). As her second and latterly estranged son, Colin Maclnnes (1968, p.866) commented, “a curious aspect of her (AT’s) portrait of the English gentry is that she was never of them and didn’t really know them”.<sup>121</sup> AT’s depiction of Barseshire across the series is almost a love letter to a disappearing stratum that she both values and gently mocks.

Her ability to lampoon social custom, as one reviewer commented, argues a slightly dispassionate and ironic observation.<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, her politics are as Conservative as most of her characters’:

In politics Barseshire is uniformly Conservative. ... Mrs Thirkell is gently satirical in her treatment of her ultra-conservatives, but it is evident that to a considerable extent she agrees with them. (McIntyre, 1956, p.401)

Anne Fielding (a character in one of the later novels) observes, when her father stands for parliament, that he is a Conservative candidate but that this does not need to be mentioned, since “that was the only thing the people one knew did stand for” (Thirkell, 1946, p.88). This is tongue-in-cheek, but ... one senses that AT would endorse this view while deprecating its being said aloud. It is not my intention to belittle or to make fun of the politics of AT or her characters. I leave to AT the affectionate smirks, asides and gentle parodies. While it may be seen from the supposedly Olympian heights of the present to be a misguided and oppressive outlook, it was, nevertheless, one that many shared and the alternative was a matter for fear as much as regret for those whose lives had been shaped and informed by tradition. It is more than a swift and melancholy sighing over what has passed. For AT there were deeply personal reasons for her angst over a radically different future. Her nostalgia was keenly felt. It was a

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<sup>120</sup> At the time of writing, much comment is devoted to this in the letters pages of *The Daily Telegraph* following the revelations about MPs’ expenses claims.

<sup>121</sup> Colin Maclnnes added the *a* to the family surname as an adult.

<sup>122</sup> Review snippet from an undated monograph published by Alfred A. Knopf featuring autobiographical comments from the author and quotes from reviews, presumably as a promotional activity by her U.S. publisher. The monograph, entitled *Angela Thirkell*, is to be found in a collection of various manuscripts in the British Library (Add. 74784)

longing for her childhood *Heimat* and a time when life seemed to be infinitely simpler than her adult life would ever be.

Barsetshire is a landscape of nostalgia, a true and deep, if wryly observed, longing for the maintenance of the status quo, a timeless place in which the eight year-old Angela Mackail sat on her famous grandfather's knee and was fed bread and butter and generally indulged. It is a landscape where social and domestic rituals pertain, where men are handsome (if, generally, a little dim, George Knox being the exception), women are sweetly witty, often 'divine fools' (a common epithet of AT's) and the children are clever and cause their parents some affectionate exasperation if not real worry.<sup>123</sup> There are nannies for the little ones, tennis parties for the adolescents and dinner, tea and sherry parties for the adults. There are the figures of mutual loathing such as the Bishop (shades of Trollope), characters such as Una Grey or later, the bureaucrats from the Ministry of Interference and the Board of Red Tape and Sealing Wax.

There are no really poor people who are starving, with rickets, worn out by constant childbearing and no money to buy contraceptives (if they had heard of them). The few agricultural labourers appear healthy and not at all worn down by their lowly paid, physically taxing long days in the fields. Pucken the 'cowman', for example, is respected and knowledgeable. The working classes are jolly, healthy and happy, producing the odd illegitimate child now and again and generally getting on with it at Grumper's End or Hogglestock, with the kettle always on (when they are not ministering to their employers). Their housing, courtesy of their employers or landlords is not noted for damp or lack of facilities and there are no complaints.

In such a setting, even the grimness of wartime is alleviated by the sweet ritual of the social round and the daily household tasks. It is the wartime depiction of Barsetshire that shows AT's real grasp of social historical detail. The grind of food rationing and the deprivations of life on the Home Front, coupled with anxiety and worry over the course of the War and the well-being of those who are away are depicted with less irony and more affection. AT's enduring theme

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<sup>123</sup> AT's frequent use of 'divine fool' (only ever used to describe women) connotes a clever but slightly incomprehensible style of observation and conversation. It is damning with faint praise, both patronising and belittling while retaining some affection.

of the relations between mothers and their sons is given more scope as mothers worry over their sons who are posted abroad. The food parcels from friends in the U.S., Canada and Australia, together with descriptions of the 'grey' wartime bread chronicle the erosion of all that has gone before for the gentry of Barsetshire. Grand houses are shut up or handed over to schools and government bodies while evacuees, including 'foreigners' invade Barsetshire. All of these changes and the subsequent aftermath of war lead to the later, less popular novels that are highly critical of the Labour Government (known as 'Them') and its attendant bureaucracy. As a Londoner, AT would have known the terror of the nightly raids during the *Blitzkrieg* but little is mentioned of this in Barsetshire. AT's wartime Barsetshire would have been unrecognisable to Trollope, despite the familiarity of family names and towns.

AT once wrote that she had often been asked why she chose Trollope's Barsetshire as a setting. "I can only say, 'It just grewed'" was her response (BL, Add. 74784). She was also known to call it her *pays de fantaisie* and to say that it had got "the upper hand" of her (Strickland, 1977, p.82). AT reclaimed, reinvented, reformed and transformed Trollope's Barsetshire but her choice of his fictional setting was also an exercise in nostalgia:

Thirkell regarded nineteenth Century England nostalgically, perhaps because she knew the vestiges of its elegance. (Collins, 1994, p.1)

Rae (2003, p.252) observes that during World War I and afterwards, the revelling in past Arcadias led to "a nostalgic craving for the natural world, with the pastoral English landscapes of Hardy, Houseman, Trollope and Brooke in special demand". AT knew Trollope's Barsetshire, that "most nostalgic of English counties" (O'Tingay, 1949, p.15) well, as she did the London of Dickens. In an introduction to a special edition of Trollope's *The Warden* (first published in 1855, AT's Introduction, 1955), AT confirmed Trollope's autobiographical note about the Cathedral and Close of Barchester to be modelled on that of Salisbury. Barsetshire as a county is an amalgam of several of the home counties according to observers (Strickland, 1977; Lee, 2005; Crosland, 1981). AT comments in her Introduction that Trollope's geography was "careless": "not even Father Ronald Knox [himself a well-published novelist] in his brilliant researches into

Barsetshire has been able to reconcile Trollope's geography with place, nor his events with time" (AT, 1955, p.xiii).<sup>124</sup> AT confesses that she, too is "untrustworthy" in the matter of geography.

AT's Barsetshire differs from Trollope's in that his concerns are often largely ecclesiastical ones. Both writers concern themselves with politics but in Trollope, there is mobility between Westminster and Barsetshire and political concerns are ambitious and full of political intrigue. AT's political concerns are the effect of government on the everyday lives of the Barsetshire inhabitants, not the individual careers of members of the ruling class. Religion enables AT to introduce clergy as characters but the broader and more detailed ecclesiastical concerns of Trollope are largely absent, apart from echoes of Bishop and Mrs Proudie with Barsetshire inhabitants carrying on the Trollopian tradition of despising 'the [Bishop's] Palace' when it is occupied by 'outsiders'. Although the clergy feature regularly in AT's Barsetshire, they are portrayed with a lighter touch than Trollope's rendering. Many of the clergy and their families are descendents of Trollope's original Barsetshire families as are some of the lay people and their ancestry is sometimes discussed in AT's fiction, a knowing wink to Trollope. Although AT's Barsetshire is threaded through with allusions to Trollope and his topography, AT's Barsetshire is also her own, her 'escape'.

### *Escaping to Barsetshire and "fleece in the hedge"*

Untrustworthy on geography or not, AT had reason to be escaping there from her adult life. After what she later described as an idyllic childhood, AT's adult life became frightening, emotionally difficult and fraught with dilemma. Writing about Barsetshire and its inhabitants became her escape.

Angela Mackail was born in 1890. She was the granddaughter of Georgiana Macdonald, one of four sisters who were remarkable and who made their mark on the world. One of the sisters became the mother of Rudyard Kipling; another

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<sup>124</sup> Ronald Knox published his *Barchester Pilgrimage* in 1935, including a roughly drawn map. This was later transformed into the map used for the endpapers in O'Tingay's work (see Figure 8.2). The later map was redesigned for AT's own work and used as endpapers. The Thirkell Barsetshire map includes the villages of High and Low Rising, as well as building on Trollope's own, very nineteenth-Century naming of places (Puddingdale, Eiderdown and Stoppingum) with places such as Winterovercotes, Worsted and Winter Underclose.

married an ironmaster and was mother to the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin; yet another married a president of the Royal Academy; and Georgie, little more than sixteen, fell in love with Edward Burne-Jones, the Pre-Raphaelite painter. Their daughter, Margaret, brought up in a bohemian household, was far more conscious of her position in the world than her mother and father had ever been.

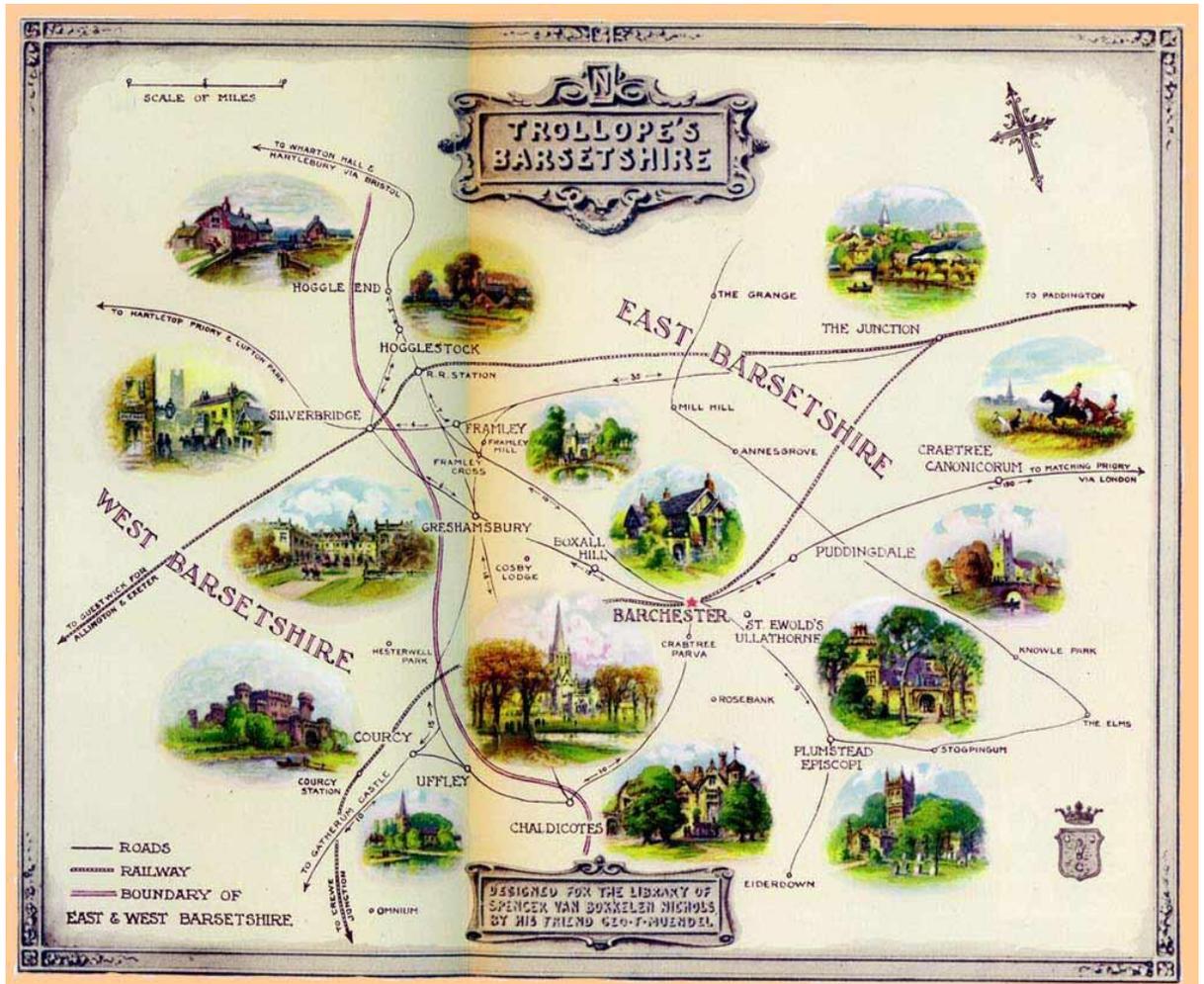


Figure 8.2. Trollope's Barsetshire (O'Tingay, 1969, endpapers)

Her grandson Colin, no great fan and prone to be waspish about his mother's family, said that Margaret Mackail only ever created one work of her art: her personality (Gould, 1993, p. 9). AT's father, John William Mackail of Arran, was a Professor of Poetry and also a civil servant. His considerable intellect was put to good use as a writer and a translator. AT remembers herself as "a little girl" who used to "wake on Sunday morning feeling that a whole life of happiness lay before her" (Thirkell, 1931, p.15). In her book, *Three Houses*, AT describes a happy and almost carefree childhood in her family home in Kensington, her grandparents' home in London and, most importantly, at North End House in

Rottingdean on the Sussex Downs where she spent the summers of her early childhood. Her cousin, Rudyard Kipling, told her his *Just So* stories in the nursery, her grandfather wrote her letters illustrated with his drawings, and invented tales and let her blow the froth off his beer (Fitzgerald, 2003, p.141). She was indulged and petted as she herself admits in her book, *Three Houses* (1931) and later commentators were quick to seize upon this (Gould, 1993; Strickland, 1977).

By the age of 21, AT had been well-educated, including travelling to Europe to learn languages and to be 'finished'.<sup>125</sup> She was spirited, independent and well read. According to Gould, AT's "intellectual attainments far outstripped her emotional development" (1993, p.13). AT was also aware, according to Gould and to others (MacInnes, 1963; Strickland, 1977), that "her parents' relationship with their several friends among the landed gentry was not without an element of deference on one side and patronage on the other" (1993, p.13).

Into her life came a working-class boy made good, the singer James Campbell McInnes, who had been born to Scottish parents in Lancashire. It was a whirlwind romance and they were married in 1911, much to the disapproval of AT's parents, two months later. Their early married life was reasonably happy and they lived near AT's parents in Kensington. Their son Graham (named after a lover of Campbell McInnes) was born in 1912 and Colin was born in 1914. In March 1917, AT gave birth to a daughter, Mary and in May left home with her children to live with her parents. According to her biographers and to her son, Lance Thirkell, who verified certain of these facts with family and staff who were with AT that the time, Campbell McInnes was drinking heavily, was behaving violently towards his wife and had raped a nursery maid. He was sadistic and prone to violent rages (Thirkell, L., 1983, p. 2). The divorce proceedings began in late 1917 and AT divorced Campbell McInnes for adultery and cruelty. The details were reported in the press. When it was over, her daughter Mary, who had been sent to the country during the divorce proceedings, died just short of her first birthday. AT's mother organised the funeral. According to Lance Thirkell, his mother was "shattered" by the child's

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<sup>125</sup> Young women at this time and in earlier decades were sent to Europe to be "finished" as young women, by either attending a finishing school or by boarding with a family of middle class native speakers. AT went first to Paris and then to Gotha in Germany.

death (1983); other commentators have seen this as further evidence that AT was a heartless mother (Gould, 1993; Strickland, 1977).<sup>126</sup>

Shortly afterwards, AT met and became engaged to George Thirkell and made the journey to Australia on a troopship. It must have been a wonderful opportunity for AT to escape the bitter and unhappy, not to say traumatic, memories of her marriage, divorce and the death of her child. In 1920 AT set sail for Australia from Devonport on a troopship full of Australian soldiers (many of them having military convictions) returning from the Great War. She was a war bride, accompanying her soldier husband, Captain George Lancelot Allnut Thirkell, to Australia. In a later memoir, *Trooper to the Southern Cross* (1934a), AT wrote about her adventures on the boat and included a great deal of background detail, such as anecdotes from the Australian liberation of the small French town, Villers-Bretonneux, descriptions of the high country in the state of Victoria and a reasonably good grasp of Australian vernacular.<sup>127</sup> The story is narrated by Major Bowen, a medical officer who has served in France and at Gallipoli. The description of the conditions of the ordinary soldier (the digger) is close to that remembered by AT's eldest son, Graham McInnes.<sup>128</sup> The following extract is from *Trooper to the Southern Cross* :

Half the troops were the biggest crooks in the A.I.F [Australian Imperial Force]... I can only say that I wouldn't have shut a dog up in the places they call the cells...

The corporal took me to one of those Black Holes and unlocked the door. We were only three days out, but the stink fairly caught me.

'Well, what's up?' I asked.

'Bust me bloody thumb,' said the man inside. He was sitting on his bunk smoking, and where he got the cigarettes from you could have searched me, but there was nothing those blokes couldn't get. They reminded you of the Kelly gang in many ways...

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<sup>126</sup> See also the text of Lance Thirkell's 1983 speech, in which he lists the comments made about his mother by other public figures, their comments based mostly on Strickland's biography (1977).

<sup>127</sup> The book was first published in 1934, later re-issued as *What Happened on the Boat* (1939) and eventually published under AT's own name.

<sup>128</sup> The memories of McInnes in his three volumes of autobiography have been subject to some debate (more of which later) but his description of the journey from the perspective of a child (albeit one who later read his mother's account) corroborate his mother's narrative.

‘How did you do that?’ I asked, being rather curious.

‘Bloody M.P. [military policeman] came to take me for a walk. I told the bastard I wasn’t going, and he started arguing, so I stousted the bloody sod in the jaw and bust me thumb, ’...’ (Thirkell, 1966, p.70-71)

The next extract is from McInnes’s autobiography:

...there was a darker side. We were expressly forbidden... to go below our own deck. Behind [a] grille we could see soldiers, clad only in shorts and gym shoes, prowling about like caged tigers; and from the close-packed crowd came a constant low, menacing murmur which rose sometimes to a roar as a fight broke out or an officer smashed a Two-up school.<sup>129</sup> (McInnes, 1966, p.26)

At extremely close quarters, AT had her first taste of Australians in any number. Later commentators would remark on the “debunking” of the Digger in this work, (Bassett, 1998, p.xii) a critique of the Australian icon that was discussed in the previous chapter. The culture shock, the sheer difference of perspective, had confronted AT before she even set foot on Australian soil. Prior to settling in Melbourne with her husband, her two sons from a previous marriage and later, a son by George Thirkell (or ‘Thirk’ as he was known), AT had had a few pieces of writing published. But it was her sojourn in Australia that galvanised AT into action as a writer. This was partly due to economic necessity and partly due to her *need* to write. The need to write encompassed her homesickness, a *real* nostalgia in the true sense of the word (Brown, 2006).

The Thirkells moved into 4 Grace Street in Malvern, Melbourne (see Figure 8.3). The area was, and is still, a middle-class suburb with many fine examples of Federation architecture, a peculiarly Australian style developed after the 1901 federation of the Australian states. It borrows from the Arts and Crafts Movement as well as Art Nouveau and yet is also distinctively Australian (Fraser, 1986, p.7). Although the house was much more comfortable and spacious than

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<sup>129</sup> A ‘Two-up’ school is an illegal betting ring in which the game of Two-up is played. A *spinner* comes into a circle of (usually men) holding a flat piece of wood on which two pennies are placed. They are flipped upwards by the spinner after bets have been placed on the likely outcome: two heads, two tails or head and tail of the coin. The game is illegal except when played on Anzac Day (Australia’s Remembrance Day in April each year) or, latterly, in a casino. The call of “Come in spinner” starts each game. In illegal games a ‘sleeper-catcher’ keeps a lookout. Most of this I learned either from playing it myself or from my police officer/bushman grandfather.

the bulk of the accommodation for working-class families at the time, it was certainly a step down from the houses to which AT had become accustomed. It also stood out as one of the smaller houses in the area, many of them being quite grand affairs, such as The Gables nearby (see Figure 8.4). This must have galled AT, who had been used to servants and a larger house. The picture of life in 4 Grace Street Malvern given by Lance Thirkell (1983, p.4), tallies in some measure with that of his older half-brother, Graham.<sup>130</sup>

[M]y father continued to conduct his important business over five-eighths of an inch of whisky in the bottom of a glass while my mother queened it over the intellectual society of that day ... The regime was not Spartan and the discipline was not severe ... Meals were adequate, but uninviting, since we were very poor at the time; and most of our clothes were second hand. All of us, including myself, had to do our fair share of bedmaking, boot polishing, washing-up and so on; and if we did anything wrong, we got the odd whipping.

Matters were made worse when the second of George's engineering businesses was lost to a "less honest but more able partner" (Thirkell, L., 1983, p.4) and it was AT who became the bread winner. Life for AT was difficult and her romantic notions of Australia (probably fed and sustained by outback novels) were shattered by the reality of it. She loved the high country where she and the children went to stay in Victoria and she enjoyed some aspects of Australian culture and life, such as summer swimming and *The Magic Pudding* (1918), an Australian *Alice in Wonderland* written and illustrated by the artist Norman Lindsay, which she called "divine" (Bird & Aldred, 2002, pp.21, 22).

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<sup>130</sup> Lance disputes some of Graham's autobiographical claims, such as that AT forced George to administer severe beatings to her sons. While some of Graham McInnes's memories may be glossed over or 'sexed up' for his four volumes of autobiography, they are revealing in that his emotional state and his relationship with his mother are explored. None of AT's biographers have done her any real justice. Strickland's biography is half hagiography/half hatchet job of AT as a professional writer. Graham McInnes's memories of his mother, while sometimes sympathetic, have been shown to be inaccurate in some instances and Gould's work is biased toward Colin MacInnes's vitriolic dislike of his mother. AT cut Colin out of her will, disliking his politics, his sexual orientation (he was bisexual like his father and also a heavy drinker, like his father, which brought unwelcome memories to her) and his fiction which was in direct contrast to hers.



**Figure 8.3** 4 Grace Street, Malvern, Melbourne. The home of AT and her family. The roof contours give an impression of the house being bigger than it actually is.



**Figure 8.4** The Gables, Malvern. A far grander example of Federation architecture than 4 Grace Street.

But, for the most part, Australia was, according to her son Graham, “an entire continent peopled by the Lower Orders”:

Hence (Australians being the last people in the world to take this lying down) her relationship with shopkeepers, officials, neighbours and local tradesmen, was an unending guerrilla warfare. (McInnes, 1965, p.72)

Increasingly disillusioned with her marriage and her life in Australia, AT sought escape in the form of writing. Necessity it may have been but it was also an oasis for her. AT’s notions of colonial life did not tally with reality. Her feelings of superiority did not mitigate against the difficulties she experienced in Australia. With a (no doubt) superior air and an accent that would have frozen the blood of many anti-imperialist Australians, even then, AT would have been a visible and audible target for republican and anti-colonial feeling among Australians, who, having proven themselves in the Great War, thought themselves equal to anyone, including a professor’s daughter from Kensington with a plummy accent. AT must also have realised that despite the strong colonial links, Australia was “distinctive, foreign and yet not foreign, carrying resonances of her native land but often eluding her comprehension and defying her preconceptions” (Perriam, 2006, p.8).

In Australia, AT’s writing output was prodigious. She wrote articles for a variety of periodicals in Britain and Australia and was paid, according to her eldest son, Graham McInnes, a pittance (McInnes, 1965, p.275). The money had, however, kept the family afloat financially and had established her as a writer. It must have been pleasant to escape to her writing on Dickens and other literary matters that spoke to her of ‘home’. Graham’s description of AT’s persistence at her work in her surroundings invites admiration:

Mother continued to hold us together in the midst of all her activity; doing her own cooking and lighting fires with mallee roots; supervising the erection by Dad of a network of naked wires festooned across the drawing room ceiling ... feeding, washing, educating, darning and mending for three rowdy boys. She nevertheless managed to conduct her *salons* and to have her dinner parties in these bizarre surroundings, but by sheer force of personality kept her desk to herself. It was at that desk, surrounded by the noise and brawl of a husband and three boys that ... she began the satirical essays

and short stories which ultimately led to the great flow of novels...

I am lost in admiration at her singleness of purpose and the force of her personality. Around that desk she built her own little seawall to keep out the roaring family and the unfriendly Australian. At that desk she gained the initial journeyman skill which from 1931 enabled her to produce no less than thirty-seven novels; whatever their content, an astonishing achievement ... (McInnes, 1965, p.275)

On her return to Britain, AT embarked on fiction, publishing 37 novels between 1933 and 1961. In 1933 she set the course for the rest of her writing life, beginning the Barsetshire series of novels. AT wrote about the lives of the descendants of Trollope's own characters, the Grantlys, the Crawleys and the Dukes of Omnium, adding several more of her own. She adapted the cast and the Barsetshire landscape to her own imagination and plot requirements. The books, which are still in print (if not now widely known or read), were immensely successful. AT, now a single mother, continued to write, having served her apprenticeship in Melbourne.

AT herself commented on her life as a working mother:

When I think of what I did in Australia between 1920 and 1930 - with a husband who gradually became less than a liability and three boys to clothe, feed and educate plus all the housework and cooking and broadcasting [for the Australian Broadcasting Commission] and doing (very bad) journalism, I often wonder why I am alive. I might have been aliver[sic] had not all this happened, but anyway it did, so I do really understand the position of the wife who finds herself being everything else as well. One gets though it with courage and goodwill - but one does leave some of one's fleece in the hedge. (Bird & Aldred, 2002, p.25)<sup>131</sup>

Having left quite a bit of emotional fleece in the hedge, AT nonetheless had to earn a living. Earning a living and having an escape from being "everything else as well" could be combined in AT's writing. During her 'apprenticeship' in Melbourne, AT had already laid the foundations for her 'escape' - not the escape from Melbourne back to Britain but her escape into her writing. In her final

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<sup>131</sup> It must have been difficult for AT to be "everything else as well" during an era when working women were much rarer than today, when attitudes as well as practical infrastructure for those who were unable to have any domestic help, were stacked against women in more ways than one.

years, when she was ill and in pain but still producing a book a year, she wrote to her friend, Margaret Bird, who typed her manuscripts for her, that her work was “hard going”. “At the moment,” she wrote, “Barsetshire isn’t even *Escape* - just a horrible job that has to be done” (letter to Margaret Bird, October 27, 1958, partly reprinted in Bird & Aldred, 2002, p.65)<sup>132</sup>

For AT, Barsetshire was ‘*Escape*’, a way of leaving behind her increasingly difficult and tangled life, her rows with her sons, her failed marriages, the fear of her first husband and her parents’ disapproval. She worried constantly about money. As the sole provider, she had reason to worry. If she stopped writing, so did the income. Her time in Australia was one of real nostalgia, a *mal de pays*, a “disorder of the imagination” (Brown, 2006) first identified among soldiers suffering from homesickness. For AT, the life and landscape of England (despite being of Scots descent on both sides of the family, AT always set her sights firmly on England) was a balm. There was an “intertwining” of imagination and memory (Jones, 2003, p.27) that could be therapeutic and healing for the author. AT was also in tune with the many whose memories of green landscapes and the country would become “an invaluable source of consolation”, and which would also generate a boom in the tourist industry of the 1930s to a public who were still struggling to come to terms with the effects and their experiences of the Great War (Rae, 2003, p.250). This ‘evocative’ and therapeutic landscape (Philo, 2002) that became AT’s own rendering of Barsetshire would prove to be therapeutic in many ways, including economically.

The Barsetshire series gave AT financial independence, a sense of worth (despite her deprecating remarks about her work) and a place to which she could and did escape in order to forget the difficulties of adult life. In a way, it was another of her ‘three’ houses, those lost oases of childhood. It was a place where she could indulge her imagination and in turn be indulged by it. Ironically, her son, Graham, indulged in a similar pastime in his four books of autobiography, particularly the book he wrote on Melbourne (1968). For him, the narrative of his time in Australia, although emotionally difficult in some ways, was also a

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<sup>132</sup> The correspondence between Margaret Bird and AT began with Margaret Bird pointing out errors in AT’s book *Cheerfulness Breaks In* (1940), after which she sent AT a quote from Sayers’ *Gaudy Night* (1935) about editing ‘howlers’; and a friendship and working partnership was born.

therapeutic revisiting of childhood, as was AT's reinvention of Barsetshire. Like the character in Carol Shields' novel (2000) who was mentioned earlier, AT imposed order on Barsetshire that was not evident in her own life or the world around her. Through repetition and in employing the same devices, such as matchmaking, tea parties and country house parties, AT could polish up the domestic life she felt to be the ideal, a romantic notion that would not have suited the independent novelist at all. In repeating social patterns and the domestic round in such an environment, AT was able to enter into a process of symbolisation (Bondi, 2005, p.444) that perhaps helped her not only to escape but also to find a sense of purpose. She would probably laugh at such a suggestion but the process of creating those green spaces full of agreeable and witty people - people who, even in the darkest days of wartime, were able to continue, in some measure, the domestic rituals that gave them (and their author) comfort - was a way of making sense of the world that she saw changing so dramatically all around her. In confining that world to the boundaries of Barsetshire, she could restore a balance that suited her and at the same time, examine it. Unlike, Jane Austen, who "barely looked up from her literary *petit point*" while the French Revolution raged (Kent, 1989, p.59), Thirkell did not shirk the events of war and post-war austerity. If she became a little shrill in her dislike of the modern world, she was also able to impose some restrictions in Barsetshire, organising both plot and character to allow the therapeutic light to glimmer.

AT was also "artfully" picking and choosing from what was "culturally available" articulating her own life and the lives of others while, at the same time, presenting a smoother surface, a more pleasurable picture of an albeit fictional social world (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p.103). In creating her therapeutic landscape, she found mobility also. Her actual mobility, one that was denied many other women, enabled her to escape abroad when her life in London was tainted by the scandal of divorce. Later, the donation of a passage back to Britain and her husband's acquiescence to her going (again, an option denied to many women at that time), informed her writing in an immediate and personal way. It gave her the impetus to settle on a career as a writer and it also informed her choice of narrative and context. For AT, unlike Cambridge's character Catherine and other women who were trying to carve out a space in

which to write, writing was both demand and pleasure. It satisfied her need for financial independence and her need for escape from the difficulties of a complicated and often difficult life. Yet AT was not the woman who ‘had it all’. She had left too much fleece in the hedge for that. She did, however, carve out her space, keeping the ‘seawall’ of her desk buttressed, while at the same time, setting out on choppy waters to create some order in the domestic space, managing mostly on her own to bring up her children and to keep the home fires burning. That seawall around her desk was a ‘home’ space in every sense of the word.

AT chose a therapeutic landscape that was, to her, Arcadia, an “elite dream of happiness” (Nicolson, 2008, p.5) as well as an ideology and a form of escape. It was that escape that critics continue to deplore. Most critiques of AT (and there are plenty) deplore her Bassetshire world, contradicting themselves by subscribing to the notion that she was emotionally cold and distant and yet at the same time, skewering a confection that while conservative in outlook, is brimming with humour (even if not everyone finds it funny, the intention and potential for humour are there) and idealistic notions of romance and love.

### *AT reviewed*<sup>133</sup>

AT’s idealistic notions of love and romance tended to divide the critics, as did her raging ‘against the light’ of a dying (as she saw it) England. AT’s son, Lance Thirkell (1983), indicates that many of the later critics based most of their negative reactions on their views of AT as a person, rather than as an author and took their cue from Strickland’s biography. Lee’s (2005) critique of AT, while controversial and less than flattering, nonetheless looks with some care at AT’s fiction, rather than simply parroting the usual complaint that AT was a ‘bad’ mother.

Contemporary critics, however, tended to be favourable towards AT’s work, which was mainly fiction, but which also included translation, children’s stories and a biography of the famous (some would say infamous) courtesan, Harriette

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<sup>133</sup> A list of reviews for AT is found in Appendix 3

Wilson (Perriam, 2009).<sup>134</sup> There are revealing comments about the later, post-war novels being less witty and more cross in tone. M. Hannah, reviewing Private Enterprise (1947), finds that even “Mrs. Thirkell herself seems to have been unduly affected by the depressing influences of rationing, form-filling, fuel shortage and regulations”, and that she has “allowed the ladies and gentlemen” of Barsetshire “to develop their grievances against the Government and the times at the expense of their personalities” (Hannah, 22.11.1947). When *High Rising* appeared, it was reviewed in light of AT’s previous novel, *Ankle Deep* (1933), which was not a Barsetshire novel and which was altogether darker in theme and tone. Mavrogordato finds *HR* on the “shallower or farce side of comedy” (29.06.1933), while the anonymous reviewer of *HR* for *The Times*, finds that the “effort to provide amusement is more accentuated than it was in the author’s last novel” (22.09.1933). Mavrogordato also comments that the

“underlying impulse which holds [the book] together comes of ‘Feminism’, but that Mrs. Thirkell’s women, though they know what’s what, have their *pudeur* [propriety], and would shrink from such a word. The men are only satellites, and the none the less that they may think themselves suns” (1933, p.628)

Developing the theme further and in a slightly contradictory manner, the reviewer comments on Laura’s son, Tony. AT often explored the relationship between mother and son and while being humorous about the exasperation of rearing small boys, nevertheless gave prominence to the exploration of the mother-son relationship. Mavrogordato develops the theme of the male satellites of the novel:

“The first satellite is Tony [Morland], who reflects Laura in her maternal capacity. Tony is the Impetuous Male, and combines in himself the physical charm and social repulsiveness of small boyhood. Laura fends for him as wholeheartedly as if he were a dog; but she has no illusions about the healthy young, and we may yet have from her the book she is considering: *Why I Hate My Children*.” (1933, p.628)

The reviewer also comments that George Knox is the “satellite” to all of the women in the book (1933, p.628) and certainly, this is George’s expectation and

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<sup>134</sup> For a full listing of books written by AT as well as reviews of her work, please see Appendix 3.

essentially what happens: the women at some point all minister to him. It is Laura alone who makes any challenge to George.

While deploring the ‘open workings’ of plot in that AT has taken the “drastic” measure of employing “both coincidence and an anonymous letter” (1933, p.628) to settle Miss Grey’s hash, or to tidy her away from the narrative, the reviewer also comments that these devices are “better” than the “pleasant village of High Rising with the extruded secretary as its great lady” (1933, p.628). All of which indicates that the reviewer is aware of AT’s contradictory stance on gender and gendered roles. On the one hand, she does tend to portray the men as comic figures, much as she does the servants, but she also ensures that the status quo is maintained, with the men (including young Tony) receiving their material comforts and a willing ear while being ‘managed’ by the women who orbit about them. Ironic in tone as this is, there is an underlying assumption that all women readers are complicit in this deception: allowing the men ‘their place’ while carving out a niche within their control. Within the closed world of Barsetshire there is an inner circle of control that both reflects and challenges Trollope’s rendering of gender roles in Barsetshire.<sup>135</sup>

When an AT omnibus appeared in 1967, a reviewer commented on AT’s wit, saying that:

It is nonsense to compare her to Trollope unless you mean simply that she is writing about a small, enclosed section of society. Those Barchester teacups rattled with greater storms and were held by hands that shook with more complex emotions [in Trollope’s work]. Where she [AT] scores is in modest but unerring social guying [parody]. (Anon., 28.10.1967)

A later review of a reprint of *Marling Hall* and *Miss Bunting*, entitled “Fantastically Feudal” comments that AT was:

of the stuff of which W8 [London] was made; and her homesickness [when in Melbourne] emphasised all the fantasy qualities of feudal England which she found so

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<sup>135</sup> Trollope created the character of Mrs. Proudie, the Bishop of Barchester’s wife. She is an overtly detestable figure, controlling not only her husband but also the other clergy who come within her orbit. As the detestable figure, she is much like Una Grey: a focus of dislike, an outsider and a woman who needs to be taught a lesson or two.

splendidly fleshed out in Trollope's *Barsetshire* and which she degenerated in her own. Ghastly as England was in the 1930s and 1940s, it was never quite so complacent and class-ridden as Mrs. Thirkell delighted in fancying it to be. (Anon., 29.03.1974)

There is no doubt that AT's work (and her life) arouses strong opinion. The extensive and largely positive reviews indicate that at least until the end of the Second World War, AT was well-received (even if not accorded widespread critical attention) and widely read.

### *Conclusion*

So what are we to make of *HR*, its author and her therapeutic landscape? As an author, AT was prolific, hardworking and never one to overpraise her work. Certainly, *Barsetshire* was an escape:

Once immersed in her world, she could write about events that, while they reflected the concerns of the day ... were under her control. She could decide who should marry Lydia Keith, who should live in the Old Bank House and whether or not Mr. Wickham would enliven a wartime party with some scarce whisky or rum ... (Perriam, 2006, p.12)

Her brother, too, wrote of enclosed and happy worlds full of escape. Although less celebrated at the time than AT and less well-known now, Denis Mackail wrote twenty-five novels, one a year, starting in 1920, about the lives of the upper classes in contemporary London (Persephone, 2005). His novels sold well enough for him and his family to live on the proceeds. His novel, *Greenery Street* (1935), based on Walpole Street in Chelsea says of the street and its inhabitants that it is a "faithless, evanescent, adorable spot" where "fate is laughed at" and "loving" hearts are always "entirely young" (2005, p.372). And, as discussed earlier, there was a longing for serene and comforting arcadias both during the Great War and after it. A reading public who desired to be entertained and taken from the dreariness of life between the wars seems to have endorsed this, given the popularity of books such as AT's.

For the author herself, the escape was as much a necessity as the need to earn money from her writing. McInnes says that, after the upheaval of her marriages and her unhappy experiences both in England and in Australia, it is:

no wonder that, upon her return to England she longed for a tranquil, ordered world, and no wonder that she used her literary knowledge and her writing skill to create it for herself (and for her readers) through the imagination. (McInnes, 1968, p.6).

The escape that she longed for was made possible for AT through her writing. As long as she had a threepenny exercise book and a pencil, AT could exercise her imagination through writing.

Her writing was also a way of expressing her feelings, feelings that she found it difficult to articulate in other ways. As her son observed:

Hers was the tragedy of the inarticulate heart. The one she had was warm but it was deeply buried and it was terribly difficult for it to come out ... She could 'give' on paper. I have wonderfully amusing, witty and loving letters from her; but to be demonstrative in person, ah! That was different. (McInnes, 1965, p.284)

So perhaps, as for many writers, the catharsis of writing for AT was not only escape but a means of articulating aspirations as well as emotions, exploration as well as an exercise in containment. As she said herself in her introduction to Trollope's *The Warden*:

It is perhaps worth remembering Charles Kingsley's words in *The Water Babies*, that this is only a fairy story and you must not believe a word of it. (1955, p.xi)

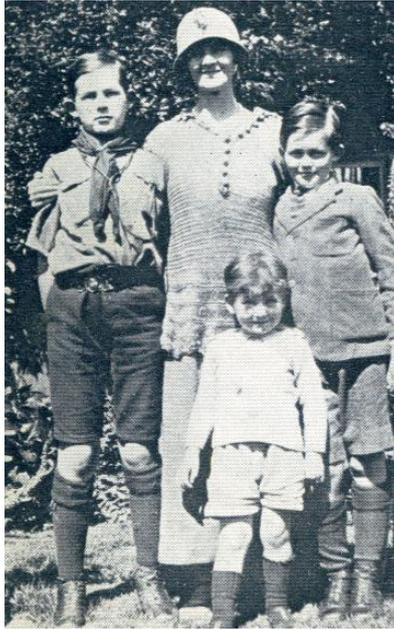
And fairy stories, while exploring a fantastic world, also enable one to say what one dares (Warner, 1995) and perhaps, for AT, she could dare to make for herself a world that was special and, even in wartime, a haven from what was for her, a harsher, more demanding world. As Rushdie (1992, p.12), comments, "those of us who have been forced by cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps had modernism thrust upon us". In other words, like it or not, we and AT have had the

unpalatable truths of the changing and baffling world thrust upon us – we may sometimes feel the need to escape, pushed at us in an inevitable exchange of material culture that occurs whenever we open a book. Lewis (2002, p.340) maintains that AT's work is important because of this as it “participates in many of the dialogues, conversations and debates in the English society of her [AT's] time.”

Barsetshire was, and is, part of the material culture in which it circulated, reflecting as much as it refined that culture. The transfer of ideas, values and culture between Barsetshire and the world outside it was a two-way street, endorsing, chiding, valorising and satirising both. Barsetshire, while a therapeutic and a fantasy landscape, was as much of the world as it was its own world. But it was not wholly AT's world, although she reworked those terrains to suit her narratives. As well as belonging to its many readers, Barsetshire had begun as Trollope's setting. For AT, who loved Trollope and Dickens, whose works were tied, for her, to an idyllic-seeming childhood, Barsetshire as AT wrote it, became her pleasure ground, an escape from a difficult family life, a place where she could forget, at least for the moment, about the fleece she had left in the hedge.

Some of that fleece was tangled with her life as a working woman and a single mother. Although she portrayed and promoted an idealised portrait of family life among the gentry in Barsetshire, there was also the contradictory portrayal of one of her strongest characters, Laura Morland, the writer character who first appears in *HR*. In *HR* there is an endorsement of the gentry as a class and of women's traditional positions within it but AT also challenges the status quo by adding characters like Laura who do not conform to 'type'. My own view is that while AT may have longed for the rural, provincial idyll that she had created in Barsetshire, she would have found it constricting and difficult unless, of course, she could inhabit the character of Laura Morland. Perhaps Laura's world is AT's ideal and personal geoliterary terrain.

Box 8.3



AT and sons in Melbourne

*From left:* Graham McInnes, Angela Thirkell, Colin MacInnes, Lance Thirkell in front. Colin chose to spell his name with the 'a' inserted after the 'M'.



“Thirk” Captain George Thirkell

All pictures taken from Strickland's biography (1977)

## CONCLUSION

Women understand ... what a dreary will-o-the-wisp is this old ... experience, “When the fall sewing is done,” “When the baby can walk,” “When the house cleaning is over,” ... then I will write the poem, or learn the language ... or master the symphony; then I will act, dare, dream, become. Merciful is the fate that hides from any soul the prophecy of its still-born aspirations. (Ward, 1877, pp.272-273)

Denying women their experience is one of the ways in which power is maintained. (Kennedy, 1992, p.15)

Their [middlebrow novels’] concerns seem both more serious and less safely distant, and the world of women who wrote them and the women who read them is central to the way I now understand the first half of the twentieth Century. Yet the issue of pleasure still seems to me crucial. (Humble, 2001, p.6)

If there is one valuable thing (among the many) that I have learned over the course of writing and researching this thesis, it is that popular culture, the middlebrow, mainstream, light entertainment or whatever one would call it, is worthy of respectful consideration. Anyone bent on a stringent critique of the middlebrow must acknowledge that its ubiquity (deplored by so many) alone merits more than a pithy dismissal. Even if *they*, the producers and peddlers of this culture are seen as determining what we want or find diverting, there is no denying that we, its consumers, have not lost our taste for it. Its circulation forms the webs of meaning by which we know and understand our society and we, in our turn, contribute to those webs of meaning. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with access to blogs, electronic feedback in various forms as well as print and broadcast media, a significant proportion of the population has access to technology that allows them to tell their stories to a wider audience than they could ever have imagined. *Wife in the North* (O’Reilly, 2008) began as a blog and made its way into print, giving forensic detail of the domestic life of a woman pining for the lights of London from Northumberland, of her joy and pain as mother, wife and former urbanite. It became a bestseller. We know that the economics of the production of middlebrow culture drives what is produced and that production is a complex and messy business.

We (most of us) are the children thoughtfully given our beautifully crafted wooden toys for Christmas, who cherish the bright blue plastic duck more dearly than turned wood with non-toxic varnish. Are we indiscriminating consumers of

works that are pushed by powerful and well-supported publishers and booksellers? As we look for escape, perhaps we also look for resonance, the answering call, the attraction that leads us to hug the blue duck to our three year-old chest. We may 'grow into' the wooden version or prefer it at other times but it may be that the blue plastic fits neatly into the jigsaw that is our comfort and our escape.

It is impossible to know the full answer to our choices. Escape for me meant reading about what I knew and about what I did not know, a combination of storytelling that allowed me to understand and yet took me further, to imagine and to enter the imagined world of the writer. So powerful was this escape that I became a writer, grew into writing from an early age and, more importantly, spent hours imagining my own stories.

Although in a number of ways, my story intersects with those of the authors in question and with their texts, in an equal number of ways, it does not. I cannot equate a few modest publications of fiction and poetry with the prodigious output of the authors under review. Equally, my writing operates not from a sphere of necessity since I have an infinitely greater number of choices as to how I have earned and do earn, a living. This changes the way in which an author works. On the other hand, I know about writing to deadlines, the practicalities of editing and being edited, of the invaluable support of other writers, the extraordinary process involved in publication and the seeking of it; how, once the words appear in print, they no longer belong solely to the author. I also know the strangeness of the intimate becoming public, the dark places finding their way onto the page, seemingly in spite of efforts to restrain them. There is also the response of readers to fiction (my father: "I don't understand it, darling, but I am very proud of you").

Given all of the above, there is also the fact that there are no universal emotions common to all women writers, only intersections at which we sometimes meet. To come across the words of such a feted and much-published author as Margaret Atwood describing the writing process as writing from within a flimsy tent, the fear of making oneself "too conspicuous", of giving oneself "away", of keeping on writing because "what else can you do?" (2006, pp.145,

146), is one of those meetings at the crossroad. And while these meetings can and sometimes do, offer insights, I claim no special, mystical aura of authorship, no members' enclosure of canapés and champagne while the shoeless peasants look through the glass. What I hope to have offered is a story, one that is entwined with my own. My geoliterary terrains form part of this story as much as those of the other texts and authors.

The geoliterary terrains of the interwar texts discussed in this thesis include the space of the middlebrow. Perhaps the strong and often negative reaction to the middlebrow is more genre than gender. Perhaps Orwell and Leavis, who were so critical of the middlebrow in the interwar years were more concerned with the lack of gravitas, as they saw it, in middlebrow fiction but their criticism was directed at women writers all the same. Middlebrow is not a term confined to fiction by women and yet, middlebrow novels by women in the interwar years tended to be more heavily criticised than those by men (Humble, 2001, Beauman, 1983). One of the central themes of this work is that silencing of women's fiction/women's creative voices occurs because the concept of what defines literary merit is inherited, is almost exclusively male, as well as being male-defined (Robbins, 2000, p.90) and, it excludes women on the grounds of gender as well as artistic merit, the latter being a term that is only rarely granted to women. There is the added trap for women that *being women* they have no extensive and acknowledged tradition in this sphere, having been long relegated to the (continuing) and bounded 'tradition' of 'women's fiction' and 'women's novels'. The few women authors judged worthy of acceptance into the canon of Great Works of Literature have been placed there by a masculinist tradition that reveres works by men *because they are mostly not works by women*.<sup>136</sup> If there is any doubt that this is a thing of the past, a list of the winners of the Booker prize for the past 40 years reveals that women have only won this prize 14 times, the majority of them having won *prior to 1990*.<sup>137</sup> Only two men have won the prize twice, while the three most nominated writers have all been women but only two of these, Iris Murdoch and Margaret Atwood, have won the prize. In our supposedly more enlightened times, it seems that

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<sup>136</sup> A writer friend commented that had McEwan's novel *On Chesil Beach* (2007) been written by a woman it would have remained an obscure piece of fiction and would almost certainly *not* have been shortlisted for any major fiction prize open to men and women. Although the inclusion of the novel in the shortlist for the Man Booker prize was controversial, it was its *length* that caused comment.

<sup>137</sup> Statistics taken from [www.literaryawards.info/en/booker-prize.html](http://www.literaryawards.info/en/booker-prize.html)

both the 'canon' and literary merit remain squarely where they have always been. It has not been the task or aim of this work to 'judge' the writing of the women under discussion and to apportion literary marks to them. It has been one of the aims, however, to provide a framework for a critical exploration of the production and reception of texts by women. It has also been the aim of this work to undertake an examination of the silencing of women in general and specifically, to address the silencing of writing by women. While some of the works in question have been published and republished a number of times, I have shown how silencing of texts and of authors can occur through negation of the text as valuable, in the denial of its existence and in favouring canonical works over those that are excluded. This latter process is strongly patriarchal and, far from being confined to the interwar years or before that time, it is ongoing. What women write, particularly when the setting is domestic, is devalued or denied in many cases.

There is a structural centrality to the settings of novels that informs both the storytelling of place and the place of storytelling. In each of the works under scrutiny in this thesis, the settings and the placing of the narrative within them are central to the webs of meaning to be found within the work. A common theme of setting among the texts is the domestic space. How the authors wrote 'home' depended on their own lifeworlds and also on their separate conceptions of plot and narrative. In *Hostages to Fortune*, Cambridge employs the language of containment and alienation and lays this over the bond of the family and the tensions of interaction. In *A Charmed Circle* Kavan uses the domestic setting to probe a more interior network of emotion operating within a dysfunctional family in *A Charmed Circle*. For DLS, in *The Nine Tailors* the gentle and shabby rectory of Fenchurch St. Paul reduces the central human character, Wimsey, to a 'stripping down' of his psyche. He occupies the nursery of the rectory, helps the Venables in their parish work, shares their stew and puts up with the material privations of this life. He has been taken away from the comforts of his London life and placed in a domestic setting which, like the watery wastes of the Fens, is alien to him. He is displaced and in this setting, is forced to confront his own interior, spiritual landscape.

Harford's work sites its central character firmly in the domestic setting and the plot centres on Sally's life there. Other characters' mobility illuminates Sally's containment on the 'home front' during the Great War. The network of material and cultural practices in *The Invaluable Mystery* operate at the domestic level and are reinforced at wider levels of nation and empire. Thirkell, too, explores nation and empire from within the domestic spaces of the small village of High Rising in her reconfigured Barsetshire. Thirkell ties the domestic space to the working space of an author, centring Laura Morland, the novel's main character within a domestic setting as working space. One of the sub-themes of this thesis has been to explore the writing spaces of the authors and of some of their characters. In each of the novels except Harford's there is a character who either dreams of writing (as Hilary Thorpe does in *The Nine Tailors*), who writes when she can, as Catherine does in *Hostages to Fortune*; or who identifies herself as a writer, as Mrs Deane does in Kavan's novel. Thirkell's *High Rising* centres the writing life of the main character and positions her writing as a central feature of the narrative as well as of the character from wrestling with a typewriter ribbon to the material centrality of her work.

The lifeworld of each author is also central to their work. I have cautioned against directly drawing on their texts as autobiographical documents. While I have argued that the texts are primary historical documents, I have also argued that the texts' positionings as part of the author's lifeworld are of importance as well. What is of more importance is how the authors' lifeworlds are informed by the texts in question and vice versa. The texts do not 'map out' the authors' spheres (Sayers, 1946, p.122) but inform them. Sayers' life and work were extant in an array of texts. Her writing, her letters to others, her journalism and autobiographical writings are extensive and for the most part, published and readily available. For Harford and her novel, this is far from the case. In this respect, the life and work of Cambridge are closest to that of Harford but Cambridge wrote a number of novels; Harford wrote only one. Harford is also the only Australian author to have been considered in any depth: she never left Australia. *The Invaluable Mystery* is her only fictional work. Harford's closest link to the authors studied in this work is with Thirkell. Despite a significant gulf in their political views, Harford and Thirkell knew Melbourne well, Harford as a native Melbournian and Thirkell as an emigrant. They were both writing

during the same period and both had experienced marital difficulty and the breakdown of that relationship. What interests me about the intersection of these two writers is their imaginative conception of place and the effect on their work of their political views.

In the geoliterary terrains of the texts are “conventional mappings and counter-cartographies” (Philo, pers. comm.), including the contradictory networks that, for example, show Thirkell to be a writer with a strongly conservative edge to her narrative voice and yet one that celebrates the professional woman writer through the strong characterisation of Laura Morland. These mappings and counter-cartographies are partly written into the texts and into the authors’ lives, uneven and uncertain.

One of the central features of the geoliterary terrains of these texts and their cultural matrices are the politics of the everyday: the lived lives of characters and authors, readers, publishers and critics. These circulate inseparably. When Nancy Mitford was writing to friends about the steady sales of her first novel, *Highland Fling* (1929), she was also counselling one of them on poultry-keeping (Mosley, 1994, p.75).<sup>138</sup> While Thirkell was writing for *Blackwoods* magazine, she was managing a household and keeping the ‘seawall’ of her desk as her private space, the geoliterary terrains of her work encompassing the physical and intellectual labour of writing and the emotional and physical labour of her domestic life.

In the exploration of the geoliterary terrains of the texts, I have endeavoured to draw together a history and a map of them. That these are incomplete is a function of the open-ended nature of storytelling. For the stories do not finish. They are told and retold, embellished and truncated and, as I have shown, they are often denigrated, devalued or denied existence. Light (1991, p.5) counsels that we are “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”. What must not happen is that the stories stop. Like Shahrazad, we must tell our stories of the everyday and the extraordinary and we must also listen.

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<sup>138</sup> All of the Mitfords were poultry-keepers and at various stages of their lives earned an income from this. Deborah, the youngest, wrote a book about her hens (Devonshire, 2001).

**But there; it's done; I'm glad to have it gone. I  
welcome this reclaimed space. Now I can think.  
(Shields, 2002, p.259)**

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**Appendix 1 - Long and short list of novels considered.**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date of Publication</b>
<b>Novels chosen for thesis</b>		
A Charmed Circle	Anna Kavan	1929
High Rising	Angela Thirkell	1933
Hostages to Fortune	Elizabeth Cambridge	1933
The Invaluable Mystery (A)	Lesbia Harford	1987 - written 1922
The Nine Tailors	Dorothy L. Sayers	1934
<b>Other novels of the period</b>		
A House is Built (A)	M. Barnard Eldershaw (pen-name of two authors: Marjorie Barnard & Flora Eldershaw)	1929
All Passion Spent	Vita Sackville-West	1931
All That Swagger (A)	Miles Franklin	1936
Intimate Strangers (A)	Katharine Susannah Pritchard	1937
None Turn Back	Storm Jameson	1936
One Pair of Hands	Monica Dickens	1939
Painted Clay (A)	Capel Boake	1917
Private Worlds	Phyllis Bottome	1934
Return to Coolamai (A)	Eleanor Dark	1936
The Beauties and the Furies (A)	Christina Stead	1936
The Butcher Shop (A)	Jean Devanny	1926
The Crowded Street	Winifred Holtby	1924
The Dark Tide	Vera Brittain	1923
The Fashion in Shrouds	Margery Allingham	1938
The New House	Lettice Cooper	1936
The Priory	Dorothy Whipple	1939
The Way Home (A)	Henry Handel (Ethel Robertson) Richardson	1925
The Way Things Are	E.M. Delafield	1927
We That Were Young	Irene Rathbone	1932

(A) denotes a work by an Australian author. All others are British. These are a small fraction of the number of novels published in Australia and Britain between the wars. No doubt my own narrowing of the focus has excluded other texts that have been silenced in one way and another.

## Appendix 2 – The Orange Prize, its Judges and British Women Writers

Parker's (2004) examination of the reception of women's fiction, truncated here, demonstrates how women's fiction has been and is being, persistently denied a central role in literary history. In this case, Parker looks at the Orange Prize for fiction, which is open only to women and finds that it is British women's fiction that is under fire. After a review of current critiques of women's fiction as limited, narrow and so on, Parker trawls the commentaries on the Orange Prize:

“Since its inception in 1996, the Orange Prize has repeatedly been seen to focus on a gulf between the quality of work produced by British and American women writers. Judging the first competition, Susan Hill claimed that, ‘the sharper writing is coming from America...’ Val Hennessy likewise asserted that ‘American women writers seem more energetic and exciting. They seem to be able to lift themselves out of their own domestic routine in their books. They go away from all that, move out of their own spheres and go further abroad for their own experiences’. Hill and Hennessy attacked British novels for their ‘dreary domestic self-obsessions’ and described the books they read by British women as ‘drivel’, ‘abysmal’ and ‘terrible’ ...[about] domestic obsessions ... parochial, small-minded and inward-looking’. The following year, Lisa Jardine expressed similar views, arguing that British women write ... books that are ‘smug’ and ‘parochial’. In contrast she praised American novelists whom, she said, ‘address wider and bigger contemporary issues. Americans are much more ambitious in their scope.’ Commenting ... that only one of the six writers on the 1999 shortlist was British (Julia Blackburn), Chair of the Judges Lola Young dismissed British women's fiction as ‘piddling’ and ‘parochial’... While British women's fiction was ‘insular’ and ‘parochial’, North American women have, she argued, the ability to take ‘small and intimate stories and set them against a vast physical and cultural landscape which is very appealing.’ “(Parker, 2004,p.3)

This, of course, began a debate that was carried out in the press. Taking the logic expressed by the various commentators on British women's fiction, it is their insularity, apparently caused by the lack of vast landscapes and broad cultural brushes that diminishes it. Domestic equals piddling, insular and drivel and a wider landscape equals just-what-we-want-to-read. No coincidence, then, that domestic fiction as viewed by these commentators, is more of the same, as viewed by the [mostly male] arbiters of the [mostly male] canon. Later, Lola Young distanced herself from her comments, remarking that she had been quoted out of context and misrepresented by journalists. This is the official line when someone has spoken to a journalist in an unguarded moment without using those magic words: “off the record”. More was said along these lines in the press over the years, all of it attacking British women's writing which, it seemed, was parochial and ‘smug’ because it was apparently out of fashion. No change there then. As Parker comments: “As the rumpus generated by accusations of plagiarism levelled at Orange Prize winner Linda Grant's *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2002) illustrated yet again, bad publicity works not only to embarrass and discredit the Orange Prize, but also to hijack it by distracting attention from its primary purpose: to celebrate writing by women.” (204, p.5).

Maggie Gee responded in May, 1999 with the following poem in the pages of *The Guardian* (Parker, 2004,p.4):

“Prof Lola Young  
We are mildly stung  
We thought we were middling;  
Alas we are ‘piddling’  
(That’s the whole lot of us -  
Lola’s got shot of us.)  
She and her buddies  
In cultural studies  
Have glanced at our stuff  
And declared it all guff.  
The Yanks au contraire  
Have big themes and they care.  
There are no surprises:  
The Yanks get the prizes.  
Our thanks, dear Prof Young,  
For putting us right;  
This side of the Atlantic  
Women are shite.  
And congrats, Orange Prize,  
On this feminist coup -  
They enjoy nothing more  
Than women at war.  
So now we’re all off  
For a drink with the prof.  
If I buy her a beer,  
Can I win it next year?”  
(in Parker, 2004, p.5)

## Appendix 3

### The Works of Angela Thirkell and Review Listings

#### Angela Thirkell Reviews appearing in *The Times Literary Supplement*

Book Title	Date of publication	Reviewer	TLS Issue	Date	Page
<i>Three Houses</i>	1931	H. Child	1558	10/12/1931	993
<i>Ankle Deep</i>	1933	E.E. Mavrogordato	1615	12/1/1933	22
<i>High Rising</i>	1933	E.E. Mavrogordato	1639	29/6/1933	628
<i>Wild Strawberries</i>	1934	E.E. Mavrogordato	1688	7/6/1934	406
<i>The Demon in the House</i>	1934	E.E. Mavrogordato	1709	1/11/1934	752
<i>O, These Men, These Men</i>	1935	E.E. Mavrogordato	1732	11/4/1935	242
<i>The Grateful Sparrow</i>	1935	M. Grant Cook	1765	30/11/1935	811
<i>The Fortunes of Harriet</i>	1936	David Leslie Murray	1787	2/5/1936	369
<i>August Folly</i>	1936	E.E. Mavrogordato	1811	17/10/1936	835
<i>Coronation Summer</i>	1937	David Leslie Murray	1831	6/03/1937	166
<i>Coronation Summer</i> (reprint)	1953	Alfred Duggan	2674	1/05/1953	281
<i>Summer Half</i>	1937	Mrs E.L. Sturch	1858	11/09/1937	655
<i>Pomfret Towers</i>	1938	R.D. Charques	1892	7/05/1938	313
<i>The Brandons</i>	1939	Mrs E.L. Sturch	1935	4/03/1939	133
<i>The Brandons</i>	1939	A. Foss (short review)	1938	25/03/1939	180.15
<i>Before Lunch</i>	1939	R.D. Charques	1974	2/12/1939	699
<i>Cheerfulness Breaks In</i>	1940	R.D. Charques	2018	5/20/2940	505
<i>Northbridge Rectory</i>	1941	M. H. Tiltman	2066	6/09/1941	437
<i>Marling Hall</i>	1942	Jan Stephens	2119	12/09/1942	449
<i>Growing Up</i>	1943	R.D. Charques	2181	20/11/1943	564
<i>The Headmistress</i>	1944	R.D. Charques	2238	23/12/1944	617
<i>Peace Breaks Out</i>	1947	R.D. Charques	2349	8/02/1947	77

<i>Book Title</i>	<i>Date of publication</i>	<i>Reviewer</i>	<i>TLS Issue</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Page</i>
<i>Private Enterprise</i>	1947	M. Hannah	2390	22/11/1947	601
<i>Love Among the Ruins</i>	1948	Maurice Richardson	2435	2/10/1948	553
<i>The Old Bank House</i>	1949	Miss Folliot	2489	14/10/1949	661
<i>County Chronicle</i>	1950	Julian Fane	2538	22/09/1950	593
<i>The Duke's Daughter</i>	1951	Maurice Richardson	2591	28/09/1951	617
<i>Happy Returns</i>	1952	Julian Symons	2637	15/08/1952	529
<i>Jutland Cottage</i>	1953	Mrs E. L. Sturch	2693	11/09/1953	577
<i>What Did It Mean?</i>	1954	C. Makins	2736	9/07/1954	437
<i>Enter Sir Robert</i>	1955	B. Alison	2781	17/06/1955	329
<i>Essays by Divers Hands (AT ed)</i>	1956	No information available	2837	13/07/1956	427
<i>Close Quarters</i>	1958	John G. Pearson	2940	4/07/1958	373
<i>Love At All Ages</i>	1959	Miss Folliot	2994	17/07/1959	421
<i>Three Score and Ten (with C.A. Lejeune)</i>	1961	W.S. Keir	3119	8/12/1961	877

Reviews appearing in *The Times*

Book	Date of Publication	Date of Review	Page
<i>Three Houses (Listing only)</i>	1931	9/12/1931	17
<i>Three Houses (short review)</i>	1931	11/12/1931	20
<i>Ankle Deep</i>	1933	13/01/1933	7
<i>High Rising</i>	1933	22/09/1933	6
<i>Wild Strawberries</i>	1934	8/06/1934	14
<i>The Demon in the House</i>	1934	30/10/1934	8
<i>The Grateful Sparrow</i>	1935	6/12/1935	10
<i>The Fortunes of Harriet (Short review)</i>	1936	25/02/1936	19
<i>The Fortunes of Harriet</i>	1936	1/05/1936	11
<i>August Folly</i>	1936	13/10/1936	8
<i>Summer Half</i>	1937	17/09/1937	17
<i>Pomfret Towers</i>	1938	6/05/1938	22
<i>Before Lunch</i>	1939	1/12/1939	4
<i>Happy Returns</i>	1952	16/08/1952	6
<i>The Good Little Girls</i>	1954	11/01/1954	2
<i>A Second Angela Thirkell Omnibus</i>	1967	28/10/1967	22