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A Prosaic People? Literature, Propaganda, and National Identity in Second World War Britain

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Introduction:
"An Unrivaled Opportunity"

In September 1940, *The Times* published a nearly half-page article which centered on the destruction of a statue of the English poet John Milton outside of St. Giles' Church, the site of his burial. Entitled "No Censorship of Opinion," the article set about contrasting the hereditary English relationship to literature and free thought— as personified by Milton— with the state of literature in Nazi Germany. The article's final line, voicing a curious take on the propaganda battle between the two warring states, contends that by the time the "name of Goebbels has ceased to stink and has been quite forgotten, the glory of Milton would survive."[1] In the framework of the article, it is the long-dead poet John Milton that stands in for the nation, and who is called upon to represent an ancestral Englishness in defiance of Nazi Germany. Juxtaposed with German propaganda is Britain's literary heritage, which stands fundamentally— as the ruined statue of Milton to the inflated figure of Goebbels— against the Nazi state. The article clearly aligns literature with the British nation and defines both the nation and the war effort by its relationship to (chiefly British) literature, both its past and present.

The aforementioned article was hardly unique. Consider too, for example, an advertisement which appeared in the *Belfast Telegraph* in the early years of the war, opining that "Books! [Are] the letter of freedom and its very spirit. Banned and burned by the Nazi, for Britons they are not even controlled or taxed."[2] The advertisement succeeds not only in aligning literary freedom with the war effort, but effectively marks literary consumption as a sort of patriotic duty; in the purchasing of books, the logic of the advert held, the reader would in effect be buying the "letter" and "very spirit" of freedom, and in so doing would also be engaging in an

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[1] "No Censorship of Opinion," *The Times* (London)*, 12 September 1940, *The Times Digital Archive.*
[2] National Book Council, "Presenting the Freedom of the Bookshop," *Belfast Telegraph,* 6 December 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

act of wartime defiance to Nazism. In this advertisement, the purchasing of books— and as a corollary, their consumption— is portrayed as an essentially British act.

What these examples demonstrate is that during the Second World War, a typically unofficial and loose coalition of British newspapers, publishers, and booksellers— together occasionally with the Ministry of Information (MoI)— mobilized Britain's imagined literary past and present as a part of the war effort. The nation's perceived special relationship with the written word was touted as an essentially British quality in direct opposition to the Nazi state, while simultaneously, its literary heritage was drawn into the modern era to represent the nation in a time of crisis. Indeed, given that British leaders such as Stanley Baldwin declared that Britain faced an enemy that, if it were to conquer London or Paris, would "destroy the libraries… just as the library of Alexandria was burnt centuries ago," then it would logically follow that marshalled alongside soldiers and civilians would be Britain's imagined literary heritage itself.[3] Building off rich literatures on Britain's Home Front, intellectual histories of British readership, and scholarship on British publishing, this thesis contends that during Britain's Second World War, enterprising propagandists in consort with opportunistic publishers broadly nationalized notions of bookishness. While the inclusiveness of their rhetoric proved thoroughly limited— they found themselves continually grappling with issues of class and gender— a loose alliance of propagandists and publishers took to defining the wartime nation by its imagined modern literary proclivities and its mythologized literary past.

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[3] "Hitler Would Burn the Books," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 9 May 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

Historical Context

   The early years of the Second World War had, to say the least, gone poorly for Britain. The invasion of Poland, which had triggered the war, perhaps ended predictably. Nonetheless, following the stalemates of the "phony war" period, the allies faced disaster in France and the low countries.[4] By mid-May, the Netherlands capitulated, Brussels fell to German forces, and the French front broke near Sedan; the French Prime Minister in a private phone call declared the first battle "lost," the allied forces "beaten."[5] Churchill, in return, opined that Britain had been nothing but "forestalled, surprised, and… outwitted" in Norway.[6] By the end of the month, Belgium, too, had surrendered. The British Expeditionary Force, within weeks cut off and pushed into the sea, salvaged itself somewhat through the evacuations at Dunkirk; British propagandists, looking for some semblance of hope in a narrative largely comprising defeats, turned a keen eye to what they deemed this "epic of gallantry."[7] On 22 June, France signed an armistice.[8] The first months of conflict in the West had proved disastrous, and Britons soon stood under the threat of the German Luftwaffe, a threat which would begin in earnest in September.[9] Britain may hardly have stood alone— it still had, after all, the entirety of its Empire behind it— but it found itself in a precarious position, contending not only with the forces of fascism which had overtaken the continent, but with what the MoI worriedly declared to be a "growing mood of pessimism" at home.[10] Of course, British propagandists worked fervently to stem the tide of

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[4] Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 57.
[5] Ibid, 106.
[6] Ibid, 79.
[7] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 3; Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 4.
[8] Calder, *The People's War*, 110.
[9] Ibid, 141; Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), 63.
[10] Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990), 161; Calder, *The People's War,* 57.

pessimism, and out of the defeats of the first campaigns and the crucible of the Blitz rose a

new— if notably invented— national mythology.

When George Orwell began his eminent wartime work *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he did

not have to look terribly far for inspiration. Orwell's opening line evocatively declared, in no

uncertain terms, that as he writes, "highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to

kill me."[11] His rhetoric is powerful, and Orwell makes the stakes of his writing urgently and

explicitly clear. Not only is the war imminently present in both a spatial and temporal sense, but

it threatens him as it threatens all Britons alike. Neither he nor his aerial tormentors feel any

"enmity" as individuals, but the combatants of this war are anonymous just as the victims are

indiscriminate.[12] The conflict at hand not only touches but threatens the very essence of "home,"

the targets— and soldiers— of which are the English "people" themselves, whose stubborn,

impractical will stands between fascism and freedom.[13] Unlike wars previous, fought as they had

been at sea and in seemingly faraway lands or, in the case of the Great War, at least usually

across the Channel and in the fields of France— in either case, a somewhat unrealized and ever-

distant *elsewhere*— most Britons confronted the Second World War at "home."[14] And whereas

previous wars had been fought by armed soldiers in the trenches and on the seas, so Britons

believed following the fall of France and the evacuations at Dunkirk, this war was instead fought

primarily by "the People" themselves.[15] The historian Angus Calder romantically summarizes

the mythos as a battle "of an unarmed civilian population against incendiaries and high

explosive; the battle of firemen, wardens, policemen, nurses and rescue workers against an

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[11] George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1941), 9.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid, 30, 59.
[14] Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 232.
[15] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War*, 29.

enemy they could not hurt."[16] Britons may not have been as defenseless as they preferred to imagine themselves— the Luftwaffe, after all, not only sustained high casualties but effectively lost the air war over Britain— but the language of the People's War certainly preferred the civilian over the soldier. "In Britain," famously declared the British propagandist J.B. Priestly, "this is fundamentally a People's War."[17]

Coined by British propagandists in the aftermath of the Fall of France and the debacle at Dunkirk, and baptized in the fires of the Blitz, the primacy of wartime belief in Britain's "People's War" is difficult to understate. The mythos of Britain's Second World War held that Britain was a peace-loving state, civilian at heart— a thoroughly united island of "civilians at war," wrote Priestly— compelled out of reluctant necessity to take up arms to defend its way of life and very existence.[18] Faced with the specter of totalitarianism— or, as to be discussed, with the specter of a hyper-martial, continental "other"— "the people" pulled together as one. It was not exactly as though divisions ceased to exist, but rather as though they became unimportant: neither Orwell nor Priestly triumphantly declared that the Britain of the Second World War was a land finally bereft of the class divisions, "snobbery, and privilege" which had long defined and troubled the nation, but rather opined that they temporarily became somewhat "silly" non-issues.[19] Whatever ultimately "trivial" divisions may have taken hold in pre-war Britain, they were blown away by the German bombs which fell on British cities, under whose shadow the citizens of London soldiered on.[20] Of course, the reasoning was hardly without its flaws— as numerous scholars have demonstrated, neither the divisions of class, gender, or race simply

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[16] Calder, *The People's War,* 157.
[17] J.B. Priestly, *Britain at War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 114.
[18] Ibid, 20, 53.
[19] Ibid, 114; Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 33.
[20] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn,* 29-30.

melted away in the face of the turmoil of the Second World War, nor did they disappear in the

post-war period— but it was both convenient and superbly powerful.[21] As Sonya Rose notes,

belief in the People's War was rooted in a simple and singular "broad consensus:" that "the

British nation was or must be an unadulterated whole."[22]

The early campaigns of the war and the realities of the Blitz proved no more welcoming

to British publishers than they had to the nation's hastily reassembled propaganda establishment.

Wartime resource concerns subsumed all others, and the exigencies of wartime demanded the

early implementation of paper rationing. This was a matter not helped by the rather inopportune

location of paper producers and raw-material growers: in Holland, French North Africa, and

Norway.[23] The Ministry of Supply (MoS) dictated that paper usage, then, had to be reduced to a

paltry 37.8% of pre-war usage.[24] Of course, publishers generally acquiesced, but not without

some chafes with the Ministry of Supply, which retained the (often arbitrary) right to grant or

withhold paper.[25] In an effort to make do with such shortages, books were extensively printed in

smaller type, with smaller margins, and lighter bindings.[26] Such conditions, though, had a

devastating effect on publishers: 6,000 titles were published in 1941, down from 16,000 just two

years before.[27] The Blitz pushed matters to a breaking point: a single German bombing raid on

29 December 1940 completely destroyed seventeen British publishing houses based around

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[21] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War*; Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: Gender and National Identity, 1939-1991* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).
[22] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 69.
[23] Valerie Holman, *Print for Victory: Book Publishing in England, 1939-1945* (London: The British Library, 2008)*,* 15.
[24] "The Wartime Boom in Books," *The Sphere* (London), 6 December 1941; Molly Manning, *When Books Went to War: The Stories that Helped Us Win WWII* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2014), 155.
[25] Holman, *Print for Victory,* 82.
[26] "The Wartime Boom in Books," *The Sphere* (London), 6 December 1941.
[27] Ibid.

Figure I. Paternoster Row, the longtime home of Britain's publishing houses, decimated by the Blitz. Reproduced from the Improvements and Town Planning Committee of London, *The City of London: A Record of Destruction and Survival* (London: Architectural Press, 1951), 203.

Paternoster Row in London, and set upwards of one million books alight (Figure I).[28] What few

reserves publishers maintained rapidly depleted.

Nevertheless, the nation craved reading material, and wartime proved no exception.

Britain had always been a particularly— if not always uniquely— literary nation. Nineteenth-

century education acts gave Britain a lead in literacy rates over much of the rest of Europe, even

into the twentieth century, and set the nation of the twentieth century on track for mass,

democratized readership.[29] By the time of the First World War, as the scholar Paul Fussell has

demonstrated, regular soldiers on either side of the Western Front were capable of being "not

merely literate," but referring to the increasingly-widespread penchant for literary consumption,

"vigorously literary."[30] The democratization of readership took little pause as the twentieth

century progressed. During the interwar years, the expansion of inexpensive "tupenny" libraries

brought *access* to library service within the reach of all but 60,000 Britons, and publishers

largely catered to the mass market to publish inexpensive, popular volumes alongside their more

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[28] Manning, *When Books Went to War*, 155.

[29] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), *189*; Kevin McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain: 1914-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992)*, 7.

[30] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 157.

traditional, "quality" ones.[31] Access, though, was only as important as demand— and of this

there was plenty. The war years, with the monotony and boredom characteristic of blackouts,

rationing, and the depravations of wartime, saw peak lending records among British libraries.[32]

Books were deemed a wartime "essential" by the Red Cross, and mobile libraries even served

bombed-out cities; following the bombing of Coventry, one commentator declared that "the

distribution of reading matter to the people was almost as necessary as the distribution of

food."[33] The social surveying organization Mass Observation (MO), in one curious wartime

survey, even estimated the percentage of people reading in various public places. In teashops,

parks, and cafes, nearly a fifth of observed Britons read at any given moment; in tubes, trains and

waiting rooms, that number rose to nearly a third.[34]

So, what were they reading? Wartime militated escapism, so many turned to "the lightest

of light literature." [35] As such, one library noted that "detective stories, adventure, [and] love

stories" each remained popular during the war. Nonetheless, the outbreak of conflict had

certainly skewed reading tastes. Nearly universally, libraries reported increasing loans of non-

fiction. One librarian noted that their clients had taken out a "terrific number of books on the last

war," while another stressed the recent ascendence of books on "modern affairs." [36] Books on

Nazi Germany— biographies of leading individuals, and even *Mein Kampf*— kept up a "big

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[31] McAleer, *Popular Reading,* 8, 49; Holman, *Print for Victory,* 7. For a more detailed discussion of "quality" and "popular" literature in the context of the literary nationalism of Second World War Britain, see Chapter Two, Section Four.

[32] McAleer, *Popular Reading,* 50; "The Wartime Boom in Books," *The Sphere* (London), 6 December 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[33] "Books For Men In The Forces," *The Times* (London)*,* 1 January 1942, *The Times Digital Archive;* McAleer, *Popular Reading*, 51.

[34] Holman, *Print for Victory*, 51.

[35] "Books All Will Enjoy," *Leven Mail*, 24 January 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[36] "Fulham Reading Survey," 1940, SxMOA1/2/20/3/A, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

demand," alongside other works relating to "international politics."[37]

Nevertheless, for publishers, the war proved at first a nerve-wracking enterprise. The first years of the war presented most Britons with a dangerous and uncertain reality. Rationing affected many, if not most, household goods and nearly everyone found goods to be scarcer. Few, at least initially, desired to spend their incomes on reading material; libraries, perhaps, seemed more economically appealing than bookstores. In 1940, Mass Observation observed the war had only "affected the book trade adversely."[38] One bookseller quoted in MO's report summarized the situation well. Noting that business had become "very very bad," he explained that "these dark nights you hoped a lot would read. But people won't come out, and… I think too many of them have too much on their minds just now… The prices of books are going to make it more difficult I suppose."[39] Yet as the historian Valerie Holman contends, the war years quickly became for publishers "a time when the usual patterns of supply and demand [were] reversed, and normal market conditions no longer applied."[40] Once the situation, and especially production, stabilized somewhat, publishers began to do quite well for themselves. Indeed, this was so much the case that one newspaper article opined in late 1941 that given the demand for books, "many publishers… who had a thin time from 1935 to 1939 can expect to pay off all their debts if things continue as they are going now."[41]

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[37] Ibid; Sandra Koa Wing, *Our Longest Days: A People's History of the Second World War* (London: Profile, 2008), 267.

[38] "Fulham Reading Survey," 1940, SxMOA1/2/20/3/A, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 1.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Holman, *Print*, 247.

[41] "The Wartime Boom in Books," *The Sphere* (London), 6 December 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive*.

Literature

This research finds itself largely occupying a space at the intersection of two strands of historical literature, each broadly dealing with histories of the "Home Front" in Britain's Second World War. The first, and perhaps more pressing given the centrality of national identity to this research, is that dealing with the "People's War." Detailed study of the People's War began with Angus Calder's monumental 1969 publication of the same name. In his work, Calder asserted that the Second World War was fought, at least initially, against the general will of the British government, and rather by "the people" themselves, who had "surged forward to fight their own war."[42] Of course, while Calder's summary of the propaganda of the People's War is certainly accurate, it is not without its shortcomings. J.B. Priestly and George Orwell stressed the concept of the People's War as, for the sake of historical analogy, a Second World War-British version of the French *Union Sacrée* or the German *Burgfrieden* of the First World War; across the political spectrum and across class-lines, Britons drew together in the spirit of national solidarity. Calder, by contrast, viewed it in retrospect as a popular outpouring of support for the war effort, one which fundamentally set "the People" in conflict with "the Government" and forced the latter's hand. Calder perhaps bought too much into the rhetoric. As many historians— addressed hereafter— have since argued, he remained fairly uncritical of wartime social issues and of the degree of unanimity of popular belief in the concept of the People's War. Nonetheless, Calder's work remains relevant as a detailed survey of wartime life on Britain's home front, even if certain claims need be taken with a grain of salt.

Since Calder's initial publication, scholarship has generally trended toward revisionism of the concept of the People's War, and can be divided neatly into three camps. The first, which

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[42] Calder, *People's War,* 18.

is not relevant to this research, deals with the broad, post-war social consensus which arose from

Britain's Second World War.[43] This debate centers on the question of whether the rhetoric of the

People's War, with all its claims of popular unity and cross-class equality, brought about the

social and economic reform of the post-war era. The second camp of literature relevant to the

People's War, which is certainly applicable to this research, deals with the political and popular

origins of the mythology. Calder's assertion that the war was fought largely at the whim of the

people rather than the government, an argument which omits the role of the government in the

deliberate creation of the mythology of the People's War, has been a particular source of

criticism. Clive Ponting, for example, has since argued that the British government took an

active role in the mobilization of a generally hesitant British public, and that the outlook of many

(particularly lower-class) Britons during the blitz could best be described as, to say the least,

bleak.[44] Similarly, Nicholas Harman concluded from his study of the mythology of Dunkirk that

the still-persistent image of the evacuation as a moment of triumph was a top-down invention

created by an alliance of the British government, armed forces, press, and radio broadcasters,

keen to avoid any morale shock at home.[45] Indeed, even Angus Calder himself, motivated

partially by critiques of his work and partially by distaste for displays of jingoism in response to

the Falklands/Malvinas Conflict, went on to revise many of his own conclusions, and stressed the

inventedness of wartime rhetoric in his 1991 work, *The Myth of the Blitz*.[46]

    The third camp of scholarship relating to the People's War, and the most recently active,

revolves around wartime social issues. Sonya Rose, in her monograph *Which People's War?*,

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[43] One exception to this can be made in considering the work of the historian David Costello, who examined George Orwell and Tosco Fyvel's Searchlight Books series, and in particular its efforts to invent "the People's War" both as a mechanism for wartime unity and as a post-war political tool. David R. Costello, "Searchlight Books and the Quest for a 'People's War', 1941-42," *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 2 (April 1989): 257-276.

[44] Ponting, *1940*.

[45] Nicholas Harman, *Dunkirk: The Patriotic Myth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 238.

[46] Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, xiii.

dissects the rhetoric of wartime citizenship in an effort to critically examine wartime issues of class, race, and gender. Among other sections, her analysis of issues of class in wartime, especially with regards to wartime belief in cross-class sacrificial equality and the Anglo-Soviet alliance, proves especially noteworthy. Rose contends that issues of class, despite wartime rhetoric to the contrary, hardly became unimportant; not only did labor agitation prove to be a contentious wartime issue, but class conflict reached what one might deem a rhetorical head during the war years. The nation found itself at once saturated with the wartime fantasy of cross-class unity while simultaneously grappling with contestations between capital and labor in the setting of a war economy, revelations on class and poverty brought about by evacuations, and expressions of pro-Soviet feeling.[47] Of similar importance to this research is Rose's analysis of wartime masculinity, discussed in more detail in chapter two. Largely in accordance with Rose's scholarship, especially regarding issues of sex and gender, is the work of Lucy Noakes. In *War and the British,* Noakes conceptualizes the People's War as an era erroneously remembered as "a time when class and political differences collapsed together to create a shared vision of the nation."[48] In their respective works, both Noakes and Rose examine the gendered aspects of British wartime identity and the often-masculinist conceptualization of "The People's War," noting that wartime notions of femininity could be both crucial to constructing wartime Britishness, as well as destabilizing in the context of the obligations of wartime womanhood.[49]

The second overarching strand of scholarship pertinent to this research revolves around intellectual and publishing histories in Britain. Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Class* represents a landmark study in British intellectual history.[50] Largely

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[47] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 29.
[48] Noakes, *War and the British*, 47.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life.*

surveying mass readership from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, Jonathan Rose

traces trends in working-class readership and thought. His analysis of late-nineteenth and early-

twentieth century working class attitudes toward Shakespeare— whom he affectionately deems

"the People's Bard"— his detailed history of working-class autodidactic tradition, as well as his

analysis of high- and low-literary tendencies prove especially invaluable to this research. Perhaps

more temporally restricted, Kevin McAleer, in his *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain,*

1914-1950, surveys readership between the wars and centers his argument on the emergence and

expansion of Britain's new reading public.[51] His is a history of publishing and readership merged

together, describing the emergence of a new industry centered largely, though not exclusively, on

"popular" demand. His work generally accords well with that of Jonathan Rose, with one notable

exception. While McAleer stressed the "escapist narcotic" role of literature to the working-class

Britons, Rose stressed its educatory potential; then again, this disagreement may be chalked up to

slight differences in the timeframe of each study.[52]

   Various histories, perhaps more temporally focused, have been written on publishing

during the war years. Valerie Holman's *Print for Victory* is certainly the most comprehensive,

but necessarily centers on the wartime bureaucracy of paper rationing, book production and

distribution, and internecine squabbles within circles of publishers and government ministries.[53]

Nonetheless, in her argument that the Second World War "may well prove to be the last major

conflict in which so much was expected of the printed word," she will find no contest in this

thesis.[54] At its heart, her work is a contestation of the overarching notion that the 1940's

represented a "barren or static interlude between periods of innovation and growth" for

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[51] McAleer, *Popular Reading*.
[52] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 8; McAleer, *Popular Reading,* 71.
[53] Holman, *Print for Victory.*
[54] Ibid, 1.

publishers.[55] John B. Hench, meanwhile, has taken up much the same gambit from across the

Atlantic, examining the wartime activities of U.S. publishers.[56] For the purposes of this research,

Ian McLaine's *Ministry of Morale* falls into this category as well. A broad history of the Ministry

of Information, McLaine's work remains the most relevant and extensive survey of the

Ministry's wartime activity with regards to book publishing and propaganda activities. McLaine,

however, could be said to have fallen into many of the same pitfalls as Calder; at times placing

too much faith in wartime propaganda and the romanticized memory of the conflict, McLaine is

not always as critical of the Ministry's propagandists as is perhaps warranted.[57] Furthermore, he

and Holman disagree regarding several issues, the most crucial of which is censorship. While

both contend that censorship remained something of a non-issue for book publishers, Holman

tends to assert the importance of self-censorship while McLaine argues somewhat naively for the

unrestrained benevolence of the Ministry.[58]

      Several honorable mentions remain which do not quite fall into either category. From the

realm of cultural history is the work of the historian Paul Fussell, whose *The Great War and*

Modern Memory remains a landmark study.[59] Focusing on literary conceptions of the Western

Front of the First World War, his survey extends further into the "political, rhetorical, and

artistic" impacts of the war and its memory "on subsequent life."[60] While this research is not

entirely concerned with the literary productions of the First World War, his survey remains

useful as a point of comparison between the respective atmospheres of literary consumption, as

well as the always-prevalent memory of the First World War. Following up on and building off

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[55] Ibid.

[56] John B. Hench, *Books as Weapons: Propaganda, Publishing, and the Battle for Global Markets in the Era of World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell U.P., 2010).

[57] McLaine, *Ministry of Morale,* 11.

[58] Holman, *Print for Victory*, 62, 92-3; McLaine, *Ministry of Morale,* 11, 40-41.

[59] Fussell, *The Great War.*

[60] Ibid, ix.

of Fussell's scholarship is Alison Light's *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars*.[61] An excellent study in both literature and inter-war cultural history, Light's work argues that the Britain of the inter-war period experienced what could best be defined as an 'inward turn,' of sorts. Partially in response to the traumas of the First World War, she argues that the nation variously shrugged off the language of the martial, masculine, and imperial and rather "redefined Englishness" through a vision of a more traditionally feminine, conservative domesticity.[62]

Curiously, one more point worth noting is that the concept of wartime literariness has recently received some attention from more "popular" circles. One work of popular history, Molly Manning's *When Books Went to War*, centers on the Armed Service Editions printed for American servicemen during the war. Inexpensive paperbacks of all sorts of literature from the then-obscure *Great Gatsby* to *Anna Karenina* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the ASEs were shipped wherever the U.S. military was sent; as she optimistically contends, not only did the ASEs become the "most important equipment" of thousands of American servicemen, but they helped to democratize American readership and "build a new literate middle class."[63] Manning's book recently graced the *New York Times* bestseller list.[64] Of a lighter, more feel-good nature is a recent fiction publication by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*.[65] Shaffer's and Barrows' novel explores the wartime significance of literature, centering on the wartime struggles of a group of women and men from the island of Guernsey, occupied during the war. Several local residents, "literature lovers all," formed the

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[61] Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991).
[62] Ibid, 8.
[63] Manning, *When Books Went to War,* xv.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* (New York: The Dial Press, 2008).

titular society both as an alibi to excuse discreet meetings and as a method of coping with the stresses of wartime.[66] First published in 2008, it was released as a Netflix film starring Lily James in 2018.

Research, Significance, and Methodology

During the early years of the Second World War, the marketing agents of British publishing houses and the propagandists of the Ministry of Information embarked on a campaign to publicize the significance of books to the wartime nation. To this end, they defined the nation through its imagined literary proclivities— its penchant for literary production and consumption, and its unique attitude toward literary freedom— and in opposition to the literary tyranny of Nazi Germany. They marshaled the nation's mythological literary heritage, enlisting Shakespeare and Milton in the war effort, and portraying them as temperate and civilian English heroes. Of course, reality is often more complex than rhetoric, and several wartime exigencies— book recycling programs, questions surrounding "enemy" literature, and censorship, to name a few— offered rather blatant contradictions to the rhetoric of literary nationalism in Second World War Britain. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Information, National Book Council, and the ranks of British publishers, booksellers, and newspapermen largely succeeded in nationalizing notions of bookishness within the wartime context.

Up until now, most studies of British national identity in the Second World War have focused on the mythology of the People's War. By contrast, this research seeks to examine wartime-British identity from the angle of what one might term "literary nationalism." As a facet of wartime national identity and propaganda, the imaginary of "British bookishness" became at

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[66] Ibid.

once inseparable from the larger, nationalizing rhetoric of the People's War, yet distinct from it in practice. Furthermore, while much literature has been published on the role and significance of other forms of media during the war— Sian Nicholas' work on the BBC, or Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards' work on British cinema, for example— little has focused on the significance of literature, especially on the significance of literary consumption.[67] Indeed, I argue that although not the most "modern" medium, literature still occupied a special place within wartime-British identity, serving both as a reminder of British (or more often, English) heritage and as another mechanism via which to combat totalitarianism. Finally, while both literary production and consumption occupy an important place in conceptions of the First World War— which was deemed by Paul Fussell the first conflict capable of being not only "literary," but "vigorously" so— literary consumption arguably became even more so in 1939-1945.[68] At home, the expansion of Britain's "new reading public" enabled Britain's literati to declare the island a nation of readers, while abroad, the totalitarian arch-nemeses of the written word tossed countless volumes into great conflagrations; like no conflict before, the Second World War could truly be deemed a "Battle of the Books."[69]

There is no dearth of source-material relating to Second World War-British bookishness. This fact is sensible for several reasons. For one, as Sian Nicholas notes in his study of the wartime BBC, the Second World War stood as a time of pervasive "myth-making on the Home Front."[70] British propaganda, though headed by the Ministry of Information, was a largely decentralized affair: its agents were myriad and sundry, its claims diverse. Writers,

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[67] Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1996); Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
[68] Fussell, *The Great War*, 157.
[69] Ibid; *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941), https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.
[70] Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 1.

newspapermen, radio hosts, intellectuals, and artists, each contributed to the wartime mission of mythologizing with exceptional degrees of patriotic piety and advocative aptitude. For all its challenges— and occasional embarrassments— Britain's propaganda machine functioned with an exceptional degree of robustness. Second, beyond the basic energy behind British propaganda, is the fact that literary propaganda necessarily stood apart. It should come as no surprise that those who most ardently espoused belief in 'British bookishness' were also some of Britain's most literarily active individuals. In sheer volume, then, the cult of English literariness punched above its weight class.

Given that the most prominent advocates of 'British bookishness' happened, themselves, to be rather literarily hyper-productive, the primary source material for this research proved immense. It should come as no surprise that neither the Ministry of Information, nor Britain's publishing houses, felt particularly unwilling to express themselves in print. Rather, they published their opinions widely. As such, the vast array of printed material— either as propaganda pamphlets, advertising leaflets, or even small 'books on books'— made for ready access to official opinions on the wartime "battle of the books." The Libraries of the University of Reading and London's Imperial War Museum proved especially beneficial in this regard. Newspapers, too, became essential to this research. The databases of *The Times Digital Archive* and the *British Newspaper Archive* offered access to hundreds of wartime circulars. Thankfully, this access was not limited only to major cities; alongside newspapers from London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow this research relied on smaller circulation, local newspapers as well. Published opinions alone, however, hardly tell the whole story.

As such, and in addition to wartime publications, this research relied upon various archives as well. At the University of Reading, the Archive of British Printing and Publishing

offered access to internal and external communications within and between the agents of the MoI, NBC, British publishers and booksellers. The same archive crucially offered access to the records of the National Book Council, an instrumental actor in the forging of the idea of British bookishness. For more 'pedestrian' opinions on and data regarding wartime readership, the Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex proved central to this research. Numerous scholars— Lucy Noakes in particular— whose own works have relied on Mass Observation, have pointed out that the organization's surveyors were overwhelmingly middle-class and its directives hardly objective; these critiques certainly bear merit.[71] Nonetheless, as a pertinent and methodical wartime social survey, Mass Observation proves not only indispensable, but unparalleled.

This thesis is divided into two principal chapters. The first, which takes as its starting point the joint MoI-NBC "Books and Freedom" exhibition of 1940, endeavors to explore wartime conceptualizations of the British nation as essentially literary. The first chapter explores wartime literariness in relation to inter-war British identity and the national "inward turn" as described by the historian Alison Light, seeking to ligature the two through the imaginary of British bookishness. The subsequent section endeavors to dissect wartime notions of the "English spirit," and to examine in more detail the equation between, as the MoI and NBC so concisely put it, "Books and Freedom." The first chapter concludes with an analysis of the intersection between the rhetoric of British literariness and that of the People's War. The overarching theme of the first chapter is the exploration of notions of literariness within the context of wartime national identity.

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[71] Noakes, *War and the British*, 79.

The second chapter, by contrast, examines the marshaling of the nation's imagined (and sometimes invented) literary past as a part of the war effort. Beginning with the saga of the wartime evacuation of a British schoolboy, the first section centers on the deployment of English literary heritage as a part of the war effort. The linguistic and literary— not to mention financial— alliance of the English-Speaking Peoples figures here alongside the imperatives and inconsistencies of wartime literary conservation. The second section, which begins with all-but-forgotten wartime play, examines Shakespeare and Milton as national, literary heroes; standing as civilian embodiments of an idealized Englishness, the section contends, the pair came to represent the nation in opposition to the hyper-martial shadow of Nazi Germany. In turn, the chapter examines the civilizing rhetoric of British literariness, and corollary notions of 'civilization' through literature, which necessarily enmired the advocates of British bookishness in questions of Empire. Finally, the second chapter concludes with a critical examination of the nation's established literary canon through lenses of class and gender.

Key Considerations

Before proceeding, there are several important considerations to touch upon. The first, and perhaps most pressing, is that of terminology: as an astute reader will no doubt have noticed, the terms Britain and England have both been used quite readily in this discussion. Here, as is often the case in British history, "England" seems to supersede "Britain" in discussions of the (imagined) nation. Yet, the nature of this research lends itself to a particular form of linguistic trickery in terms of the relationship between "English Literature" and, even where expressly defined, the "British nation." Few of the writers presented as essentially British are Scottish, Welsh, or Irish, but the same cannot be said for those doing the presenting. If this is the case,

what is the relationship, here, between a literary Englishness and a wider, national Britishness? The opinions and arguments at the heart of this research contend, broadly, that a literary Englishness unites the British nation as a whole. Whatever the case may be, the words 'Britain' and 'England' will be used purposefully in this research, as reflective of the rhetoric being analyzed. They have not been up until now, and will not be going forward, used purely interchangeably.

The second important consideration is that of class. In the context of the literary nationalism at center in this research, class comes in repeatedly. By and large, the rhetoric that this research seeks to uncover and analyze was predominately of middle-class origin. It ignored disparities of literary access, as well as the difference in what was read among different social strata. Even if, as has previously been mentioned, almost all Britons were afforded access to inexpensive lending institutions, that hardly means that all made use of them; the time to read was notably more available to those of the middle classes than those of the working-classes. And— as is further discussed in the second chapter of this research— it should go without saying that most Britons did not read Shakespeare and Milton on a daily basis (though it is perhaps also worth adding that, as Jonathan Rose points out, the British working-classes had a closer relationship to high-literature than that for which they were given credit).[72]

The final consideration worth bringing up at this stage relates to questions of gender. As previously mentioned, both Sonya Rose and Lucy Noakes have done important work on the language of gender during the Second World War. While gender does not center nearly as much in this research, wartime ideas of English masculinity and femininity— centering on the idea of an English domesticity— come into play in the first chapter, largely influenced by the

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[72] Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 124.

scholarship of Sonya Rose and Alison Light. Furthermore, gender becomes important in the question of who represents the nation, as is discussed in the second chapter, where neither the Austin's, Brontë's, or Dickinson's of English literature come to the fore.

Speakers and Motivations

The propagandists of the Ministry of Information and the marketing departments of British publishers found themselves perhaps naturally in wartime alliance. As Britain faced a crisis of confidence and faced down existential threat, British propagandists clawed at nearly any theme which could enliven the population or repair whatever confidence had been lost across the English Channel. The MoI, while it regularly misread the public temper and regularly embarked on propaganda programs which resulted in failure, seldom hesitated to take a new tack regarding morale measures.[73] For this reason, their approach to the National Book Council, and loose alliance with Britain's book industry, was certainly sensible. Stressing the literary stakes of the conflict at hand operated as just another mechanism by which to raise awareness regarding the significance of the war and the nature of the threat which the nation faced. All in all, such propagandizing stood as part of the Ministry's duty— and books made for a powerful symbol. They were capable of simultaneously emphasizing the freedom for which Britain fought, linking the modern nation with its heritage, and providing an objective symbol of (an invented) Englishness. And the MoI would not even have to do the legwork.

That legwork the MoI could largely and safely leave to the marketing departments of British publishers, who themselves approached matters with their own objectives. Of course, given that the early years of the war drained the coffers of British publishers, marketing

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[73] McLaine, *Ministry of Morale,* 10.

departments sprang rapidly into action. The National Book Council, Chatto & Windus, Penguin

and J.M. Dent each leaned heavily upon the war effort to provide fodder for marketing schemes.

Despite the initial shortcomings, many even came to view the war, somewhat distastefully, as a

boon to the book industry. As the National Book Council wrote to one publishing company, it

viewed the conditions of wartime as "an unrivalled opportunity for publicizing the value of

books to the nation," and noted that "every effort has been made to take advantage of these

opportunities" while "the time is ripe."[74] It is for the best that the NBC kept their minutes

private; such language, while thousands of Britons fought abroad and while the nation faced

down existential threat, was not only deeply insensitive, but near anathema to wartime

mentalities of common sacrifice.[75] Ultimately, though, both those in the business-minded

hallways of Britain's publishing houses on Paternoster Row and those in the propaganda-minded

chambers of the MoI's headquarters at Senate House found themselves in tacit agreement and

loose alliance regarding what would prove to be a lucrative source of rhetoric for each. The lines

of marketing and propaganda became easily blurred.

Furthermore, it also follows naturally that the rhetoric of literary nationalism championed

by both the MoI and the organs of British publishing was largely restricted to the early years of

the war. As far as the MoI was concerned, by late 1942-1943 Britain's crisis of confidence had

largely waned. The Ministry, in return, changed its tack, allocating fewer of its efforts and

resources toward large-scale propagandizing.[76] Likewise, the situation changed for British

publishers. Production stabilized during the mid-war years, even if it did not return to pre-war

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[74] Letter from National Book Council to Messrs. Chatto and Windus, 9 January 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus
Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.
[75] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 31.
[76] McLaine, *Ministry of Morale,* 11.

levels, and demand for books reached new heights. Those who survived the depravations of the

first years of conflict found captive markets for their wares.[77]

The literary-nationalist rhetoric of Second World War Britain, then, was at once a

massive, state-sponsored marketing campaign and a semi-privatized, decentralized propaganda

campaign. Haphazardly organized and serving various ends, the entire set-up could almost be

described as semi-feudal. At the county and baronial level existed British publishers and

booksellers, each of whom worked independently toward their own marketing ends. Many, such

as J.M. Dent's Everyman's Library, leaned heavily upon the themes of wartime readership to sell

their wares; others were more sparing. Yet these publishers largely operated under the ducal

authority of the NBC. A trade organization at heart, the NBC was designed to represent British

publishing interests to the Government, but reoriented itself somewhat during wartime. In

addition to lobbying for reductions to the wartime burden borne by publishers, the NBC took it

upon itself to defend "the status of books in wartime."[78] Yet the NBC nonetheless occupied a

subsidiary propaganda role to the MoI, which was universally concerned with other, more

pressing matters than Britain's publishing industry. The NBC, then, occupied a confused middle-

ground. It was a trade organization which sought to represent Britain's book industry— an

organizational mission which sometimes placed it in direct opposition with official ministries in

regard to rationing, censorship, taxation and other wartime exigencies— but which found itself

generally in alliance with the MoI.

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[77] "The Wartime Boom in Books," *The Sphere* (London), 6 December 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive*; Holman, *Print*, 247.

[78] National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 25 July 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

National Identity

Of course, given the centrality of so vague and indefinite a concept as 'national identity' to this research, a brief discussion of its precise significance in this case is certainly both warranted and necessary. As a caveat, the national identity of Second World War Britain is not a singular entity nor, for that matter, is it expressly or easily definable. As with any human cultural creation— and national identity *is* an at least partially active creation— it is subject to instances of insecurity, contradiction, and to use a term particularly relevant to the subject of this research, doublethink.

Benedict Anderson, in his foundational study *Imagined Communities*, contends that the nation is conceived of as a "deep, horizontal comradeship"— this is particularly true in the case of the Britain of the Second World War, suffused as it was with the rhetoric of the People's War.[79] By comparison, in his work, the social theorist Etienne Balibar argues that the rhetoric of both national identity and of the nation is rooted in the construction of the 'people' as a unified and singular group in the context of history. In an analysis particularly suited to Second World War Britain, he contends that "no modern nation, however 'egalitarian' it may be, corresponds to the extinction of class conflicts. The fundamental problem is therefore to produce the people. More exactly… it is to produce the effect of unity by virtue of which the people will appear, in everyone's eyes, 'as a people', that is, as the basis and origin of political power."[80] Pasting over domestic issues such as class, education, and wealth, the rhetoric of 'the people' and 'the nation'

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[79] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Fussell, *The Great War,* 7.
[80] Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, and Class: Ambiguous Identities*, edited by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1991), 93-94; Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 10.

in the Britain of 1939-45 endeavored to create an image of British unity in opposition to existential threat.

The rhetoric surrounding literature and readership— the focus of this research— contributed to the construction of a unified British people in two principal ways. On the one hand, this phenomenon occurred through the marshaling of a partially invented, shared, and universally enjoyed literary heritage, and on the other through the comparison of a literarily productive and consumptive Britain to the image of the book-burning Nazi state. Of course, following particularly in the wake of Anderson's scholarship on "print cultures," the book is a particularly apt mechanism for the construction of a national community. Anderson argues that (printed) language is particularly capable of connecting to ideas of national heritage and the continuity of the nation across time. He writes:

> Languages thus appear rooted beyond almost anything else in contemporary societies. At the same time, nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language. If English-speakers hear the words 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust'— created almost four-and-a-half centuries ago— they get a ghostly intimation of simultaneity across homogenous, empty time. The weight of the words derives only in part from their solemn meaning; it comes also from an as-it-were ancestral 'Englishness'.[81]

For the purposes of this research, this sentiment may rather easily be extrapolated to literature. The words of Shakespeare, for example, and as will imminently be discussed, seemed to evoke ideas of the English nation and set it within a temporal context. Shakespeare's works were drawn upon to root the nation in a time of conflict and uncertainty, as well as position it in relation to a stabilizing and storied English past; just as the Britain of 1940 faced the German Luftwaffe, so too the England of Shakespeare faced the Spanish Armada. If ever Anderson sought an example

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[81] Anderson, *Imagined,* 145.

of his "as-it-were ancestral Englishness" through language, he could well have found it in the

rhetoric of Britain's Second World War.

Anderson fashioned the image of the unified nation as an "imagined community," a title

which stresses the inventedness of the nation. While Anderson's work was indeed foundational,

Etienne Balibar is perhaps more pertinent in his fashioning of the nation. He argues:

> Let us dispense right away with the antithesis traditionally attached to that notion, the first of which is the antithesis between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' community. *Every social community reproduced by the functioning of institutions is imaginary*, that is to say, it is based on the projection of individual existence into the weft of a collective narrative, on the recognition of a common name and on traditions lived as the trace of an immemorial past (even when they have been fabricated and inculcated in the recent past). But this comes down to accepting that, under certain conditions, *only* imaginary communities are real.[82]

The rhetoric that this research examines is doubtless an invention of the Britain of the Second

World War, but the very fact that it was created made it a sort of lived reality; and one, at that,

with a long and influential afterlife, given the ways in which the image of the People's War has

shaped British memory and post-war identity. Ideas surrounding British literary heritage

provided a personal and societal connection to a national past, while the juxtaposition of British

literary freedom with German book-burning and censorship stressed the existential nature of the

conflict at hand. Of course, the inventedness of the rhetoric is evident in its numerous, sometimes

even mildly humorous, contradictions. Ultimately, though, the very fact that the connection

between literature and national identity was imagined made it very much a reality of the wartime

experience. And if— as has been suggested by many scholars of nationalism— national identity

is fundamentally oppositional, then no better opposition could be found for Britain's imagination

of itself as a literary nation than the German state of the Second World War, which consigned to

the flames countless thousands of works of literature.

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[82] Balibar, "The Nation Form," 93.

Chapter One:
This Sceptered Isle, This Literary Isle

Beginning with what was surely the most visible example of wartime bookish

propaganda, the joint MoI-NBC "Books and Freedom" exhibition in Charing Cross Underground

Station, this chapter seeks to examine the milieu of British bookishness in relation to various

major components of wartime national identity. This thesis contends that the origins of the

wartime cult of English literariness can be traced to the broad redefinition of Englishness and

'inward turn' of the interwar period as described by Alison Light. In turn, section three examines

the parallels between the phoenix-like freedom of literary Englishness and the stoical

Englishness of the Blitz. Finally, section four concludes the chapter with an exploration of the

connections between the cross-class unity and ordinariness as stressed by the rhetoric of the

People's War and the unifying notions of mass-readership as stressed by the rhetoric of Britain's

literary propagandists.

"Books and Freedom"
Bookishness in the Underground

To anyone passing through Charing Cross Underground Station in the summer of 1940,

the subject of the joint MoI-NBC "Books and Freedom!" exhibition would have been hard to

miss, title aside. Consisting of a series of display panels masquerading as overlarge books, each

bedecked with quotations, images, and maxims pertaining to the significance of books in the

struggle at hand, the exhibition was hardly subtle, and hardly matched the MoI's stated

preference for "discreet" propaganda.[83] What it did meet, however, was the MoI's call for

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[83] Holman, *Print,* 105; Books and Freedom Exhibition Photos, 1940, IWM D 1186, Digitized Collections, Imperial War Museum, London, England, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195721.

propaganda relating to books: a subject deemed of "cultural and symbolic value."[84] "Books and Freedom," almost certainly the most visible instance of bookish propaganda in wartime Britain, crucially drew upon a variety of themes— the juxtaposition of attitudes towards literature in Britain and Germany, the symbolism of mass readership, and the marshaling of English literary heritage, among others— to deliver its simple missive: this was also a war of words. Although ultimately a relatively small sideshow in the theatre of wartime propaganda, "Books and Freedom" reveals the visibility granted to ideas of bookishness within wartime British identity.

The exhibition, hampered from its inception by bureaucratic inefficiency and Luftwaffe raids, began neither auspiciously nor expeditiously. As a concept, "Books and Freedom" was first mooted no later than March of 1940 when the London Passenger Transport Board, responsible for London's public transit, approached the NBC offering space for a display in Charing Cross Underground Station centered on the importance of books to the war effort— an idea to which the NBC readily agreed.[85] Enlisting the support and funding of the MoI, the NBC worked at what was veritably a procedural fever pitch to establish the display: within a mere two months, it submitted a model design to the Treasury, and by July the sub-committee tasked with organizing the exhibition reported "progress."[86] Scheduled to open by September 9th, "delays due to air raids" meant that the exhibition did not begin until October 3rd. Kafkaesque bureaucratic bumblings aside, the display was "generally voted a great success" upon finally opening, newspapers declaring it "well worth a visit."[87]

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[84] Holman, *Print,* 105.

[85] National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 5 March 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

[86] Ibid; National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 4 June 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

[87] National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 3 October 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK; "Library Exhibition," *Burnley Express*, 26 July 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

Charing Cross Underground Station proved an excellent location for the exhibition, a fact which eagerly excited the NBC.[88] Despite its confines (it was, after all, an Underground station), the exhibition would be practically guaranteed visibility. What is more, the exhibition's location in London's underground offered an understated value, and carried with it its own significance. Not only did the ample foot traffic emphasize the pedestrian audience the exhibition sought to entreat, but the Underground had a history as a site of (somewhat paternalizing) educatory schemes.[89] Frank Pick, the Chief Executive of the London Passenger Transport Board, had long championed the Underground for its pedagogical potential, as a site of "cultural and educational" growth for its advertising possibilities.[90] Furthermore, the Underground had taken on a more specific wartime significance. Tube stations, converted into makeshift bomb shelters, welcomed 200,000 Londoners nightly during the long raids of 1940 and 1941; the damp and dark passageways which snaked beneath the British capital increasingly became sites of national importance, symbolizing the Britain of the People's War, and the quiet endurance of a population who accepted the danger and discomfort as "their part in the defense of London."[91] As the NBC had earlier noted, the war had handed them an "unparalleled opportunity."[92] And now, they even had a captive audience.

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[88] National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 5 March 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK; Letter from National Book Council to Messrs. Chatto and Windus, 9 January 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK; National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 4 July 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

[89] Geoffrey Field, "Nights Underground in Darkest London: The Blitz, 1940-1941," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 62 (Fall, 2002): 23.

[90] Michael Saler, "The 'Medieval Modern' Underground: Terminus of the Avant-Garde," *Modernism/Modernity* (Johns Hopkins University Press) 2, no. 1 (January, 1995): 127.

[91] Ponting, *1940,* 164; *London Can Take It*, directed by Humphrey Jennings (Ministry of Information, 1940), 1:26, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022009.

[92] Letter from National Book Council to Messrs. Chatto and Windus, 9 January 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.
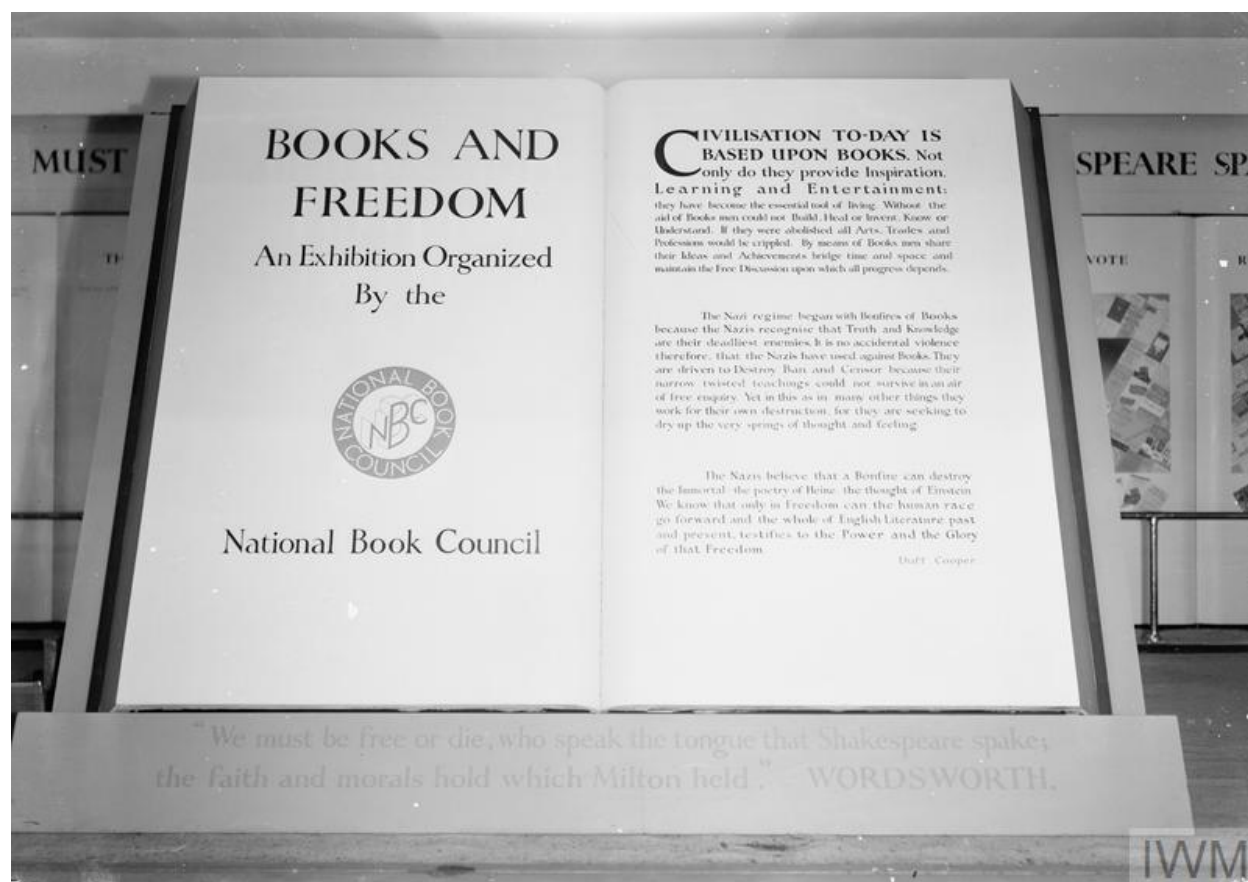
Figure II. The introductory panel of the 1940-1941 "Books and Freedom" Exhibition at Charing Cross Underground. (London: Ministry of Information Photo Division, 1940). Reproduced from the Imperial War Museum, London.

"Books and Freedom" was certainly impressive, especially for a display squeezed into an underground station. It consisted in all of fourteen panels, each about ten feet in height, arranged to appear as the open pages of seven overlarge books.[93] The subjects of each book varied, ranging from "the world of thought and culture as represented by books" to the "preservation of books" and the "encouragement of reading."[94] Fashioned to be inherently oppositional, each book was open to two pages: the first reflected upon the status of some aspect of books, literature, or readership in Britain; the second, by contrast, centered on the same aspect as observed in Nazi Germany. As one newspaper noted, "each book very effectively contrasts the

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[93] "Library Exhibition," *Burnley Express*, 26 July 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[94] Ibid.

Figure III. The second panel of the 1940-41 "Books and Freedom" Exhibition at Charing Cross Underground. (London: Ministry of Information Photo Division, 1940). Reproduced from the Imperial War Museum, London.

freedom which authors and books enjoy in this country with the violence which the Nazis have used against them."[95]

Of the seven original "books" that were on display, records remain of only two, luckily including the introductory panel. It begins by loudly proclaiming the title of the exhibition, with roughly three-quarters of the first page dedicated to affirming that the exhibition was organized by the NBC. The next "page," which consists of a statement by Minister of Information Duff Cooper, introduces the exhibition at length. He begins by reflecting upon the

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[95] Ibid.

importance of books to enlightened "Civilization," before turning to their role in the present

conflict:

> The Nazi regime began with Bonfires of Books because the Nazis recognize that Truth and Knowledge are their deadliest enemies. It is no accidental violence therefore, that the Nazis have used against Books. They are driven to Destroy, Ban and Censor because their narrow twisted teachings could not survive in an air of free enquiry. Yet in this as in many other things they work for their own destruction, for they are seeking to dry up the very springs of thought and feeling.[96]

Standing alongside the virtues of "Truth and Knowledge," Britain, so held the logic of the

display, was best positioned to face down the German menace of literary tyranny. Not only was

Britain a nation of free and avid readers, but in formation alongside it was the "whole of English

literature past and present," which stood unequivocally for the "Power and Glory [of]

freedom."[97] Pasted at various points around the exhibition were the worthy words of

Wordsworth, who wrote that "We must be free or die, who speak the tongue that Shakespeare

spake; the faith and morals hold which Milton held."[98]

The second "book" which remains of the exhibition is yet more potent, and contrasts the

attitudes of British and German soldiers towards literature. On the first panel ("The Nazi Way")

is an image of a German soldier standing over a ruined building, looking on as the dust settles.

Above the image is a quote by Joseph Goebbels— "We must fulfill our destiny. Bring up tough

guys"— while below stands a shelf of books containing only one volume, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

Opposite this image is "The British Way:" a pilot, shaded beneath his aircraft, enjoys his spare

time with book in hand. Above the image is a quote by Wordsworth, while below is a smattering

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[96] Books and Freedom Exhibition Photos, 1940, IWM D 1192, Digitized Collections, Imperial War Museum, London, England. https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195722.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.

of various books of different genres and interests.[99] The panel draws upon myriad themes

relating to British bookishness, each of which is further detailed in the chapters and sections to

come. Through the bookshelves at the base of the display, the freedom and variety of British

libraries are contrasted with the perceived literary myopia of the Nazi state. In opposition to the

rigidity and martial "toughness" of the German soldier, the British pilot sits, reading, as a mild-

mannered figure— more in resemblance of a "civilian at war" than a soldier, to echo the words

of J.B. Priestly; the bucolic and idealized English countryside, now host to an airfield garrisoned

by literary citizen-soldiers, is contrasted with the ruined cities of the continent.[100] Meanwhile,

pasted in opposition to the German arch-propagandist Joseph Goebbels is none other than

William Wordsworth. And finally, one might also consider the significance of the exhibition's

title, which declared in no uncertain terms the equation between "Books and Freedom."

  The exhibition, though, ultimately failed to escape the realities of war. The initial delays

in the opening of "Books and Freedom" due to German air-raids only presaged further

destruction, and within a month of its initial opening, the NBC was informed that "Books and

Freedom," which had "received high praise from all quarters, came to an untimely end at

Charing Cross through enemy action."[101] The NBC had worked nervously on the exhibition even

before its destruction; for example, it had reacted with anxious alarm to the loss of a collection of

book-jackets two weeks before the opening of the initial exhibition, and had requested as a result

that they be replaced not only "<u>urgently</u> for display," but "with all speed- if possible, <u>by</u>

<u>hand</u>."[102] Now, months of its labor turned to dust, it was thrown into abject panic. The MoI took

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[99] Books and Freedom Exhibition Photos, 1940, IWM D 1186, Digitized Collections, Imperial War Museum, London, England. https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195721.

[100] Ibid; Priestly, *Britain at War,* 114.

[101] Letter from National Book Council to Messrs. Chatto and Windus, 22 October 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

[102] Letter from National Book Council to Kegan Pail, 30 August 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

the lead, however, and some time later the NBC was informed— presumably with both relief and surprise — that the Ministry had publicly announced "that ['Books and Freedom'], which had been damaged by enemy action, had been rebuilt and would be on show at Reading" within the month.[103] Perhaps in keeping with the tenor of the exhibition's argument about literature more broadly, its destruction seemed only to draw more attention to it. In the new year, the MoI decided to build four copies, "somewhat reduced in size, to send to smaller towns," and even mooted the possibility— never realized— of sending the exhibition across the Atlantic.[104]

The exhibition, when it finally took to traveling, became an object of praise across the country. Small-town newspapers, less busy and more keen to report on the novel exhibition, graced "Books and Freedom" with particular acclaim. The *Burnley Express* looked upon it with alacritous approval, opining that the panels "show vividly the opposing attitudes of England and Germany to the world of thought and culture represented by books." The paper found the exhibition "very effective" and urged its readers to visit the display.[105] The *Rugby Advertiser* reported its arrival with similar enthusiasm. First calling upon English stoicism, it declared that "Hitler left out of his calculations the fact that when the news gets grim the Englishman's heart grows stouter," but also noted that "[recent] events have called for a renewal of our undimmed faith in ultimate victory, but even strongly held faith must draw strength from without at times."[106] Of course, this much-needed spiritual "renewal" would come through none other than

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[103] National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 28 November 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

[104] Letter from Ministry of Information to Messrs. Chatto & Windus, 2 April 1941, CW 91/9, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK; Letter from National Book Council to Messrs. Chatto & Windus, 20 August 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

[105] "Library Exhibition," *Burnley Express*, 26 July 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[106] "Books and Freedom: Striking Exhibits in Rugby," *Rugby Advertiser*, 25 April 1941. *The British Newspaper Archive.*

"a striking exhibition [come] to Rugby at an opportune time."[107] Then again, Rugby was not the busiest of towns, and the *Advertiser* was equally charmed by the fact that it had been chosen for the exhibition's "first visit to a small town."[108] In larger cities, the exhibition received less note. The *Lancaster Guardian*, more reserved in its praise, offered precisely the same commendation as the *Burnley Express* for its effective delivery but noted simply that admission was, after all, free.[109]

At the end of the day, "Books and Freedom" was hardly a crucial exercise in wartime propaganda; indeed, in the annals of the MoI's gargantuan efforts, it would rank as a mere footnote. To the National Book Council, though, "Books and Freedom" was not only a major undertaking— necessitating a great deal of institutional effort and coordination, not only within the NBC itself but also with publishers, the Treasury, and the MoI— but lent enormous visibility to the imaginary of British bookishness. It may not have swayed many hearts and minds, and few who witnessed the exhibition, after all, would have been on the fence about the Nazi state's attitude towards literature, but this was hardly the central goal of the display. Rather, "Books and Freedom" visibly and determinedly advertised that books— either as material objects, repositories of information, tokens of freedom, or reliquaries of an ancestral Britishness— were central to both the British nation and to the conflict at hand.

"What is Past is Prologue:"
Interwar Identity and the Making of British Bookishness

The propagandists who championed the nation's relationship to literature often made their diverse claims not just with stylistic and oratorical tact, but almost always with a measure

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] "Books and Freedom Exhibition," *Lancaster Guardian,* 29 August 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

of literary piety as well. They were each women and men of letters— skilled novelists, essayists,
or locutors in their own rights— often riding on or progressing towards prolific if not always
profitable careers in literature.[110] In a sense, they are conspicuously biased as a profession: just
as a man with a hammer treats any problem as a nail, so too to them the war would of course
appear at its root literary, or at least as fodder for literary apologetics. If anyone were to agree
with Samuel Johnson's estimation that "the chief glory of any people arises from their authors,"
it would likely be they.[111] Hardly, however, did they write in an otherwise aliterary vacuum. Not
only was the wartime population voracious in its appetite for books— they were after all exempt
from the purchase tax— but it had long been schooled in, or at least assured of, the far-reaching
history of English literature; as Paul Fussell notes of the population a mere thirty years earlier,
few reading Britons "of any rank had not been assured that the greatest of modern literatures was
the English and who did not feel an appropriate pleasure in that assurance."[112] And the interwar
years, as has been noted, made reading only more accessible to most Britons.[113]

  Given that the nation's propaganda establishment— staffed as it was by the ranks of
British writers— believed Britain a bookish nation at heart, literature functioned as both a
formidable and apt mechanism through which to define the nation. But any tendencies toward
literary self-definition were only augmented by the cultural doldrums of the interwar period.
Alison Light, in her well-known monograph *Forever England,* argues that the memory and
emotional cataclysm of the First World War prompted a great reflection on the significance of
"Englishness." As she convincingly argues, Britain experienced a "revolt against, embarrassment

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[110] Sir Hugh Walpole, for instance, was a prolific novelist in the inter-war years, and John Betjeman, after the war, went on to become Poet Laureate. Other writers, like George Orwell, whose name appears repeatedly, hardly need introduction.
[111] Fussell, *The Great War*, 158.
[112] Ibid; Calder, *The People's War,* 512.
[113] McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing*, 49.

about, and distaste for the romantic languages of national pride" in the interwar years, which ultimately contributed to a generalized "redefinition of Englishness."[114] In effect, Britain turned inwards, variously shrugging off self-definition through the martial, masculine, or imperial, and instead opted to focus on the civilian, domestic, and insular.[115] It was not difficult for literature— at least for the established English literary canon— to fit within these bounds. Indeed, the very roots of British bookishness can be seen in the cultural fissures of the interwar period, and Britain's wartime turn toward literary self-definition as a byproduct of the nation's earlier 'inward turn.' With books operating either as quaint symbols of domestic Englishness or as linguistically insular symbols of tradition, the nation's self-ascribed bookishness can be viewed as a tenet of national identity inseparable from the interwar national redefinition as described by Alison Light.

An Isle Apart: Insularity and Englishness

England has always been graced with an especially active insular imagination, both in the sense of its physical geography and its imagined temperament. In this regard, little changed between the 19th century and the 20th. Linda Colley, whose history of British nationalism focuses on the 18th century, notes that Britishness was initially "superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other."[116] Of course, in the context of British identity, that "Other" has always most naturally been the specter of the continent (and up until just before the First World War, most typically that of Catholic France).[117] Orwell agreed when he noted that any internal differences between the Welsh, Irish, Scots and English disappeared "when

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[114] Light, *Forever England*, 8.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 6.
[117] Ibid.

confronted by a European," as all Britons share an essential "Englishness," a term he preferred

poetically for its more prosaic qualities.[118] In an age of bruised Britishness, with the nation

confronted at once by the budding spores of class conflict, the decline of the Empire, and now

with an ever-threatening continental foe, a turn toward insularity is akin to a return to the roots of

national identity.

Yet many writers viewed Britain's literary proclivity as a quality intimately connected to

the nation's insular imagination. Orwell, for instance, contrasts the artistic inclination of the

continent with that of Britain through prose at once dry and self-deprecating, noting point-blank

that "the English are not gifted artistically," before arguing that they:

> are not as musical as the Germans or Italians, painting and sculpture have never
> flourished in England as they have in France. Another is that, as Europeans go,
> the English are not intellectual. They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel
> no need for any philosophy or systematic 'world-view.' Nor is this because they
> are 'practical,' as they are so fond of claiming for themselves.[119]

Yet he goes on to opine that the nation's lack of artistic ability is little more than:

> another way of saying that the English are outside of European culture. For there
> is one art in which they have shown plenty of talent, namely literature. But this is
> also the only art that cannot cross frontiers. Literature, especially poetry, and lyric
> poetry most of all, is a kind of family joke, with little or no value outside its own
> language-group. Except for Shakespeare, the best English poets are barely known
> in Europe, even as names…[120]

In a way, Orwell reprises the stereotypical belief in English cultural lackingness— that abroad is

"culture, romance and sensuality," while home is "philistine, prosaic and frigid," as Light

notes— and transforms it into something operative as a source of national pride.[121] Not only does

English literature, in Orwell's formulation, represent Britain's primary artistic proclivity, but it is

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[118] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 26.
[119] Ibid, 13.
[120] Ibid, 29-30.
[121] Light, *Forever England*, 7.

strikingly national through its use of language, entirely inseparable from Orwell's "England" as a whole. English literature exists up to and no farther than the boundaries of the nation, outside of which it is without value; it is a source of ultimate difference to Orwell, then, that the British can understand the "family-joke" of English literature while the cultures of the continent are left puzzled and in the dark.

Of course, estrangement from the continent is no new theme in British identity. John of Gaunt's speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II,* for instance, has since been woven into the fabric of the national consciousness, essentially defining the mythology of British insularity (a delusion perhaps more acute before the advent of the steam engine):

> This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle, This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, This other Eden, demi-paradise, This fortress built by Nature for her self Against infection and the hand of war, This happy breed of men, this little world, This precious stone set in a silver sea, Which serves it in the office of a wall Or as a moat defensive to a house, Against the envy of less happier lands, This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England…[122]

Shakespeare was English, not British— a fact easily evident if one has ever read *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's there enclosed opinion on Scotland— and wrote when national identity was, liberally, primordial-to-nonexistent. John of Gaunt's words, nonetheless, have since become ingrained in Britain's self-image.[123] Even Churchill, a renowned writer, called on his words readily in a pre-war essay, opining that they "still thrill like the blast of a trumpet," and "thrill, I suspect, the Scots and Irish and Welsh among us as well as the English… not only because they are beautiful, but because they are true— as true today in the reign of King George V as they

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[122] William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, The Folger Shakespeare Library, Act 2, Scene 1. https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/richard-ii/act-2-scene-1/.

[123] For Shakespeare's opinion on Scotland, he writes in Macbeth:
Alas, poor country! / Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing, / But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile; / Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air / Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems / A modern ecstasy. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, The Folger Shakespeare Library, Act 4, Scene 3, https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/macbeth/act-4-scene-3/.

were under Royal Elizabeth."[124] His words are a modern instantiation of Colley's "superimposed

Britishness" *par excellence*. Not only do they unite the four nations under a banner of ancestral

Englishness, but they do so through the ever-looming menace of the continent, which stands

offstage and ready to strike at the estranged "happy breed of men" but for their geographical

isolation.[125]

Everyman's Library*, whose propagandistic advertisements for books made especial use

of wartime circumstance, drew ready connection between Britain's imagined insularity and its

literary past in one of its wartime publications.[126] Indeed, its author— who writes only under the

pseudonymic initials V.V.— begins earnestly enough with an allusion to Shakespeare's *Richard

II*:

> For a thousand years the people of Britain, protected by their moat, have enjoyed
> one of the greatest opportunities ever given to any nation, the opportunity to work
> out their own political and social salvation… Every stage of that struggle is
> recorded in their literature, and for centuries at every stage their literature has
> contributed to their progress… English literature, like the English language, has
> taken eagerly of the best that other nations have created, but it has always
> maintained its own creative impulse and that tradition of freedom which without
> creative work cannot continue.[127]

Everyman's Library* defines the nation variously as unusually bookish, ahistorically unitary, and

decidedly estranged from the continent. Of course, in this case British insularity does not equate

to intellectual isolation, as Orwell may indeed have argued; but just as Britain's geography

offered the freedom and security necessary to the political evolution of the British nation, so too

literature gave Britain the "creative impulse" that enabled it to evolve and prosper. The argument

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[124] Reeves, W.D., "Riddles, Mysteries, Enigmas— Quoting Shakespeare— And Moore," *International Churchill Society*, 28 March 2015, accessed 24 April 2022, https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-131/riddles-mysteries-enigmas-quoting-shakespeare-and-moore/.

[125] Colley, *Britons,* 6.

[126] For more on *Everyman's Library,* turn to "Mass Readership and the People's War."

[127] V.V., *Books and Freedom* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1941), Mark Longman Library, Special Collections, University of Reading, Reading, England, 070.5-PAM/05.

distills well: Britain's insular geography, inclination, and literary aptitude combined to shape the modern British nation. And in the aftermath of Dunkirk, when Britain found itself *seemingly* alone and decidedly disillusioned by the continent, such rhetoric proved especially powerful.

Literature and the Language of English Domesticity

       Insularity, though, was not the only mechanism by which British identity turned inwards. As the nation turned away from the continent and the romantic, imperial, and masculine language of a 'Great Britain,' it turned toward the home. As Light has noted, the period between the wars also brought about a great "privatization of national life," whereby the domestic became a center-point for the nation, and the virtues of Englishness were declared to be the virtues of an idealized "private-sphere of middle-class life."[128] Literature, here, was perhaps a more natural addition to the fold, filled as the ideal middle-class home was with images of home-libraries and fireplace armchairs. The rhetoric of a sort of ordinary, middle-class domesticity was the rhetoric of the reserved: the rainy and cozy British Sunday, the uninviting but endearing British meal (typically stylized as the Sunday Roast), and the shy and demure British woman (typically stylized, as Alison Light notes, as the "awkward British virgin").[129] In essence, the image of English bookishness fit neatly into the picture of the domestic English nation. And given the broad "privatization of national life" that took place in the interwar period, as well as the perceived threat presented by totalitarianism to the domestic sphere in the wartime context, privateness was perhaps sensibly stressed as an English virtue.[130] Consider once more George Orwell, who venerated the very "*privateness* of English life," who opined that the ideal of

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[128] Light, *Forever England,* 7-8.
[129] Light, *Forever England,* 7.
[130] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 153.

English liberty "is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare

time, [and] to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above,"

and who declared unequivocally that the "most hateful of all names in the English ear is Nosey

Parker."[131]

Reservation was a national ideal with which the image of English bookishness accorded

well, and privateness, domesticity, and literary appreciation each fit neatly together in the

formulations of contemporary writers. One might turn, for instance, to Sir Hugh Walpole, a

prolific English novelist during the interwar years who shortly before his death in 1941 published

a pro-book pamphlet for the NBC. Walpole begins earnestly enough, noting the "centuries" of

"perfect [literary] freedom" enjoyed by the English, and laughing at the "amused indulgence"

with which Samuel Johnson or Sir Roger de Coverley would react if "forbidden by government

order" from looking into certain pieces of literature. He quickly moves on, however, to "the root

of the matter," the very question of an Englishman's "private life:"

> He cherishes this private life as more precious to him than anything else that he
> has. It differs from the private life of anyone else because he himself is different
> from anyone else. The sense that it is his, and that he is free to do with it as he
> will, is the source of all his joy and pride… He is citizen of a country where,
> through the fighting of a series of battles, he has won for it complete liberty. Once
> he was not free in religious dogma ; once he was not free in politics; once he was
> not free even in his amusements. But now, he is, save for a trifle or two, entirely
> free […and] indignant at intellectual restraint.[132]

Not only is Sir Hugh's idealized Englishman literary in temperament— he cites John Bunyan,

Samuel Johnson, Dickens' Pickwick, and Wells' Mr. Polly as the paragons of "proud," "happy,"

and "free" Englishmen— but England itself is literary in principle; Britain is a land that reacts to

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[131] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 15; When Orwell writes of a "Nosey Parker," he refers to an individual who fails to mind their own business.

[132] Sir Hugh Walpole, *The Freedom of Books* (London: National Book Council, [1940-41?]), Imperial War Museum Libraries, Imperial War Museum, London, England, LBY K. 6998-1.

literary restriction "not so much with anger as with amused indulgence."[133] At no point does Walpole explicitly mention the conflict at hand, yet the stakes and significance of the conflagration are made clear nonetheless; the nation exists in the private home, and both Englishness and English liberty in the books which line the shelves of British libraries.

Books from Boots': Contesting the "Insular Delusion"

Despite much of the rhetoric to the contrary, one might readily note that British history is seldom, in fact, insular. Just because the nation may have shrugged off the self-imagery of the martial and imperial did not change any realities— Orwell, for instance, clearly felt a distaste for the English talent for hypocrisy "about their empire, [often to the point of] not knowing that the Empire exists"— and a certain cadre of writers took to criticizing what Orwell termed the nation's "insular delusion."[134] Light argues that the cultural conflicts of the interwar period hardly went uncontested; the prevailingly "isolationist, [and] inward-looking" interwar view of Britain did not always square with "the continuing process of modernization."[135] Yet even for those on the opposite side of the cultural rift, for those who sought to contest Britain's isolationist, socially- and politically-conservative interwar mentality, literature made a powerful touchpoint. So, many of the proponents of a literary-Englishness wrote of England's literary aptitude not as an Orwellian boundary-marker, but rather as an ambassador of Englishness abroad; this especially regarding the United States, with whom Britain felt itself to be in linguistic and philosophical— not to mention increasingly-financial and, after 1941, military— alliance. In a 1943 work designed in Britain for American publication, an Oxford professor of

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[133] Ibid; Of course, such claims were also deeply ironic, given that *Lady Chatterly's Lover* and *Ulysses* were both banned for some time in the UK, in the case of the latter until well past the war years.
[134] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 20.
[135] Light, *Forever England*, 9.

literature declared that the "British (or at least the English) are often derided as unimaginative and insular, yet they have written more great poetry than any other people and their literature has gone out to the ends of the earth."[136] An article in the *Belfast Telegraph* was even more explicit, declaring that the root of "English Spirit" was Britain's "literary tradition," a "peculiar, enduring quality that survives even when it is ignored, that feeds the spirit of man when he is suddenly confronted with a great issue. Shakespeare's genius," the *Telegraph* noted, "and the prosperous English literary tradition that have enriched mankind were no mere accidents. Yet how seldom are these things remembered by those who delight in insular delusions."[137]

One might turn to consider John Betjeman as well, a prolific poet perhaps better known for his post-war writings and office as Britain's Poet-Laureate. While Betjeman is certainly now best known for his later traditionalist sentimentality and impassioned defense of the English countryside, some of his wartime poetry readily contests a conservative, idealized, insular and nostalgic sense of nation.[138] Indeed, in his 1940 poem "In Westminster Abbey," Betjeman satirizes the wartime values of the British nation, poking fingers at its antiquated sense of self, hypocritical self-righteousness, and irrational longing for an idealized past. The poem's narrator, a woman who personifies some of the more unfavorable characteristics of wartime Britain, visits the titular Abbey sometime during the Blitz. Kneeling, she prays at once for the war effort— with either an uncritical conviction or an ingenuine indifference, who can say— and for her own security, and after considering both the status of German civilians and the Empire, she ruminates on Britain's place in the world:

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[136] A.C. Ward, *A Literary Journey Through Wartime Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), 4.

[137] "English Spirit," *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 April 1945, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[138] Helge Nowak, "Britain, Britishness and the Blitz: Public Images, Attitudes and Visions in Times of War," in *War and the Cultural Construction of Identities in Britain*, edited by Barbara Korte and Ralf Schneider (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 252.

> Think of what our Nation stands for,
> Books from Boots'[*] and country lanes,
> Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
> Democracy and proper drains.[139]

"Free speech" and "free passes" are earnest enough inclusions in Betjeman's catalogue, but his

views on Britain's sense of self-importance become evident in his narrator's assertion that the

nation stands as the ultimate *Fidei Defensor* of both "Democracy and proper drains;"

and his distaste for English social conservatism equally shines through in his narrator's

expression of belief in "class distinction." The most puzzling aspect of Betjeman's list, however,

especially for a presumably pro-literary poet, is his satirization of the place of "Books from

Boots' and country lanes" in the national imaginary. Of the two, "country lanes" is more readily

apparent, filled as the wartime rhetoric of the nation was with the "fertile source of fantasy"

represented by the rural-nostalgic image of the "'Deep England' of the countryside," as

popularized by propagandists like J.B. Priestly.[140] "Books from Boots'," though, is more

enigmatic, and Betjeman problematizes the nation's self-conceived bookishness. Betjeman

perhaps allows some snobbishness to come through, here, as the notably female protagonist's

purchasing of books from Boots' could be representative of his distaste for the low-brow, or at

least spoon-fed and mass-market literature of a drugstore like Boots. Nonetheless, he certainly

connects it with an out-of-date and idealized— one might say fabricated— notion of Britishness.

Ultimately, though, the catalogue of Britain's values reflects a desire to return to a fictional and

perceptibly lost *status quo ante bellum*: one that removes Britain from the ravages of the

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[*] Boots, a popular British pharmacy, widely incorporated lending libraries into its stores in the first half of the twentieth century; "Boots Hidden Heroes: F.R. Richardson," Boots UK, 23 October 2019, accessed 24 April 2022, https://www.boots-uk.com/newsroom/features/boots-hidden-heroes-f-r-richardson/.

[139] John Betjeman, *Old Lights for New Chancels* (London: John Murray, 1940), 55.

[140] Light, *Forever England,* 16; Chris Waters, "J.B. Priestly, (1894-1984): Englishness and the Politics of Nostalgia," in *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain*, edited by Susan Pedersen and Peter Mandler (London: Routledge, 1994), 219.

"barbarians and vandals" represented by time and war— as Alison Light notes in a different context— who threaten not just the "proper drains" on which the nation is built, but the fantasies of English insularity and middle-class domesticity as represented by "Books from Boots' and country lanes."[141]

Ultimately, the language and mythos of wartime English literariness emerged as a byproduct of two monumental, and in many ways, mutually reinforcing, cultural forces. At its root, one can trace the heritage of 'British bookishness' back to the cultural contestations and broad national redefinitions of interwar Britain. In turning away from the language of the masculine and martial, and instead toward that of the feminine and domestic, the proponents of Britain's 'inward turn' paved the way for the literary self-definition of the Second World War. It was not until the shocks and disillusionments which the nation encountered in the first defeats of the Second World War, however, that the rhetoric was truly galvanized. In the post-Dunkirk period, the nation found itself not only once more disillusioned with the affairs of the continent, but even confronted once more with the fearsome threat of a continental foe. What is more, though, that foe seemed to contest every aspect of Englishness redefined. Britain, then, sought a symbol which could neatly define the nation in opposition to Nazi Germany. It found this in books. Not only did books seem to embrace the very spirit of the nation's newfound spirit of conservative domesticity and reservation, but they embodied a spirit of free inquiry— a spirit which did not always hold true even in Britain, as is further discussed— entirely anathema to the forces of totalitarianism. And as Britain's propagandists would readily argue, books, for their very freedom and indefatigable spirit, were essentially linked to the spirit of Englishness at large.

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[141] Light, *Forever England,* 7; Betjeman, *Old Lights,* 55.

Books, Bombs, and the Blitz
Literature from the Ashes

   London Can Take It, written and narrated by the American war correspondent Quentin

Reynolds in conjunction with the MoI for audiences both in Britain and the United States,

exemplifies the wartime British mindset as championed by the nation's propagandists.[142] The

film begins as London prepares for another long night of bombings, as it has ever since "the

invader began to attack the last stronghold of freedom." Individuals go about their evenings

when the wail of the banshee siren rings out, and Reynolds reports that:

> Dr Paul Joseph Goebbels said recently that the nightly air raids have had a terrific effect upon the morale of the people of London. The good doctor is absolutely right. Today the morale of the people is higher than ever. They are fused together, not by fear, but by a surging spirit of courage the like of which the world has never known. They know thousands of them will die. But they would rather stand up and face death than kneel down and face the kind of existence the conqueror would impose upon them… It is true that the Nazis will be over again tomorrow night and the night after that and every night. They will drop thousands of bombs and they'll destroy hundreds of buildings and they'll kill thousands of people. But a bomb has its limitations. It can only destroy buildings and kill people. It cannot kill the unconquerable spirit and courage of the people of London. London can take it.[143]

The image that Reynolds presents is starkly unpleasant, and it directly confronts the grim, deadly

realities of the Blitz and modern conflict. Reynolds' Britons, though perhaps unsettled by such

realities, are hardly cowed, and in his formulation the bombing of London has done little more

than encourage the British people to remain steadfast in their opposition to Nazi Germany, and

firm in their convictions. Britain, its buildings, and its citizens may be destructible, but its spirit

is "unconquerable," that of the "last stronghold of freedom." Orwell's argument was not so

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[142] Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It,* 120.
[143] Ibid; *London Can Take It*, directed by Humphrey Jennings (Ministry of Information, 1940), https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022009.

different: Britain itself may not have been unconquerable, but the "spirit of England" was

fundamentally "incorruptible."[144]

At a time when victory, in the aftermath of the fall of France and the debacle at Dunkirk,

seemed precariously out of reach, when the nation faced a crisis of confidence, and when so

much emphasis was placed on the inextinguishable nature of the national spirit, 'bookish

freedom' made an excellent touchpoint. Reynolds' London was bombed-out and blackened,

Jennings' London was acrid and burning, and yet in either case such destruction was met not

with resignation but stoical, perhaps fictitious indifference and acceptance. The national spirit,

whatever precisely that meant, remained intact, and so long as that were true the nation remained

uncowed and undefeated. So too were books cast by the MoI and NBC as fundamentally

unconquerable. They were perhaps scorched, burned, bombed, torn apart, and wounded, but their

symbolism always remained intact even in their individual destruction. *The Battle of the Books*,

seen in this context, can be viewed almost as a librarian's rendition of *London Can Take It*. First

flashing images of banned volumes and the bonfires to which they are consigned in Germany,

the film promptly turns to the fires of London, where a man picks a single volume from the

rubble. The narrator, meanwhile, explains that:

> On [May 13, 1933] 25,000 books were burnt outside the University of Berlin. They were burnt deliberately, and in shame. The future will judge whether the shame was in those books, or in the hands which burnt them. In Britain the only books which have been burnt are the books destroyed by the firebombs of the Nazi bombers. But books are hard to destroy: no book can be killed so long as one copy of it lives in a free country.[145]

Books survive as the phoenixlike objects of freedom, their symbolic value paralleling the

phoenix-like spirit of the free nation itself; just as the film contends that "our art becomes our

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[144] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 13, 22.
[145] *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941), https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.

arms," so too the spirit of literature becomes the spirit of the nation.[146] Sir Hugh Walpole argued

this exact point, as well, when he asserted that:

> no book that has merit can altogether die. It is like quicksilver. Its message is in the air, intangible, silent perhaps for many years, and then quite unexpectedly alive again. So, if you wish to dominate man's restless enquiring mind (and no slaughter of millions of bodies ever affects, for more than a moment, the life of man's spirit) you must make terms with the books… So the freedom of books is indestructible, and the men and women of our country, with all their faults and lacks, are made of this freedom.[147]

The spirit of literature, the spirit of man, and the English spirit are each defined in the same

intangible and invulnerable way. And, in the formulation of Sir Hugh, literary freedom becomes

entirely inseparable from political freedom. Walpole's argument for the literary spirit and

Reynolds' argument for the English spirit draw on exactly the same themes. Where Reynolds

writes of Londoners who, in the face of German bombs, only find themselves in higher spirits,

Walpole writes of men "like Lear and Hamlet and Quixote and Pickwick" who, "once they step

onto the earth are there for evermore. You cannot burn them, nor imprison them, nor beat them

to death. Like the puppet in 'Petruschka,' when you think you have them, they are looking down

at you from the roof, laughing at you."[148] Any effort to stamp out either "spirit," any effort to

bomb it or burn it into submission, is met only with stoic indifference, and a stiff, if slightly

sardonic, upper lip.

"Freedom," a conspicuously vague concept unless presented in opposition to an "unfree"

other, fit neatly alongside both the rhetoric of the wartime nation and the rhetoric of British

bookishness. Through the workings of both the propagandists of the MoI and the marketing

agents of the NBC, books became objects for which the nation, as "the last stronghold of

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[146] Ibid.
[147] Walpole, *The Freedom of Books.*
[148] Ibid.

freedom," readily stood.[149] They remained, like the English spirit more broadly, unconquerable and ultimately undefeatable, standing in direct opposition to the intellectual destruction of Nazi Germany. To quote Lord Elgin, who in an October of 1940 debate in the House of Lords spoke up against paper rationing, this was a "grim struggle" which Britain would not win "merely because we have tanks and aeroplanes; we are going to come through because we have courage and ideas and faith and intelligence; and for all those we need books."[150] Books underpinned the values of the wartime nation and objectified the "freedom" for which it fought. It was not without reason that the MoI and NBC titled their exhibition, almost thoughtlessly, "Books and Freedom."

Free Readership for the Free Nation

Just as Parliament stood as the great institution of a free nation, so too the library stood as the great institution of a literary one. The rhetoric of wartime free-readership christened libraries as sites of national importance, declaring them no less than those "most precious of our institutions." [151] And in one article, conspicuously titled "Books for Freedom!", the library even became akin to a shrine, while wartime readership took on a semi-sacred significance; the *Runcorn Weekly News* argued that it was in the destruction of public libraries that one could most clearly see the evils of war and the very "mark of the beast." [152] The *Bognor Regis Observer* expressed similar— if more secular— literary sentiments, and declared that the war had proved in a "remarkable way that books must be counted among the 'weapons of war'," and that the

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[149] *London Can Take It,* directed by Humphrey Jennings (Ministry of Information, 1940), https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060022009.
[150] John Brophy, *Britain Needs Books* (London: National Book Council, 1942), 63.
[151] "Books for Freedom!", *Runcorn Weekly News*, 9 May 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[152] Ibid.

humble "county library" provided an "essential service" to the wartime nation.[153] Such rhetoric was hardly limited to newspaper publicists and book publishers. Stanley Baldwin, erstwhile Prime Minister, lauded the significance of libraries to the wartime nation in one speech in May of 1940. Opening a library in Exeter just one month before German troops marched through Paris, he declared that if "Hitler won the war he would destroy the libraries of London and Paris… One thing that the Totalitarian States hated was a free search for knowledge, and therefore churches and libraries must be anathema to them. Just as the library of Alexandria was burnt centuries ago so now, if Hitler came to Paris of London as conqueror, he would do just the same."[154] Not only did Baldwin intimately align the wartime British nation with the defense of free readership and the "free search for knowledge," but his argument— phrased in semi-religious language and filled with classical allusion— declares such principles fundamental threats to totalitarianism, and the struggle at hand as timeless as the struggle for civilization itself.

Few were so vocal, however, as the Edinburgh-based *Scotsman,* which continuously reaffirmed the significance of free access to literature to the nation. One article, which sought to defend the "free library not only in the financial sense," even went so far as to decry those librarians who "ignominiously" considered themselves the arbitrary "pawnbrokers of literature" for the lower classes, and so undermined the spirit of free inquiry the library was meant to champion. To this end, it encouraged readers not just to rely on the local library, but to search for knowledge themselves: lending, it declared, was but "a road to possession," and every man and woman ought to have a home-library in addition to a library-card. Britons, it declared, were not a "race" of "book borrowers," but book-owners; those "races" who were book-borrowers alone,

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[153] "The County Library in War Time," *Bognor Regis Observer*, 17 October 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive*.
[154] "Hitler Would Burn The Books," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 9 May 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

the *Scotsman* curiously— and with little explanation— termed "despicable."[155] Far from

Orwell's and Jennings' London, bookishness was not limited to merely the "English spirit."[156]

According to the framework of wartime propagandists, the varied and open bookshelves

of British libraries and, especially according to the NBC and *The Scotsman*, British bookstores,

stood as testaments to the free-thinking attitude of the British nation, existing in direct opposition

to the emptied and myopic bookshelves of Nazi Germany. Sir Hugh Walpole stressed that the

freedom of the bookshelf was the paramount source of British pride, affirming that the Briton

"most of all… is proud that he is free to read whatever his intelligence and taste suggests to him

is worth his reading."[157] The "Books and Freedom" exhibition, too, emphasized this very point.

One of the surviving panels detailed both a British bookshelf and a stereotypical German

bookshelf, and while the British bookshelf is laden with the various and sundry volumes that the

NBC worked so tirelessly to acquire, the German bookshelf contains but nine copies of the same

volume: *Mein Kampf*.[158]

Of course, that the German state so voraciously targeted those books which it considered

untoward was a fact hardly lost on the propagandists of the MoI, and one which the NBC readily

used to market itself. Presenting the publishing industry as a fundamental combatant in the

struggle at hand, one NBC publication declared that:

> The general public, especially in London, still remembers vividly the big fire raids
> around St Paul's when, in Paternoster Row and adjacent streets— the long-
> established centre of the book trade— more than six million volumes were
> destroyed. Millions of others have been lost in bookshops and libraries in
> provincial cities, and millions more in damaged, gutted, or burnt-out warehouses,
> printing and binding works. A total of twenty million volumes destroyed would
> probably be an underestimate. The Nazis have long acknowledged, with

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[155] "Scottish Public Libraries," *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 16 September 1943, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[156] "English Spirit," *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 April 1945, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[157] Walpole, *The Freedom of Books*.
[158] Books and Freedom Exhibition Photos, 1940, IWM D 1186, Digitized Collections, Imperial War Museum, London, England. https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195721

> justification, that they place books, agents of knowledge and enlightenment, among their principal enemies: had they instructed their bomb-aimers to select their targets and had these bomb-aimers possessed the ability to hit precisely what they aimed at, they could hardly have achieved greater destruction.[159]

Not only are Britain's publishers and booksellers presented as combatants in this conflict, but they are deemed ideal targets for Nazi bombers. British publishers, together with their wares, stand in fundamental opposition to the foundations of fascism, almost purposefully targeted as combatants in the struggle for freedom. In this account, where human life seems not to figure and where books as the "agents of knowledge and enlightenment" are presented as lamentable casualties of war, the conflict becomes inherently literary in nature.

Of course, such themes all made for great marketing. "V.V.", the anonymous writer in the employ of the NBC, argued that British books stood in direct opposition to the "nightmare" of German fascism, and that British "literature and history, thought and wisdom" acted as the surest guarantor of the nation's freedom from the shackles of "intellectual… bondage." Intimating that book-buying was both an urgent necessity and a patriotic imperative, the writer argued that it fell on the shoulders of all Englishmen to acquaint themselves with the English classics, lest no one "ever again travel the roads of England with Mr. Pickwick, or the uplands of Spain with Don Quixote, [or] watch the fluttering sea-hawk drawn under the folds of Ahab's flag as the Pequod disappears beneath the waves, or follow Satan on his dreadful flight through chaos to the earth."[160] (Interestingly, the canon of English literature as defined by British publishers almost universally included translations borrowed from non-English writers, a subject dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.) Arguing that readership— and as a corollary, the patronage of Britain's bookstores— was quite near to an ancestral duty, the anonymous writer even went on to

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[159] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books*, 32-33.
[160] V.V., *Books and Freedom*.

insinuate that it fell on the shoulders of the modern Englishman to ensure the survival of "all that

is most wise, most humorous, and most magical in the winnowed and garnered literature of two

thousand years."[161] Along the same lines, the National Book Council released a series of

advertisement in the local newspapers across Britain which "presented" to the reader "the

Freedom of the Bookshop." "Books!", it argued, "are the letter of freedom and its very spirit.

Banned and burned by the Nazi, for Britons they are not even controlled or taxed."[162] Not just

agents of self-improvement and knowledge, books become the "letter of freedom" and the "very

spirit" for which the nation fights. In buying books, then, the humble reader is at once

reaffirming a key national value and acting in defiance toward the would-be censorship of the

fascist state. Literary freedom and political freedom were cast as rhetorically inseparable, each

intimately related to the spirit of Englishness at large.

The People's War for the Written Word
The 'Common Reader' and the 'Ordinary Man'

Englishness and its principles proved easy to define; less simple, however, was the act of

defining "the people." Rhetoric and reality were not always the same, and the British nation,

whatever romanticism it may have embraced during the war years, still generically stylized itself

as essentially English, characteristically male, and idyllically middle-class.[163] Nonetheless, the

spirit of common sacrifice for the war-effort, together with the perception of the cross-class and

leveling qualities of wartime citizenship made expressed definitions of citizenship remarkably

open-ended.[164] Take, for instance, J.B. Priestley's definition of the British people, filled as it is

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[161] Ibid.
[162] National Book Council, "Presenting the Freedom of the Bookshop," *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 December 1941. *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[163] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 29, 198.
[164] Ibid, 4, 29.

with looping tautology: "And who are the people? We are all the people so long as we are willing to consider ourselves the people."[165] While certainly unitary and poetic, Priestley's definition is hardly concrete. Orwell, once again, was perhaps more acute— if equally romantic— in his definition of the people: the British, as he formulated them, were distinctive as a nation for their absolute individuality. England, to Orwell, was made up less fully of "Englishmen" than it was "of flower-lovers, …of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, [and] crossword-puzzle fans."[166] Orwell's Englishman was not given to "regimentation" or anything "official," but believed wholeheartedly in the "unofficial" as a source of community and nationhood: "the pub, the football match, the back garden [and] the fireside."[167] In contrast to their wartime view of the German nation— which, one might readily note, did not always correspond accurately to the German view of the German nation— the British saw themselves not as popular mass drawn to political theater but rather as a conglomerate of "ordinary" citizens; as notes Sonya Rose, wartime Britons viewed themselves as a people who eschewed "nationalism or [participation] in the affairs of state."[168] What made the British nation distinctive in the national imagination, perhaps paradoxically, was among other qualities the unassuming ordinariness of its citizens. What would in microcosm have made for a dreadful cocktail party in fact made for a stalwart and serene nation of botanists and philatelists.

Of course, it is curious that so much emphasis should be placed on the private, ordinary individual as a part of a nationalized rhetoric of popular unity. Both the documentarian Humphrey Jennings and the writer George Orwell would have laughed at such incongruity,

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[165] Waters, "Englishness and the Politics of Nostalgia," 216.
[166] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn,* 15.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 4.

declaring it just another of the "paradoxes" which each deemed quintessentially British and inextricably linked to the stubborn impracticality of the nation; one might even laugh at it today as a four-decade-early manifestation of the 'doublethink' of *1984*.[169] Jennings, though, offers some answer in his wartime film *Fires Were Started*, in which he refers to none other than *Macbeth* to speak of the members of the Auxiliary Fire Service:

> Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men; as hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs, shoughs, water-rugs and demi-wolves, are clept all by the name of dogs: the valu'd file distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle, the housekeeper, the hunter, every one according to the gift which bounteous nature hath in him clos'd.[170]

Just as Shakespeare's dogs are canines when seen together but individuals when the mass is dissected, so too Jennings' England is made up of intensely unique but simultaneously ordinary individuals, all "clept by the name" of Englishmen when they come together. And here one might return as well to Orwell's earlier assertion that England, for all of its "cupboards bursting with skeletons," "black sheep," and "irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts," is ultimately a great family made up of bickering and private individuals who only close ranks "at the approach of an enemy."[171] The individual and the people are rhetorically inseparable.

The "ordinary man," whose life was varied and intensely private, represented the nation well in opposition to the "regimented" masses of the budding totalitarian state: he was marked by individuality, given to temperate and civilian pleasures, and, if quaintly boring, then at least unique. Just as the First World War belonged to "Tommy Atkins" fighting in the trenches of France, so too the Second belonged to the "ordinary man" who went about his business on "the Home Front."[172] This strand of propaganda and wartime rhetoric, apart from its power on a

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[169] Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It,* 227; Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn,* 14.
[170] Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It,* 229.
[171] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 26, 35.
[172] Light, *Forever England*, 8.

national scale, lent enormous opportunity to Britain's ever-vocal literati— both the nation's publishers and booksellers as well as propaganda establishment— who succeeded in tying together the "ordinary man" of Britain's People's War with the "common reader" of Britain's bookstores and lending libraries.[173]

The Many Faces of Wartime Readership

The MoI succinctly merged the language of British bookishness with the rhetoric of the People's War in the 1942 propaganda film *The Battle of the Books*. Produced shortly after the entry of the United States into the war— and doubtless with audiences on both sides of the Atlantic in mind— the film takes as its premise the intellectual war being fought between the book-burning "robots" of the Nazi state and the free-thinkers of Britain.[174] After condemning the conflagrations which engulfed countless volumes, the film reminds the viewer that in Britain, "the only books which have been burnt are the books destroyed by the firebombs of the Nazi bombers."[175] Books are posited as essential to the Britain of the People's War, as symbols of wartime equality and intellectual freedom. In Britain, the MoI declares, "every man, woman, and child can get books free," and "people with every kind of war-work who can't spare the time to go to a library" prove no exception.[176] If Britons were united by the "equality of sacrifice" which, as notes Sonya Rose, so pervaded the imaginary of the People's War, then it would only make sense that the MoI would stress the nation's equality of readership; if the nation were to

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[173] Hench, *Books as Weapons*, 5.

[174] *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941), https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.

[175] Ibid.

[176] Ibid.

toil in unison, it too had to seek, as wrote one wartime diarist, "solace" in unison.[177] Of course, the mythology of "equality in sacrifice" was ultimately more fantasy than reality, coined by the Government as a "morale measure" early in the war in response to labor agitation.[178] And whatever *The Battle of the Books* may have asserted regarding the classless nature of British readership, even the "escapism" offered through reading was often a classed luxury. One might readily turn to the minor industrial town of Runcorn, in Cheshire, to illustrate this point. In Spring of 1941, the *Runcorn Weekly News* lamented the fact that:

> In many of our great cities, the "blitz" has come to that most precious of our institutions— the Public Library, where the common man who, alas, has had to bear so much of the burden of this real "People's War" was wont to resort to gain for himself the good reading that otherwise might have been denied his slender purse. Thus, even in that isolated instance, is seen the mark of the Beast.[179]

Yet the *Runcorn Weekly News* decried even more those "library authorities" who, in closing early and denying the "common man" and war-worker a time to exchange or take out books, were guilty of "selling the pass"† themselves.[180] The People's War stressed the importance of wartime equity; so too access to readership had to be— at least rhetorically— equitable.

 The Battle of the Books, though, also returned to the Orwellian definition of the nation centered in the rhetoric of the People's War. Appropriately alluding to Lewis Carrol and marrying together notions of literary freedom, mass readership, and an individualized domestic ordinariness, the MoI passionately declared that:

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[177] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 31; Wing, *Our Longest Days,* 124; "War-Time Reading," *Falkirk Herald*, 4 October 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[178] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 30-31.
[179] "Books for Freedom!," *Runcorn Weekly News*, 9 May 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
† "Selling the pass," a now old-fashioned term for treasonous behavior, comes from an episode in Irish history when a group of soldiers, tasked with holding a mountain pass, instead accepted a bribe and sold the very pass they were supposed to protect. The newspaper's accusation is of nothing less than treason against the equitable aims of the People's War. "Sell the Pass," The Free Dictionary, 2022, Accessed 24 April 2022, https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/sell+the+pass.
[180] "Books for Freedom!," *Runcorn Weekly News*, 9 May 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

> Argument sharpens our wits, and each new book and pamphlet is one new proof
> of our freedom to speak our minds. The people of Britain aren't like Nazi robots:
> they're interested in everything from cabbages to kings, in books about gardening,
> technical training, economics, heroes and statesmen… [and] good cheap editions
> are the tradition of British publishing.[181]

Reprising Orwell's heterogenous catalogue of the nation's characters, the MoI stresses the power

of British literary diversity and the role of the individual reader in the greater People's War. In

this the MoI is hardly alone; it is just this spirit of literary diversity that none other than

Churchill, in a quote which would be repeated *ad nauseum* by Britain's publishers and

propagandists, praises when he asserts that books, "in all their variety offer the means whereby

civilisation may be carried triumphantly forward."[182]

But just as literary diversity signified the quaint and quotidian ordinariness of the nation,

so too the seeming availability of inexpensive volumes for the "common man" signified that this

truly was a People's War. In this sense, it was the democratization of readership across all walks

of "ordinary" British life which connected the concepts of English literariness with the class-

conscious rhetoric of the People's War. Readership was said to stretch across class lines, uniting

all Britons as a literate people; Orwell, for instance, emphasized this very point when he noted

that "to an increasing extent the rich and the poor read the same books."[183] Jack Chambers, who

directed *The Battle of the Books*, lade his film reels with images of Britain's common readers:

urbanites and country-dwellers, soldiers and sailors, academics, gardeners, businessmen, and

even the nation's "fighting men at lonely outposts" each appear as idyllic, amiable, and hyper-

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[181] *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941),
https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn,* 52.

Figure IV: The faces of wartime readership. Reproduced from *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers, (Ministry of Information, 1941), 2:21, 4:13, 4:17, 4:21, www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.

literate ambassadors of British readership (Figure IV).[184] And as these images flicker across the

screen, the Shakespearean actor Henry Ainley triumphantly reemphasizes Britain's literary

commitment to its free-thinking, reading public:

> In Britain, every man, woman, and child can get books free. Here's a library on wheels, for wardens and stretcher-bearers, people with every kind of war-work who can't spare the time to go to a library. Other traveling libraries serve the people in the country, and every van and village is linked with the National Central Library.[185]

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[184] *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941), https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.

[185] Ibid.

Chambers' vision of British bookishness is at once quaint and uplifting: whole communities— in

the film, the arrival of the mobile library draws out an entire country village— come together

through books, and the weary war-workers of the nation find respite in reading. In fact, the film

takes on a remarkably upbeat tenor, and excepting an introduction that condemns the book-

burnings of Nazi Germany, it focuses almost entirely on the intellectual progresses and

reprieving pauses afforded by British readership. Chambers' image of Britain as a hyper-literate

nation, filled as it is with bookstores and book fairs, shade trees under which to read, and pup-

tents filled with agreeable and cultured citizen-soldiers, seems almost picturesque. Neither

conflicts of armies nor conflicts of class seem to figure. Optimism never was the strong-suit of

the MoI; after all, it decried those individuals who resolutely believed "all [would] turn out" for

the best, just as it decried those loose-lipped "gossips" who whispered "all over the town."

Nevertheless, Chambers' film reflects what was, in the early years of the war, an ever-increasing

concern of the Ministry: that the theme of inexorable sacrifice championed by the rhetoricians of

the People's War may have begun to place too severe a strain on the British public's capacity to

maintain their 'stiff upper lip.'[186] Even though the language of the People's War stressed above

all, to borrow a phrase from a historian of the Cuban Revolution, the "mystic bonds of a

fellowship of sacrifice," *in The Battle of the Books* communal sacrifice is second to communal

respite.[187] Such respite, though, necessarily comes through literature, a national form of

recreation through which Britons of all walks of life and all classes were united.

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[186] McLaine, *Ministry of Morale,* 73, 3i.

[187] Victor Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 18.

"Everyman's" Library

The MoI, however, was not the only organization to draw connections between British

bookishness and the milieu of the People's War, and few organizations so fully embraced its

rhetoric as did *Everyman's Library*. Founded by J.M. Dent in 1906, the series was a run of

inexpensive paperbacks intended to affordably bring the great works of English literature— at

least, those whose copyright had run up— to the British working-class.[188] Beginning

appropriately enough with Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, *Everyman's* launched to almost immediate

success, its ascension in the first decades of the century inextricably linked with the emergence

of Britain's "new mass market" and reading public.[189] *Everyman's* believed wholeheartedly in

the power— or perhaps profit— of self-education through literature, and argued for the classics

as not just idle reading, but as an "engine for equality, a body of knowledge that anyone could

acquire, given basic literacy and cheap editions."[190] By 1940, the London *Daily News*

unequivocally declared that "no one has done so much to put the masterpieces of literature

within the reach" of average "English men and women" as has *Everyman's* and its editor Ernest

Rhys; not only were the readers of Britain in his "lasting debt," but "if titles were to be awarded

for services to civilization… [Rhys] would long ago have been made a duke."[191] *Everyman's* was

uniquely positioned to take advantage of the sudden, national emphasis on Britain's "common

man," on cross-class unity and wartime equality, and on the intellectual significance of the war

now being waged.

With tidings of war, the agents of *Everyman's Library* quickly sprang into action. Ernest

Rhys published his autobiography within the first year of the war, and asserted that the conflict

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[188] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 131.
[189] Holman, *Print for Victory*, 9.
[190] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 131-3.
[191] Robert Lynd, "He Deserved a Dukedom," *Daily News* (London), 15 May 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

could have been avoided entirely had only the Nazis read "Plato's *Republic,* Carlyle's *French Revolution*, John Locke, Abraham Lincoln, *War and Peace*, and *The Federalist Papers.*"[192] Not only did Rhys take the opportunity to stress the value of his edited canon to free society, but he implicitly stressed the literary bonds which united the people of Britain, America, and Russia— a catalogue all the more interesting when one considers that neither the United States nor the USSR had yet been drawn into the conflict. Sensing opportunity, though, Ernest Rhys and *Everyman's* did not tarry in consolidating the language of marketing with the language of propaganda. In their formulation, English literature represented the great bastion of the nation's freedom and freethinking spirit; and while the ramparts may have been manned by the often-pretentious ranks of the nation's literati, the keep was defended by none other than Britain's common reader. In a series of pamphlets published during the war, *Everyman's* called upon Britons to remember not just the vastness of the nation's literary heritage, but all it had done for Britain and the world at large:

> English literature has developed a range and richness which are unsurpassed. In science and poetry, philosophy and fiction, politics and drama, history and medicine, English writers have added to their own heritage and the whole heritage of mankind. And because they have maintained the freedom to think and write their work has become a great bulwark of that freedom. Only such a tradition could have produced a series of books as 'Everyman's Library,' and no community in which such a series is widely read can surrender its soul to tyranny.[193]

Modesty never was a strength of *Everyman's*, but marketing was. Such a profound literary heritage, the publisher reminded its readers, was entrusted above all to the nation's "Everyman." And if any were forgetful of this fact, *Everyman's* called upon its readers to remember Wordsworth's refrain, that "We must be free or die who speak the tongue / That Shakespeare

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[192] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 136.

[193] V.V., *Books and Freedom.*

spoke."[194] John Brophy, writing for the National Book Council and certainly partial to Dent's

publishing enterprise, furthered the logic. Before calling upon the government to lessen rationing

and restrictions imposed upon Britain's publishers, Brophy argued that high literature belonged

not just in the ivory towers in which resided the nation's academics, but in the hands of Britain's

common reader:

> Now quite a lot of teaching can be done by the spoken word, and a method which
> was used by Jesus and Socrates might seem adequate for any pedagogue's needs.
> But in the modern world, our world, few schools could subsist only on lectures,
> and teaching is by no means confined to academic institutions. Mr. J.B. Priestly
> was not simply throwing off an idle epigram when he said that "Everyman's
> Library has probably done more for education than some of our universities".[195]

Everyman's embraced the logic of the People's War without let or hindrance, and marketed itself

as the champion of Britain's common reader. Of course, *Everyman's* financial self-interest in

such rhetoric complicates matters, but it hardly invalidates its role in the creation of the mythos

surrounding British literariness. As *Everyman's* contended, not only did the works it sold act as

agents for the "equality" so central to the rhetoric of wartime citizenship, but they upheld the

very freedoms for which the People fought.[196]

A Struggle for Profits

However, while publishers and booksellers may have been quick to draw upon the

rhetoric of the People's War, they were not always so genuine in their convictions. The fact that

Britain's publishers largely embraced the language of popular unity was by and large self-

serving, driven above all else by shrewd business-sense and marketing concerns, and neither the

security of the nation nor the unity of "the People" were the foremost concerns of Britain's

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[194] Ibid.
[195] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books,* 7.
[196] Jonathan Rose, *Britain Needs Books,* 131-3.

publishing houses. As has already been established, the trade representatives of the NBC

considered the war an "unrivaled opportunity" for their own publicity and marketing campaigns,

and sought to "take advantage" of "war conditions" to further the trade in books.[197] Yet, this

posed a distinct problem for the book-trade's relationship to the wartime nation: as Sonya Rose

has noted, the notion of "equality of sacrifice" was central to the construction of Britain's Second

World War as one fundamentally of "the People," and "regardless of how much or how many

individuals may have 'shirked' their duties or taken advantage of the war for private gain,

popular opinion increasingly endorsed an egalitarian morality and condemned its opposite."[198] It

was not a time for self-service. Of course, publishers worked hard to situate themselves neatly

within the wartime rhetoric of personal sacrifice. As the NBC declared:

> Men and women are called to serve in the armed forces or in war industries, and
> taxation, so heavy and so pervasive that our forefathers would not have tolerated
> it even as a nightmare, clamps down to minimize not merely harmless pleasure-
> seeking but unnecessary spending of every sort. Everyone feels the incidence of
> war in this way, and authors and publishers, printers, binders, papermakers,
> booksellers and librarians, have no more (and no less) right to grumble than other
> hard-pressed citizens.[199]

Yet, as Valerie Holman proves, this did not stop them from simultaneously arguing with some

vigor for special dispensations and exemptions from wartime purchase taxes and curbs on

production.[200] However, given that those "special interests" who, in their demands for special

consideration "put their own interests first" were the subjects of particular condemnation by the

propagandists of the MoI and 'the people' alike, such vehement lobbying threatened to work

against rather than for the agents of Britain's book-trade. Interestingly, this was a fact that the

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[197] Letter from National Book Council to Messrs. Chatto and Windus, 9 January 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus
Collection, Archive of British Print and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.
[198] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 31.
[199] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books,* 30.
[200] Holman, *Print for Victory,* 82.

NBC well understood, and while they hardly moderated their attempts at gaining "special consideration" as an industry who performed for the nation a "national service," they consciously decided on a re-brand. Hesitant to appear "negative" or counteractive to the war-effort, the NBC renamed its "Committee for Opposing the Taxation of Books" the "National Council for the Support and Defense of Books." In addition to the organizing opposition to purchase taxes, the committee was charged with the public relations mission of "defending the status of books in wartime."[201] This the committee did with alacrity, finding its most able voices not in the halls of Whitehall, the chambers of the MoI, nor on the busy avenues of Fleet Street or Paternoster Row, but on the shelves of the nation's libraries.

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[201] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 31-33; Brophy, *Britain Needs Books,* 30; National Book Council Meeting Minutes, 25 July 1940, CW 88/1, Chatto & Windus Collection, Archive of British Printing and Publishing, University of Reading, Reading, UK.

Chapter Two: A Canon Behind Them

Britain's propagandists, together in consort with its publishers and booksellers, largely defined the nation by its literary virtues. In truth, bookishness fit neatly as a national value. Following on the heels of the cultural contestations of the interwar period and their emphasis on the peaceable, the feminine, and the domestic, books offered a tangible symbol for the changing nation. In a sense, then, Britain's literary propagandists themselves capitalized off a ready-made cultural narrative to sell their wares and propagandizing claims. They fit bookishness neatly into the wartime context, respectively stressing the phoenix-like qualities of books alongside the stoical Englishness of the Blitz, and the classless ordinariness of readership within the context of the People's War. With tact and erudition, Britain's literati effectively defined the wartime nation through its modern literariness.

At the same time, however, they also turned toward the nation's literary past. The bonds of a shared literary heritage, so contended the advocates of British bookishness, united the English-speaking peoples on either side of the Atlantic in opposition to the anti-literary tyranny of the Nazi state. Meanwhile, through the rhetoric of the nation's propagandists and publishers, the great writers of the nation's literary past were marshaled into the national imaginary as wartime heroes. In a fit of unparalleled imagination, Shakespeare became the embodiment of an idealized Englishness, afforded even a Christ-like second coming as the savior of the nation; Milton, meanwhile, was tasked with nothing less than the defense of English "civilization" itself. The canon of English literature— contentious as its inclusions and exclusions may have been— defined the nation in opposition to totalitarianism. Shakespeare may have been long dead. His spirit, however, lived on.

The English-Reading Peoples
Literary Heritage and Literary Alliance

Even before Parliament affirmed its declaration of war in September of 1939, Britons

across the nation were confronted with unsettling and acute realizations of their own

vulnerability. When the "intelligent" Briton of 1939 thought about the war, notes Angus Calder,

"he saw in his mind's eye… his own living room smashed, his mother crushed, his children

maimed, corpses in familiar streets, a sky black with bombers, the air itself poisoned with

gas."[202] Calder went on to estimate that nearly a third of Britain was, to some degree, affected by

population movements between the first week of June and the first week of September 1939.[203]

In the weeks following the declaration of war on 3 September, and before the government

orchestrated any of its own evacuation schemes, roughly two million of those Britons who were

able evacuated themselves to the countrysides of Wales, Scotland, and England; within a mere

forty-eight hours, five thousand left the port of Southampton on ships bound for America.[204]

In response to such concerns over the possibilities of air-raids, the government quickly

and somewhat haphazardly organized for the billeting of children away from urban areas.

Despite receiving fewer children than expected— between thirty-seven and forty-eight percent of

eligible children, depending on the region— when child-evacuations began in the fall of 1939,

just under half of London's school-aged population left the city.[205] To the government,

evacuation offered a "military expedient, a counter-move to the enemy's objective of attacking

and demoralizing the civilian population"; to families, it was a method of ensuring the safety of

their children.[206] By May 1940, two major developments had taken place regarding the status of

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[202] Calder, *The People's War,* 22.
[203] Calder, *The People's War,* 35.
[204] Ibid, 36; Sonya Rose, *Which People's War*, 57.
[205] Calder, *The People's War,* 37; Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 57.
[206] Calder, *The People's War,* 36.

evacuees. On the one hand, many in England who had fled the cities began to return, and in

September, when the Blitz began, nearly half-a-million children remained in London.[207] On the

other hand, the government, responding to offers from both the dominions and the United States,

organized for overseas evacuations through the Children's Overseas Reception Board. By 4 July,

it had received upwards of 200,000 applications. The scheme did not last long: it was shut down

when seventy-three "seavacuees" drowned following the torpedoing of the *City of Benares* in

mid-September.[208] Nonetheless, by then, nearly 2,600 children had officially made their way

across the Atlantic or to the dominions, in addition to nearly 14,000 others who had done so

privately. Of these, over five thousand found their way to the United States.[209]

The son of a distinguished academic and lecturer in Anglo-Irish literature, Desmond

Edward Henn was born in Cambridgeshire in December of 1929.[210] A sensitive boy with "fair

hair, wide-set, blue-grey eyes and a merry, determined mouth," he grew up on the grounds of

Cambridge University. [211] In 1939, when Desmond was only ten, his world changed drastically.

The outbreak of war uprooted his family: his father, Thomas, joined the British army as a

subaltern in the intelligence corps; his mother, Mary, joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force,

eventually being assigned to the codebreaking center at Bletchley Park. The young Desmond,

now only eleven, was evacuated to America, where Yale University had offered to host the

children of Oxford and Cambridge dons for the duration of the war.[212] When Henn arrived across

the Atlantic, he was most certainly out of his element. His mother accompanied him briefly, but

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[207] Ibid, 128.
[208] Claire Halstead, "Dangers Behind, Pleasures Ahead: British-Canadian Identity and the Evacuation of British Children to Canada during the Second World War," *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no. 2 (2014), 164; Calder, *The People's War*, 129.
[209] Calder, *The People's War*, 129.
[210] Enid Henn, *Desmond: A Memoir* (Cambridge: The Golden Head Press, 1967), 7.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Bridget Hourican, "Thomas Rice Henn," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, 2022, Accessed 24 April 2022, https://www.dib.ie/biography/henn-thomas-rice-a3928.

departed as soon as he had safely settled in. Yale, to its credit, did everything it could to keep the

children busy. It regulated their schedules with dictatorial precision; from rising at 7:00 a.m. to

lights out at 8:30, their time was split between activities, meals, and "reflection times."[213] From

sporting events to lectures— Henn even attended one on "England and Shakespeare," whose

passages were deemed well "suited to this period of England's history"— the children seldom

stopped moving or thinking. Most of the thirty-seven unaccompanied children sent to New

Haven likely arrived in the United States with little; what each did carry with them, however,

was their very own "Token of Freedom."[214]

The Token of Freedom was a book— little more than a pamphlet, really— given to child

evacuees destined for the United States in 1940. Privately printed by the succinctly-titled

"Americans in Britain Outpost of the Committee for Defending America by Aiding the Allies,"

The Token of Freedom was intended for distribution to unaccompanied children being evacuated

to the United States.[215] It represented nothing less than a "spiritual passport," one "fit to

accompany the children of the defenders of freedom who set sail from Great Britain in 1940."[216]

In fact, it was an anthology of "immortal words" meant to instill the values of freedom into those

who read it in loco parentis, composed of excerpts from various Greek, Roman, British and

American writers. Intended to be read on the voyage across the Atlantic, it's "Foreword to the

Children" declared:

> When you see the statue of Liberty in New York's harbour, remember why she is
> holding up a light. It is what any brave Mother would do, if her children were
> travelling a dangerous road in what CHAUCER called "the dark darknesses' of

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[213] Katherine Spooner, "Yale and the Oxford Children: A Pioneering Evacuation Program," *Yale Historical Review*, https://historicalreview.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Spooner.pdf, 37.

[214] Ibid, 34.

[215] *The Token of Freedom* (London: The Americans in Britain Outpost of the Committee for Defending America by Aiding the Allies, 1940), frontispiece.
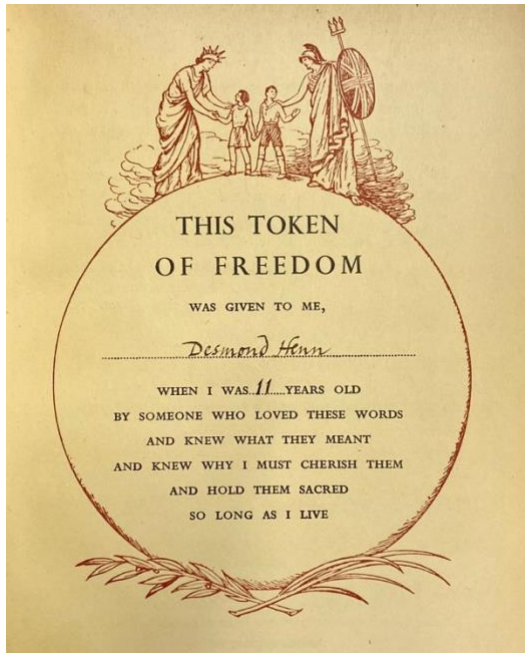
[216] Ibid.

Figure V. The frontispiece of Desmond Henn's copy of *The Token of Freedom*. Britannia, bedecked for war and flanked by clouds of smoke, sends her children to the care of Columbia.

The Token of Freedom, (London: The Americans in Britain Outpost of the Committee for Defending America by Aiding the Allies, 1940), frontispiece.

this world. The spirit of Freedom is so dear to the Free People that they made her image enormous, strong as bronze, beautiful as a proud young Mother. Remember, too, why she is holding fast to written words in a book. MILTON tells you why, on page 33. Tyrants hate the very words Liberty, Liberté, Freedom, and try to destroy the very stones on which they find such words lovingly carved. But your British fathers and mothers are saying No to that. They have said that the name and praise of Freedom shall not be torn down and mocked.[217]

At once, *The Token* rhetorically united Britons and Americans as English-speaking peoples who shared an essential connection as the readers of "free" literature. Those children who carried *The Token* with them not only carried the words of Shakespeare, but they carried the foundations on which their nation stood, and the words for which their parents fought. The children who received the *Token* were unaccompanied; Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Longfellow and Lincoln stood in as surrogate parents, role-models for children torn from home. As a frontispiece, the book held a space for children to inscribe their name, directly beneath an image of two children flanked by the twin parental figures of Britannia and Columbia: "This token of

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[217] Ibid, "Foreword."

freedom was given to me, <u>Desmond Henn</u>, when I was <u>11</u> years old, by someone who loved these words and knew what they meant and knew why I must cherish them and hold them sacred as long as I live."[218]

Coordinated Conservation

    The Token of Freedom was but one strand in a much larger national rhetoric which sought to unite Britain and the United States— and occasionally the USSR— through their perceived literary bonds. Even before the United States was drawn into the conflict in 1941, Britain's propagandists had made efforts to stress the literary bonds which connected the two nations. Ernest Rhys of *Everyman's Library*, for example, optimistically argued in 1940 that the war could entirely have been avoided had only the Germans read his compendium of British and American (and Russian) thinkers.[219] Such opinions were not limited only to publishers, though. Lord Elgin, speaking in a House of Lords debate on book production, leaned on the perceived literary bonds of the English-speaking peoples when he asked, "How many citizens of the United States are now with us because they have read Shakespeare or Dickens or Winston Churchill?"[220] Of course, there was certainly something deeply gratifying in the image of the English greats operating still as the chief marketing agents of the nation. Nonetheless, Lord Elgin's question is deeply asymmetrical; as he phrases it, the flow of literature across the Atlantic acts only as a one-way street. It was perhaps a point of pride— or perhaps more accurately literary hubris— that Shakespeare and Dickens won American minds, that the English language remained above all the domain of English men. Paul Fussell somewhat pointedly notes that in the First World War

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[218] Ibid, frontispiece.
[219] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 136.
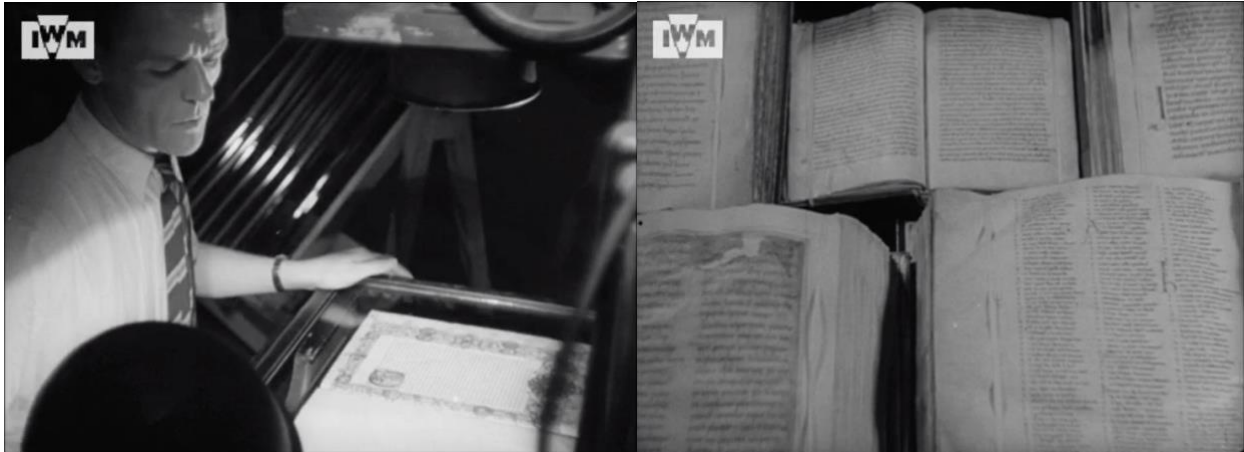[220] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books,* 63.

Figure VI. Protecting Britain's Literary Heritage: An archivist records a rare book on microfilm; Manuscripts and incunables waiting to be recorded for safekeeping. Reproduced from *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941), 4:55, 5:09, www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.

many Britons, though convinced of their own literary greatness, saw American literature as somewhat sparing and limited. By and large, it existed "in a vacuum devoid of" a "line of important 'philosophic' poets running back to the fourteenth century."[221] Of course, while the United States certainly had a Twain and a Melville, its literary canon was young and at best nascent. For literary ancestors, America would always have to turn across the Atlantic.

Yet as Britain's propagandists stressed, that literary ancestry, at least in its physical form, was under threat. Not only was the nation under the perceived threat of invasion— in which case propagandists implicitly warned that "every book" that did not serve the Nazi party would be "sought out and destroyed"— but the Blitz threatened to destroy the nation's libraries and archives. Indeed, filled to the brim with paper products, the nation's book depositories stood as little more than well-organized tinderboxes; between the beginning of war and the autumn of 1941, nearly twenty-million books were set alight by German bombs in Britain.[222] Together, argued British propagandists, the United States and United Kingdom worked to save their

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[221] Fussell, *The Great War,* 158.
[222] Peter Thorsheim, "Salvage and Destruction: The Recycling of Books and Manuscripts in Great Britain during the Second World War," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 3 (August 2013): 423.

material literary heritage. *The Battle of the Books,* which was screened shortly after the American

entry into the war, certainly capitalized on this image. Nearly a quarter of the film is devoted to

the efforts to save precious pieces of literary history from the Nazi bombers, and while one

archivist records leaves of a book on microfilm, Henry Ainley declares that:

> There are rare books which once lost are gone forever. Many have been sent to
> America. But our museums and famous libraries are recording all their most
> precious books on microfilm. Some of the money to do it comes from America.
> And the reels of film will be deposited in the Library of Congress in Washington.
> The whole of Milton's work can be contained in this small reel of film. Milton,
> who said "Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature: God's image. But he who
> destroys a book kills reason itself.[223]

The Battle of the Books casts the two brotherly nations as literary allies, working fervently

against the rising tide of war to save "reason itself." It is a vision of civilian Anglo-American

alliance, predicated not on shared threats but on shared heritage. Crossing the Atlantic, Milton

becomes an ambassador of the British nation.

When British propagandists stressed Anglo-American literary alliance, they did so

primarily for the sake of propagandizing such themes on the home front; nonetheless, they also

went out of their way to make themselves applicable, even endearing, to American audiences. In

this sense, one can read an interesting subtext from the language of Anglo-American literary

alliance. The Ministry of Information, after all, released *The Battle of the Books* just months after

the American entry into the war. When the film informed its viewers that the efforts of literary

conservation were largely financed by American universities, and that the completed reels would

be sent for safekeeping at the Library of Congress, it spoke as much to American audiences as it

did to British ones. It may have served to remind Britons that both nations acted in somewhat

quaint literary alliance, but it also served to remind them of what was an increasingly contentious

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[223] *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941),
https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.

and increasingly crippling wartime debt.[224] The trade-off does not entirely appear worthwhile; and even if so, it could have been managed without direct reference to American financing. In a sense, then, such rhetoric was pointed toward audiences in both nations. To American audiences, the language of shared literary concerns reemphasized the necessity for wartime loans and the urgent need for capital. To British audiences, to borrow from Clive Ponting, such rhetoric served to "disguise" the unfortunate realities of British financial dependence on the United States "by talk of the common purpose of the English-speaking peoples."[225] Propagandists touted the shared literary freedom of the two anglophone powers even while Britain increasingly and patently became financially unfree.

A World of Literature

Curiously, it was not only *English* literary heritage that the nation saw itself as defending. Perhaps embodying Stanley Baldwin's assertion that Britain stood as the modern-day Library of Alexandria, British propagandists asserted that the nation acted as the defender of the world's literary heritage. *Everyman's* had long argued that the English literary canon was not limited only to the works of Shakespeare, Milton, and Shelley, but that it included as well "translations of the chief masterpieces of the western world, ancient and modern, from the Bible and the work of Plato to Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy and Ibsen." English literature, the *Everyman's* marketing team argued, "like the English language, has taken eagerly of the best that other nations have created, but it has always maintained its own creative impulse and that tradition of freedom."[226] And now that the fascist states had deigned to toss the great works into

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[224] Ponting, *1940,* 215
[225] Ibid.
[226] V.V., *Books and Freedom.*

their conflagrations, it was the responsibility of Britons, who historically had been the great

readers of "all the printed matter in the world," to take up arms and defend the "undying freedom

of the spirit of man."[227] The argument was hardly humble, but it was powerful.

British propagandists, following this logic, turned to literature as another method of

stressing the Anglo-Soviet alliance as well. The entry of the USSR into the war in 1941, while

certainly a great boon for the British war effort, presented the British government with an

interesting conundrum. Concerned that pro-Soviet outpourings could be capitalized upon by the

Left, the government sought to actively propagandize support for Russia, but with as little

mention of communism or the Soviet state as possible.[228] The resultant rhetoric, which

emphasized the Russian people and culture, fit quite neatly alongside the rhetoric of British

bookishness.[229] British newspapers, in particular, fell quite readily in line behind Tolstoy, whom

they heralded as the greatest of Russian writers. *The Tatler*, an illustrated paper akin to the

Illustrated London News, published a full-page special titled "Remember Tolstoy" centering on

the martial lessons of *War and Peace*. Arguing that Russia had taken the lessons of Tolstoy to

heart, it emphasized its belief that "Stalin has read his Tolstoy… and therefore has ordered an

orderly retreat." Current events, it argued, only proved "what a faithful guide to Russian

character and military thought Tolstoy still is."[230] The Allies, so held the logic of the propaganda,

were united in their deference to the lessons of literature.

The cult of Tolstoy, however, was not limited by borders. General Heinz Guderian, in his

memoirs, notes that when his forces overran Tolstoy's home estate of *Yasnaya Poliana* they

made the estate their temporary headquarters. Soviet propagandists, for their part, argued that

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[227] Walpole, *The Freedom of Books.*
[228] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 48.
[229] Ibid.
[230] "Remember Tolstoy," *The Tatler* (London)*,* 22 July 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

German forces pillaged his estate and destroyed his manuscripts; claims which Guderian readily

contested as propagandistic "fantasy." In deference to the writer, he asserts, he visited his grave,

making sure "no German soldier disturbed it," and secured the materials in his museum to make

sure "no stick of furniture was burned, no book or manuscript touched."[231] Yet, he asserts, in a

curious case of literary combativeness, the Russians themselves "had laid mines about the grave

of their greatest writer."[232] Whatever the truth of the matter, British newspapers reported the

event lamentably. Quoting John Masefield, Britain's poet Laureate, the *Dundee Evening

Telegraph* even daringly asserted that "no land has borne more admirers of Tolstoy than"

Britain.[233] The enthusiasts of British bookishness claimed even Tolstoy as their own.

Such literary loans, however, were hardly one-way; Soviet academicians made

particularly evident their taste for Shakespeare, outbursts excitedly reported by British

newspapers. In April of 1942, the *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, *Birmingham Daily Post,* and

Liverpool Daily Post each ran stories on "special meetings" held "this month in Moscow to mark

the anniversary of Shakespeare's death." Soviet historians, the papers asserted, were to deliver

lectures on "The Humanism of Shakespeare, the Enemy of Fascism," "Shakespeare and the

War," and "English Humour in Shakespeare's Works."[234] Shortly thereafter, the *Coventry

Evening Telegraph* expressed the hope of the director of the Shakespearean Memorial Theatre

that the "present joint struggle of the U.S.S.R. and Great Britain will lay a foundation for fruitful

collaboration between Soviet and British theatrical workers studying and producing Shakespeare

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[231] Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, translated by Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1952), 257.
[232] Ibid.
[233] "Nazis Ravage Tolstoy's Home," *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 25 December 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[234] "Moscow Honours Shakespeare," *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 20 April 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive*; "Shakespeare— Enemy of Fascism," *Birmingham Daily Post*, 15 April 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive*; "British Envoy Sees Stalin," *Liverpool Daily Post*, 15 April 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

on the stage."[235] Tolstoy and Shakespeare, as literary heroes and cultural ambassadors, unified

the allied peoples (and each, ironically, even maintained large followings in Germany throughout

the war years).

Of course, if the nation stood as the ultimate defender of the written word, it was a

sobriquet that necessarily included German literature as well. British propagandists, sensing

opportunity, carved out a special place on the bookshelves of the nation for those books which

Hitler's followers had "stamped 'Verboten.'"[236] Publishers, booksellers, and the MoI were

generally successful— with exceptions, as discussed shortly— in dissociating classical German

literature from the Nazi state. Few saw much issue in the reading of German classics, and in that

regard, little had changed from the First World War, from which literature—unlike the arts and

German "Kultur" more broadly— had emerged relatively unscathed; as notes Jonathan Rose

with something of a chuckle, it was hardly unheard-of for soldiers to march into the trenches

carrying "Goethe, in the original German."[237] The condemnation of German classics would, in

reality, simply prove counterproductive, threatening to undermine the rhetoric of literary

nationalism that the MoI and NBC had worked so hard to build. Britain, then, could consider

itself to have taken the cultural high road. Of course, it helped that the Nazi state had turned

against that German literature it found untoward and inconvenient, and thus Britain emerged not

just as the defender of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Tolstoy, but of Heine and, even if not banned

in Germany, Goethe as well. After all, none other than the Duff Cooper, Minister of Information,

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[235] "Stratford's Message Received," Coventry Evening Telegraph, 20 April 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[236] "Books and Freedom: Striking Exhibits in Rugby," *The Rugby Advertiser*, 25 April 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[237] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 136.

proclaimed it Britain's intent to save the "immortal poetry of Heine [and] the thought of Einstein" from the Nazi "bonfire."[238]

Shakespeare in the Shredder

Of course, while the nation may have identified itself as defending Britain's literary heritage, the exigencies of wartime made realizing this goal nearly impossible. War demands copious quantities of paper, and given the rather inopportune location of production facilities— in Holland, French North Africa, and Norway— paper imports fell drastically with the outbreak of war.[239] While publishers were restricted to 37.8% of pre-war paper usage, such cutbacks were not enough, and the government was quickly forced to institute schemes to salvage unused paper.[240] Paradoxically, while British publishers extolled the virtues of Milton and Shakespeare, and while the MoI loudly proclaimed that the nation was doing everything in its power to ensure the safety of its material literary heritage, the Ministry of Supply was engaged in a recycling campaign which saw countless such volumes destroyed. In 1943 alone, Britons submitted 600 million books to salvage campaigns; while most of these were likely modern paperbacks or unimportant volumes, countless were necessarily irreplaceable remnants of the nation's cultural heritage.[241] When Henry Ainley asserted in *The Battle of the Books* that in "Britain the only books which have been burnt are the books destroyed by the firebombs of the Nazi bombers," he was perhaps correct only on a technicality; in Britain books were not burned, they were

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[238] Books and Freedom Exhibition Photos, 1940, IWM D 1186, Digitized Collections, Imperial War Museum, London, England, https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205195721.

[239] Holman, *Print*, 15.

[240] "The Wartime Boom in Books," *The Sphere* (London), 6 December 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive*; Manning, *Books*, 155.

[241] Thorsheim, "Salvage and Destruction," 432.

pulped.[242] In fact, during the duration of the war, nearly thirty times as many books were

recycled by Britons themselves as were destroyed in German air raids.[243] While such campaigns

hardly involved state-sponsored malice towards 'enemy literature' on the part of the

government— although one can question whether such ideas played into personal decisions on

which books to donate— they certainly made for rather peculiar reports when considered

alongside the rhetoric of British bookishness.

Jack Loudan, a reporter for the *Belfast Telegraph*— the same newspaper which aired the

advertisement presenting "the freedom of the bookshop"— wrote a story in August of 1940 on

the book salvage campaign. "Shakespeare and Byron," he declared, "are helping the war effort,

too."[244] Visiting the "wastepaper salvage depots" of Ulster, Loudan named the piles of books

ready to be recycled "the strangest mixture ever you saw. Side by side with thriller magazines

and novelettes are well-worn copies of Keats and Byron that were new in the days when their

authors were more than a memory."[245] Amazingly, Loudan considered the age and symbolic

value of many of the books before him, but drew starkly different conclusions on their

destruction. As Loudan notes, he found:

> a set of old ledgers that might have come straight from the office of Ebeneazer
> Scrooge himself or from the counting-house of Cheeryble Brothers. I opened one
> of these books at random and saw that the writing was like copperplate and that
> some of the entries were made as far back as 1780… I can imagine that Belfast
> Tim Linkinwater… with his periwig and snuff-box, dipping his quill pen into
> purple ink and carefully forming the beautiful slender letters that adorn every
> page. Little did he think that 160 years later his ledgers would be of service in a
> worthy cause.[246]

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[242] *The Battle of the Books*, directed by Jack Chambers (Ministry of Information, 1941),
https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060016336.
[243] Thorsheim, "Salvage and Destruction," 432-433.
[244] Jack Loudan, "Shakespeare and Bryon are Helping the War Effort Too," *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 August 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive*.
[245] Ibid.
[246] Ibid.

Loudan clearly saw the age and irreplaceable nature of the ledger before him. It was a piece of

Belfast's history, at least 160 years old by his observation; and yet he was readily able to throw it

back into the heaping pile of books before him due to be recycled in service of "a worthy cause."

The nation stands in defense of both the ideals and material heritage of literature, yet

simultaneously it destroys that literature in its own defense. It is doublethink worthy of Orwell

himself. Of course, such similarly mind-boggling rhetorical incongruities crop up with regard to

German literature as well. Even if the nation declared that it stood in defense of German writers,

and even if it expressed its distaste for "Hitler's game" of burning-books "in case the people read

them," it did not always look upon such happenings as entirely inappropriate when committed

for the cause of "freedom."[247] In July of 1940, the *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, sensing little

irony, reported that in Winnipeg "German language books… are to be burned." "Undoubtedly,"

it went on, "they are… propaganda matter and therefore unsuitable and unnecessary."[248]

All the War's a Stage
The Marshaling of Literary Heroes

Veronica Haigh, artist and playwright, was little better known in 1940 than she is today.

While few discernable biographical details remain of her life, one can easily deduce that she felt

a passion for both theatre and British history; between 1937 and 1939, Haigh submitted several

illustrations to the London illustrated newspaper *The Sphere*, each of which centered on either

the London theatre scene or medieval and early modern England.[249] Even if hardly a household

name, Haigh certainly possessed some talent, and one of her works remains still in the archives

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[247] "War-Time Reading," *Falkirk Herald*, 4 October 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive*.
[248] "German Books Burned," *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 11 July 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive*.
[249] Veronica Haigh, "A Present for St. Elizabeth," *The Sphere* (London), 23 November 1938, *The British Newspaper Archive*; Veronica Haigh, "Cardinal Hinsley's Homecoming," *The Sphere* (London), 22 January 1938, *The British Newspaper Archive*.

of the *Victoria and Albert* in London.[250] Haigh's big break, however, rode in on the winds of

war. In 1942, she published her first— and as far as is discernable, only— play, entitled *To*

Dream Again.[251] Performed at the Prince of Wales Theatre in Cardiff, the play starred Nicolette

Bernard alongside the well-known actor Richard Donat, who appeared both on the British stage

and screen alike.[252] Haigh's play was presumably a noteworthy success: not only did the play go

on to performances in major cities and provincial towns across England, but it was even termed

by the *Edinburgh Evening News* "one of the most notable contributions to the stage in recent

years."[253] Haigh's play was as unusual as it was notable. Set during the Blitz of 1940, *To Dream*

Again centered on the character of Shakespeare, who, in England's darkest hour, sallied forth

from heaven in order to save the embattled nation.

As the play begins, William Shakespeare and Roger Bacon stand in heaven, watching

Britain below through a divine mist. When Shakespeare hears the faint drone and "lamentable

warbling-wail" of the air raid siren he declares it his intention to revisit England.[254] Working in

an armaments factory in the guise of a Dane, Mr. Hansel, Shakespeare befriends a local, upper-

middle class family. The youngest member of the family, a twenty-something war worker named

Rachel, quickly befriends the quizzical Mr. Hansel. Predictably, the two bond over their mutual

love for English literature, and when Mr. Hansel asks her about Shakespeare, she declares that

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[250] "Veronica Haigh," *Victoria & Albert Museum of Art*, 2021, Accessed 24 April 2022, https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1241204/veronica-haigh-drawing-veronica-haigh/.

[251] Veronica Haigh, *To Dream Again: A Romantic Play in Three Acts* (London: Guild Library, 1946), 5.

[252] Ibid, 5; Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It,* 144.

[253] Haigh, *To Dream Again*, 3; "Chorlton Reperatory Theatre Club," *Manchester Evening News*, 26 November 1949, *The British Newspaper Archive*; "Entertainment," *Newcastle Journal*, 6 August 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive*; "Royal Court Theatre," *Liverpool Evening Express*, 27 June 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive*; "Chit Chat," *The Stage* (London), 14 February 1946, *The British Newspaper Archive*. Of course, wartime was hardly a great period for theatre. As the *Lancashire Evening Post* explained, most able-bodied actors had been seen off to the Services, a fact which made "Shakespeare impossible for the time being." As a period of widespread desertification of the arts, the genuineness of such an appellation as "one of the most notable contributions to the stage in recent years" can readily, and perhaps with a slight smile, be questioned. "War Defeats Shakespeare," *Lancashire Evening Post*, 4 October 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[254] Haigh, *To Dream Again*, 9.

ever since the war he has seemed "to be there— all around— like the air one breathes."[255]

Quickly, over long garden walks and firelit literary discussions, the two fall in love. What may

have been an idyllic midsummer night's dream, however, is quickly ruptured when the local

constable appears to enquire about the mysterious stranger's papers. Admitting he has none, the

constable, suspecting him a German spy, marches the Bard to the local jail. As the family works

to have him released, Rachel goes to visit Mr. Hansel. Here he admits his true identity, and

Rachel— hardly fazed— embraces him. Shakespeare makes it clear that he is not to stay, but

tells her not to worry. As the play closes, a German bomb falls upon his cell, while Shakespeare

returns to heaven to report back his findings— and his sureties of England's survival— to an

astounded Bacon.

While Haigh's play never strays far from the realities of the Second World War and the

context of the Blitz, it fully embraces a vivid fantasy of national mythology. It is not entirely as if

Shakespeare emerges as an infallible national hero sent from heaven to rescue the nation, but

rather as though his heroic spirit guides the nation. Shakespeare, declares Rachel, is "all around,"

the very "air" and essence of England.[256] Far from stressing the heroic, in fact, Haigh stresses the

ordinary, and while Shakespeare's words and works are presented as grand and great, he himself

is portrayed as indistinguishable from the average Englishman. He works in an armaments

factory, carries out an ordinary duty, and has a circle of friends that is, to say the least, limited.

Haigh clearly situates Shakespeare into the wartime context. One conversation between

Shakespeare and Rachel's mother, Mrs. Hampden, for instance, exemplifies this very point:

> Mrs. Hampden: It is odd you should have spoken of the real Shakespeare, Mr.
> Hansel, because to us English people, he seems very close at an hour like this. It
> is almost as if his spirit lived again.

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[255] Haigh, *To Dream Again*, 45.
[256] Ibid.

> Shakespeare: His spirit lived again! … Madam, something has been puzzling me
> ever since I came here. If Shakespeare did come back now, would you not expect
> him as an eminent Englishman. If I may call him so, would you not expect him to
> do some special deed?
> Mrs. Hampden: Some special deed?
> Shakespeare: Yes. Some deed of valour?
> […]
> Mrs. Hampden: Well, you see, in this war, Mr. Hansel, it is the ordinary people
> who are the… the saviours of their country; and in any case, Shakespeare
> wouldn't return to *do* anything I shouldn't think, because as I said before, he is
> alive in England's actions now.[257]

As Haigh formulates him, Shakespeare represents the spirit of England incarnate. Yet situated in

the context of the People's War, when ordinary Britons have taken up the gambit of national

defense instead of great individuals, Shakespeare's spirit comes to stand for the nation rather

than his person. It is the spirit of all England, of the "ordinary people" who are the "saviours of

their country." Haigh's Shakespeare plays his part in the People's War.

　　Amazingly, in Haigh's play, Shakespeare returns to England only to find his return

unnecessary. He is already there in an incorporeal sense, and his figure serves only to personify

English creativity, enlightenment, and temperance. When Shakespeare returns to heaven, he

reports back to Bacon wondrously and elatedly, that:

> consciously I am awake— in heaven— but subconsciously— in my dreams— my
> life and spirit are forever England's… In the past Francis it was given to the few,
> the poets and the prophets, to kindle by the burning splendour of their single light,
> a bright succession of undying fires— but this is not the age of kings and
> leaders— and those who seek to dominate destroy— rather than create— but now
> is Everyman the king and captain, and his the royalest cause of all.[258]

Haigh could readily have been sponsored by the marketing department at *Everyman's.* Her vision

of England and of the war represents the struggle of a creative and (reasonably) equal and free

people against the forces of destruction. Shakespeare emerges within that vision as a complex

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[257] Ibid, 55-6.
[258] Ibid, 101.

national hero, remembered not for heroic deeds but for his heroic spirit. As the *Glasgow Evening News* summarized the play: "When Shakespeare, in the guise of a Dane, comes down from Heaven to visit England in wartime, he finds everything changed except the country's spirit, and that is his own."[259]

Wartime Bardology

Shakespeare made a particularly sensible hero for a nation which stylized itself as essentially civilian. While the nation certainly mobilized itself in wartime, and while there was still an expectation that ordinary men would "demonstrate their virtue by being visibly in the military," this did not necessarily mean that the English spirit was inherently martial.[260] Indeed, at heart (and as the expectation went, in peacetime,) it remained civilian; insofar as the wartime was concerned, it could be said to be composed of rather Cincinnatian citizen-soldiers. Along the same lines, the nation's taste for heroes shifted as well. As Sonya Rose contends, Britain emphasized its "temperate heroes," those women and men who combined "good humour and kindliness with heroism and bravery."[261] As opposed to what the British saw as hyper-martial and hyper-masculine German heroes— whom J.B. Priestly termed mere "bogy-men"— Shakespeare was domesticated and temperate.[262] He could be relied upon for words and themes that were near limitless and, making the jobs of propagandists somewhat easier, he could be quoted into almost any context— in fact, given his contributions to the English language, one might surmise it challenging to avoid him. He was not only civilian and ubiquitous, but he represented a much-needed image of creativity in an epoch of untold destruction. Britons, so held

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[259] Ibid, 3.
[260] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War*, 196.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Ibid, 154.

the rhetoric of the MoI, were not destroyers or conquerors, but creators and builders. To quote

Veronica Haigh, while the nation was blacked-out, Shakespeare offered it the "burning splendor"

of enlightenment; while Germany sought to "dominate" and in so doing to "destroy,"

Shakespeare's Britain sought to "create."[263]

It was hardly just Shakespeare's spirit, though, which guided Britons through the war; as

British newspapers were keen to point out, his works could readily be employed to make sense

of an uncertain and mercurial struggle. Several British academics and thespians— namely John

Gielgud and F.C. Chatburn— organized lectures on the applicability of Shakespeare to the war.

One lecture, "Shakespeare in War Time," centered on the martial applications of the Bard;

another, "Shakespeare— Peace and War" was given in aid of the Polish Relief Fund.[264] Another,

held in Cheltenham by Professor G. Wilson Knight, was quoted by the *Gloucestershire Echo*:

> In "Henry IV," for instance, Hotspur, the simple-minded man of action,
> represented the young, fascist-minded state of modern Europe… which found a
> solution to every problem in physical force… In contrast to this outlook was that
> of Prince Hal, who, until forced to face up to the facts of a perilous situation, was
> a merry, easy-minded and somewhat dissolute character, who, nevertheless, was
> able in an emergency to meet and defeat the military Hotspur… Shakespeare, in
> "Henry V," had tried to characterize the perfect Englishman. Inheriting not only a
> due regard for material power, but also the deeper philosophy of peace-loving
> equanimity which, said Professor Knight, was essentially English.

As the *Gloucestershire Echo* concluded, Britain stood at a juncture in which it "could either

uphold or betray the traditions of England so glowingly painted by Shakespeare."[265] Once again,

Shakespeare became a role-model for the peaceable English nation. On a less serious note,

several newspapers, keen for a laugh, explained in broadly similar terms how Shakespeare's

quotes could be applied to the modern age. The *Lancashire Evening Post* relayed Shakespeare's

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[263] Haigh, *To Dream Again,* 101.
[264] "Shakespearean Lectures," *The Stage* (London), 1 February 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive*; "Martial Shakespeare," *Halifax Evening Courier*, 3 March 1942, *The British Newspaper Archive*.
[265] "War Philosophy of Shakespeare," *Gloucestershire Echo*, 20 July 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive*.

opinion on gossip in stating that "a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish war."[266] The *Fleetwood Chronicle* had more sense of humor. "Of a bomber," it quoted *The Tempest:* "Some airy devil hovers in the sky and pours down mischief." Of the blackout, it quoted *Romeo and Juliet:* "But soft! What light from yonder window breaks?" And perhaps most humorously, "Of the beer tax," it quoted *Julius Caesar*'s reference to Brutus' betrayal of Caesar*:* "This was the unkindest cut of all."[267]

Of course, Britain's thespian community was quick to support such rhetoric, and predictably comprised some of its greatest contributors. In Stratford-Upon-Avon, the annual Shakespeare Festival, which was held despite the "national emergency," drew much praise, if reduced crowds.[268] Ernest Daniels, who wrote the program for the festival, certainly saw room for Shakespeare in the war. As he questioned, though the "land was torn by war" and "the bells were silent," "who shall say the significance of the day was not greater than ever before; the spirit of Shakespeare more felt?" Shakespeare's "immortal values," he argued, would see the nation through its strife into "a better future."[269] Likewise, as the *Daily Record and Mail* of Glasgow reported, Glaswegian theatergoers believed that the war and its "attendant discomforts" served only to "strengthen rather than diminish the appeal of Shakespeare."[270] Of course, when one reads on to find that those theatergoers found their most "genuine enjoyment" in the "foiling of the cunning Jew by a brilliant Portia," Shakespeare's "immortal values" might be slightly drawn into question; for all of the nation's rhetoric of tolerance, antisemitism remained a

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[266] "On Gossip," *Lancashire Evening Post,* 14 June 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[267] "Things That Turn Up," *Fleetwood Chronicle*, 12 September 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[268] "Shakespeare Festival," *Evening Dispatch* (Birmingham), 20 February 1940. *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[269] Ernest Daniels, *Shakespeare Festival* (Stratford-Upon-Avon: Theatre World, 1941), Imperial War Museum Libraries, Imperial War Museum, London, England, LBY K. 05 / 2210.
[270] "Shakespeare Improves with War," *Daily Record and Mail* (Glasgow), 31 October 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

prominent aspect of public culture well into the war.[271] Nonetheless, Shakespeare was also

enlisted to boost morale. One acting troupe, sponsored by the Council for the Encouragement of

Music and the Arts, and presumably with the support of the MoI, traveled to Royal Ordinance

Factories across the nation in the summer and fall of 1943; "Shakespeare for War Workers," as

they called it, offered showings of *Twelfth Night* and other Shakespearean plays, traveling from

Lancashire across the country over a series of months.[272] Ultimately, Shakespeare was heralded

as standing for "much more than the beauty and drama of poetry." As the *Chester Chronicle*

noted, "By the eve of the last war Shakespeare had come to stand… for the spirit of England.

And the spirit of England was to regenerate the world."[273]

Milton as Puritan, Milton as Propagandist

While Shakespeare perhaps stood as the personification of the ideal Englishman— calm,

creative, domestic and, for his low birth, ordinary— it was John Milton who stood in to

personify the nation in its fight against fascism. The choice was certainly apt, and British

propagandists capitalized on the subjects which had inspired him to write. On the one hand,

Milton's best-known work centered on a descent into hell, and provided a backstory for the devil

himself; it was not entirely difficult to draw comparison between his stories and the present

realities of the "demoniac" Hitler.[274] On the other, Milton was famed for his passionate defense

of free speech in *Areopagitica,* which he wrote in the midst of the English Civil War. Had

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[271] A.J. Sherman, *Island Refuge: Britain and Refugees from the Third Reich, 1933-1939* (London: Paul Elek, 1973)*,* 121; Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 92.

[272] "Shakespeare For War Workers," *Shields Daily News* (Tynemouth) 21 August 1943, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[273] "City and County Notes," *Chester Chronicle*, 6 January 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[274] V.V., *Books and Freedom.*

Britain's propagandists wanted to invent a historical figure to symbolize the nation's fight

against fascism, they could have done little better.

The Token of Freedom, when it questioned why the Statue of Liberty "is holding fast to

written words in a book," directed its readers to Milton for an answer. Turning to his page, one

comes to a section on "The Free Mind." Milton, through his Areopagitica, is the first speaker:

> Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to
> be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are: nay, they do preserve as in a
> vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I
> know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon's
> teeth: and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And
> yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a
> good book: who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image: but he who
> destroys a good book kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were, in the
> eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-
> blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured upon purpose to a life beyond
> life. It is true, no age can restore a life, whereof, perhaps, there is no great loss;
> and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want
> of which whole nations fare the worse. We should be wary, therefore, what
> persecution we raise against the living labours of public men, how we spill that
> seasoned life of man preserved and stored up in books; since we see a kind of
> homicide may be thus committed, sometimes a martyrdom...[275]

Milton, in a single paragraph, summarizes the entire argument of Second World War-British

bookishness. The destruction of literature is not wanton murder, but deicide resultant in

martyrdom; books live on, and guide their readers through their "master-spirit" and "ethereal and

fifth essence." As Milton warns, in language tailored to the propaganda of British bookishness,

books guide even whole "nations." And those nations which forsake the written word, and in so

doing "reject truth," ultimately "fare the worse."[276]

The agents of Everyman's Library also turned to Milton in their marketing campaigns,

quoting entire pages of the poet. Everyman's drew comparison between his assertions and the

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[275] The Token of Freedom, 33.
[276] Ibid.

"characteristic" qualities of the British people. His beliefs, after all, bred "tolerance, and tolerance breeds sympathy, humour, insight, a relish for the infinite variety of human character, and a steadily growing recognition of the value of the individual man and woman. But it is not a tolerance which extends to cruelty and injustice… nor does it extend to narrow fanaticism, the blind sacrifice of humanity to an idea."[277] The propagandists turned to Milton to express Britain's historical antipathies towards censorship and (especially literary) fanaticism of any kind. His words defined the nation in opposition to the "demoniac," "fanatic" ideologies of the Nazi state.

Not all invocations of Milton, however, came through his works. At the beginning of the Blitz in September 1940, *The Times* published a nearly half-page article predicated on the lamentable bombing of St. Giles' Church, where the poet is buried. Little attention is paid to the damage sustained by the Church itself, but rather the attention of the article focuses on a statue of Milton overturned in the courtyard. Decrying the "censorship of opinion" which the Nazi state had enforced throughout Germany, *The Times* declared that by the time "the name of Goebbels has ceased to stink and has been quite forgotten, the glory of Milton would survive."[278] Standing in opposition to the chief propagandist of the Nazi state is neither Prime Minister Churchill, Minister of Information Duff Cooper, nor even a living British writer, but the long dead poet John Milton, who from his grave still personifies the nation in the struggle against censorship.

Milton and Shakespeare made for a powerful and poetic duo, but they were hardly interchangeable figures. Of the two, Shakespeare prevailed as the more idealized and, perhaps as a corollary, the more embellished. He represented the nation not as he was but as it viewed itself: temperate, chivalric, creative, and composed. Of course, Shakespeare, whose plays so often

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[277] V.V., *Books and Freedom.*
[278] "No Censorship of Opinion," *The Times* (London)*,* 12 September 1940, *The Times Digital Archive.*

relied upon great battles, rousing speeches, well-timed Norwegian incursions and acts of regicide, never strayed particularly far from the martial values. But the nation imagined Shakespeare himself as a decidedly civilian figure, who defined Britain in a primarily domestic sense. Milton, by way of contrast, represented the nation in a much more oppositional role. If Shakespeare figured as the calm and calculated embodiment of the 'English spirit' which everyone from the NBC to the *Belfast Telegraph* blathered on about so imprecisely, then Milton figured as the ardent defender of the (equally imprecise) English virtues from foreign threat. Shakespeare, writer of tragedies and comedies alike, was humane, accessible, and even fallible; he was the quintessential Englishman. Milton, however, wrote no comedies. He wrote works of political, polemical, and even religious significance. As such, he became through the words of the NBC, MoI, and British press a figure more associated with implacable justice, integrity, and righteous passion. When the nation needed inspiration, it turned to the Bard. When it needed a defender— or a precedent of defense— against the forces of tyranny and (often literary) destruction, it turned to Milton.

Back to Alexandria
British Books and British Civilization

Milton, perhaps sensibly, emerged in the rhetoric as a champion of British "civilization." The *Strathearn Herald,* for example, argued that the nation had to be careful to safeguard the "culture of the humanities" as exemplified by the works of Milton "if the western civilization is to be preserved at all."[279] An even more expressive reminder of Milton's connection to British civilization comes from the *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*. Following the aforementioned

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[279] "Universities and the War," Strathearn Herald, 2 January 1943, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

bombing of Milton's grave at St. Giles' Church in London, and perhaps reminding its readers of

the literary alliance felt by the English-speaking peoples, the newspaper quoted *The New York*

Times:

> It was right that Milton, rebel and champion of free speech, defender of the
> English people, should be attacked even in his grave by a slave of Hitler. It was
> right that the enemy of civilization and of religion should strive to batter down the
> ancient church and destroy the memorials precious to literature and liberty.
> Another tenant of St. Giles's is John Foxe, of the Book of Martyrs (sic). To
> mention martyrs and martyrologists brings to mind Hitler who has covered
> Europe with prisoners, with sufferers, with corpses.[280]

Not just a defender of England, the English, and literary freedom, both the *Northern Daily Mail*

and the *New York Times* praise Milton as an implicit defender of "civilization" at large. What

makes the *Hartlepool's* account so noteworthy, though, is also its blatantly religious language. In

another sense, then, Milton made for a powerful symbol. *Everyman's*, in an early-1941

marketing pamphlet, after all termed Hitler a "demoniac," who:

> brooding over all the kingdoms of the earth for which he has signed his non-
> aggression pact with the devil,[†] knows that his barbarian empire could not long
> survive unless every book written, in every branch of literature and learning, were
> written to serve the Party, and every other book, old or new, were sought out and
> destroyed.[281]

Who better to combat the perceived irreligious and infernal enemy of the nation than Milton?

After all, not only was he well versed in infernos, perdition, and evil, but as adroit readers would

eagerly note, he even peopled his Paradise with sword-wielding, angelic warriors.[282] And, given

that some even styled the Second World War as a great, modern crusade— a rhetorical turn of

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[280] "U.S. Press and 'Typical Nazi Action,'" *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 29 August 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[†] *Everyman's* reference to Hitler's "non-aggression pact with the devil" operates in a dual sense. On the one hand, it is perhaps intended as a reference to the German-Soviet nonaggression pact of 1939, and if so, serves as an interesting example of how expressed British attitudes toward the Soviet Union shifted over the course of the war. On the other hand, it simultaneously situates the Second World War within a religious context, positioning it as a Manichaean struggle between the forces of good and evil.

[281] V.V., *Books and Freedom.*

[282] Kiernan, *The Duel in European History,* 14.

phrase which had so marked the language of First World War— Milton could be deployed in another sense as well; after all, Milton had also written fervently of, as one literary scholar phrased it, "men fighting for the Cross in strange lands, …defying Saracens in hand-to-hand combat on the stricken field."[283] Given that plenty of writers in Britain's press, literary journals, and even the BBC reached a broad agreement that any German victory would, as the historian David Costello writes, threaten "a return to the dark ages or worse," Milton made for a profoundly symbolic figure.[284] Not only did he stand as a hero of Britain's literary past, but he stood as an implacable defender of British enlightenment and the crusade for "civilization."

In a broader sense, though, 'civilization' became an important cause for which the wartime nation fought, intertwined through the rhetoric of Britain's propagandists with ideas of British literariness. Indeed, like the concept of the wartime "crusade," the language of "civilization" broadly represented a re-run of the propaganda of the First World War. Then, too, Britain had blithely decried the Germans as "Huns" assaulting symbols of European civilization like, somewhat appropriately, the Library of Leuven in Belgium.[285] The *Marylebone Mercury*, for example, argued that the "civilian backbone of fighting Britain" had not just done their duty for King and Country, but for the cause of "civilization" itself.[286] Winston Churchill certainly agreed, but merged that argument with the cult of British bookishness. In what would be one of the most-quoted wartime phrases by British publishers, Churchill opined that "Books in all their variety offer the means whereby civilization may be carried triumphantly forward."[287] Books,

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[283] Ibid; James Fountain, "The Notion of Crusade in British and American Literary Responses to the Spanish Civil War," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7, no. 2 (June, 2009): 133; Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 115.

[284] Costello, "Searchlight Books and the Quest for a People's War," 258; "Weymouth," *Western Gazette* (Somerset), 19 July 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[285] Vesna Živković, "The Destruction of the University of Leuven Library in First World War and its Renovation in the Post-War Period," *Documentary Heritage* 26, (2021): 118.

[286] "Order of the Day," *Marylebone Mercury*, 10 June 1944, *The British Newspaper Archive.*

[287] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books*, 6-7.

then, were cast too as *bona fide* agents of British civilization. Yet both British 'civilization' and

British literariness stood precariously at risk. One might recall that Stanley Baldwin, after all,

cast Britain as a modern-day Library of Alexandria. The nation in his words took on an almost

mythical status, and tasked itself with defending the agents of enlightenment and civilization

from the barbarians— or, perhaps more appropriately in either case, the Romans— at the gates.

An Imperial Provenance

   The concept of defending British and western 'civilization,' however, necessarily

enmired the advocates of British bookishness in the rhetoric of Empire. Of course, the book in

Britain had a lengthy imperial history. As John Mackenzie notes, the book trade, for its

propaganda value both at home and abroad, became "an inseparable part of imperialism," as:

> Stories of travel and exploration, missionary writing and other heroes, books
> celebrating military and naval exploits, the 'romance' of transportation,
> communications and engineering, the excitements of migration and pioneering
> life, the quaint and exotic among indigenous peoples of the Empire, all these
> became Christmas and birthday present staples, and above all prizes for school
> and Sunday school. Publishers provided both propaganda and bribes, dressed up
> in dust jackets, (invented in this marketing age) and board covers which vividly
> conveyed the message carried within. Even if books were not read, their owners
> could scarcely miss the stirring titles and equally exciting cover illustrations
> which depicted an heroic and expansionist age, in which fellow countrymen
> generally overwhelmed or converted people of 'lesser' cultures.[288]

Britain's publishing companies were not merely complicit in imperial propagandizing, but

indispensable to it. And as Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr argue, the book even took on a

special philosophical significance in the context of Empire. Not only did the English book

betoken "autonomy, authority, and sovereignty," but it even stood as a veritable monument to

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[288] John Makenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 18.

and exemplar of "English virtue, civility, and nation-ness."[289] Books, then, were inseparable

from imperial discourses of enlightenment and the rhetoric of British civilization.

Yet by 1940, as demands for imperial reform grew and as the language of empire began

to shift more towards that of cooperation and "commonwealth," such claims perhaps lost some

of their persuasive power. Nevertheless, the agents of British publishers extolled the relationship

between books and British civilization, reminding their readers that the wartime nation stood

stalwartly for both. As *Everyman's* argued to its readers, books defined the 'civilized' world:

> [In] some Arab and early American communities, and perhaps others totally lost
> to us 'in the dark backward and abysm of time,' …writing played little part and
> no need was felt for any process of printing. [Whereas in Europe] the genius of
> the Greeks set fully in train that ardent, pertinacious questioning of the whole
> universe, physical and metaphysical, upon which so much of our life and thought
> are based, writing became essential and the invention of printing inevitable.
> Without books …the range of [human] learning and teaching would be the range
> of the human voice.[290]

Yet even this fate, argued the publisher, would pall in comparison to the "poorer," more

"barbarian" nightmare of the Nazi tyranny over the written word.[291] The argument situates the

uncivilized Nazi state in an implicitly imperial context. In their tyranny over books, so argued

Everyman's, the Nazis abandoned civilization to become "barbarians" akin to the "backwards"

communities which forsook books altogether. It was an equation of perceived intellectual

inferiority couched in intellectualist, paternalist, and fairly racialized rhetoric; and, at a time

when Britain was going to great lengths in order to convince its colonies to support the war

effort, it seemed remarkably short sighted. Nevertheless, the NBC made a similar argument.

Books, it maintained, were merely "lasting records of language" capable of being produced—

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[289] Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Spine of Empire? Books and the Making of an Imperial Commons," in *Ten Books that Shaped the British Empire: Creating an Imperial Commons,* Antoinette Burton and Isabel Hofmeyr, editors (Durham: Duke U.P., 2014): 10-11.
[290] V.V., *Books and Freedom.*
[291] Ibid.

and as a corollary, respected— by any peoples, however "ancient." The Babylonians pressed

words into clay, the Egyptians scribbled onto papyrus, and the Irish— here there was certainly an

imperial, or at least paternalizing, element— cut "significant incisions [into] stone." As the NBC

reminded its readers, "as we are alive if we can breathe, so we are men if we can speak. And if

we can read and write we are— or ought to be— civilized."[292] The implicit argument held that

Nazi Germany, in destroying books and failing to respect the written word, had fallen behind

even those "ancient" civilizations.

As expected, the MoI, too, extolled the moral and intellectual virtues of British

civilization. In rhetoric rife with imperial irony, the Ministry declared in a 1940 campaign that

Britain and its Empire had engaged in:

> The Greatest Crusade.
> We, who are members of the British Commonwealth, hold in our hands the future of the world.
> …
> Tyranny is the oldest disease of the human race. For thousands of years men have been tempted by visions of world conquest to sell their souls to a tyrant. Under the thin disguise of new catchwords, the Nazis have started the old futile game of building a slave empire.
> The British Empire is exactly the opposite. There has been nothing like it in the world before; it is a commonwealth, a family of free nations— linked together by a loyalty to one king. It stands for progress; it is the hope of the future.[293]

Essentially parroting the language of Britain's literary propagandists, the MoI declared that the

Empire was now engaged in a great, civilizational "crusade" for progress against the forces of

tyranny. The Ministry melded the language of empire neatly with that of religion; the NBC

merely had to add Milton. Nonetheless, the irony seemed palpable, and at a time when the

metropole worked so fervently to convince its Asian and African colonies to support the war

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[292] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books,* 6-7.
[293] McLaine, *Ministry of Morale,* 223-224.

effort, remarkably short sighted. Orwell, of course, remarked hyperbolically on the British penchant for imperial hypocrisy and ignorance; he jokingly argued that while Britain's stance towards its Empire represented "sheer hypocrisy," to many Britons such hypocrisy took "the form of not knowing that the Empire exists."[294] And however much wartime Britain may have desired to stylize itself as peace-loving and civilian, such claims read somewhat ironically when considered in the context of history. The Empire had been founded— and as was still demonstrable in India and would soon be reemphasized in Kenya, maintained itself— on violence and abuse; even Shakespeare's England took to 'pacifying' Ireland.

John Betjeman, whose poem "In Westminster Abbey" appeared earlier, felt similar qualms. Indeed, he even critiqued British imperial hypocrisy and arrogance alongside his critique of Britain's self-ascribed bookishness. Read alongside its preceding stanza, his disagreement with the place of "Books from Boots" in the national imaginary takes on an imperial significance. As his protagonist prays, she implores God to:

> Keep our Empire undismembered
> > Guide our forces by Thy Hand,
> Gallant blacks from far Jamaica,
> > Honduras and Togoland;
> Protect them Lord in all their fights,
> And, even more, protect the whites.
>
> Think of what our Nation stands for,
> > Books from Boots' and country lanes,
> Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
> > Democracy and proper drains…[295]

Following a vacuous, arrogant, and conceited prayer for the Empire, bookishness becomes the first item in a catalogue of English traits worth fighting for. In fact, one might well question whether the protagonist of Betjeman's poem values bookishness above imperial lives.

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[294] Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn,* 20.
[295] Betjeman, *Old Lights*, 55-56.

Literariness becomes a seemingly arbitrary and asinine value for which to fight, alongside such other 'civilized' trifles as "proper drains"; in Betjeman's eyes, a perceived sense of British bookishness becomes irrevocably intertwined with Britain's self-important belief in its status as a hyper-rational, 'civilizing' power.[296]

An Aching Canon
Elitism and Paternalism

Of course, as Betjeman's piece demonstrates, the rhetoric of British bookishness did not go entirely uncontested. Many among Britain's upper classes and intelligentsia hardly even believed in the intellectual equality of Britain's working classes. Universities, a likely site for intellectual elitism, proved especially defensive. This was hardly new: as Jonathan Rose notes of the earlier emergence of Britain's "new reading public," the intellectual independence of the working classes seemed to many members of the "educated classes… a serious threat to their own social position."[297] And given that *Everyman's* went so far as to declare that Britain's common man need not turn to "academic institutions" for education, it might not entirely come as a surprise that one of the most vocal critics of the literary inclination of Britain's "common people" would have come from the Faculty of English at Oxford. A.C. Ward, a professor of literature writing for an American audience at the request of his university press, wholly disparaged the literary merits of Britain's "common people." Reflecting on Londoner's reaction to the Blitz in language at once derogatory and reminiscent of Booth's *Darkest England*, he noted that:

> The common people in modern England are no lovers of great words. They make their challenge to the enemy in homelier ways, and so, at the foot of St. Giles tower, behind a sheltering fragment of wall and amid the rubble and piled stones

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[296] Ibid.
[297] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 13.

only a few yards from Milton's grave, local inhabitants are rearing rabbits and chickens.[298]

A.C. Ward's 1943 caricature of Britain's "homely" and literarily-ignorant common man hardly aligns with the hyper-literary citizen-scholar presented by publishers like *Everyman's*. And if Ward at least believed that Britain's working classes might be educated up from their "gloom and grime," others were yet more pessimistic.[299] One social worker, writing for none other than the MoI, lamented through imperial allegory the "City Savages" one could find at Liverpool Rest Centres in the aftermath of bombings; speaking his or her mind on their capacity for education, the social worker called not for schoolteachers, but "missionaries."[300] Belief even in the basic existence of an intellectually vibrant working class was hardly universal.

Thankfully, such blatantly classist and intellectually elitist rhetoric seemed in the minority. Even for those who did believe in the distinctive literariness of the nation, however, their rhetoric remained not only rife with paternalism, but even revelatory of much broader issues of class and literary representation. The MoI and NBC championed Shakespeare and Milton as literary heroes, the virtual embodiment of English virtues and values; yet one might readily note that comparatively few, among any strata of British society, would have been avid or regular readers of either figure. Those books and authors ignored by Britain's publishers and propagandists, then, become just as important as those extolled by them. The canon of Britain's 'classics' was arbitrary and restrictive, a veritable 'old boy network' of authors. As the arbiters of the 'canon,' Britain's publishers excluded female authors, non-Western authors, and any authors whose writings they deemed particularly incendiary or morally remiss. And what is more, most publishers and booksellers took on a rather palpably paternalistic tone. They judged

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[298] Ward, *A Literary Journey,* 13.
[299] Ibid, 19.
[300] Sonya Rose, *Which People's War,* 59.

their responsibility as not merely providing books to the 'masses,' but as largely deciding what those masses should read as well— at least rhetorically speaking, demand figured only secondarily.

In yet another sense, too, the literary marketing campaigns of the Second World War became irritatingly problematic; for all their political savvy and propagandistic tact, they seemed at times almost blatantly out of touch. At the height of the Blitz, one-in-six Londoners were homeless.[301] Yet all the while— indeed, especially in 1940 and 1941— the NBC and British publishers aggressively argued that Britons ought to buy, buy, buy. The Blitz hit publishing houses, too. In fact, as noted earlier, the NBC lamented the losses in books almost piously, letting out what seemed like funereal cries for those "twenty million volumes destroyed" in "the big fire raids around St. Paul's."[302] Indeed, in the NBC's account of the Blitz, human lives hardly figured. However asinine this point may appear so deep into a study of literary nationalism in Second World War Britain, one might readily question whether most people genuinely cared so ardently about books, whether materially or philosophically. For most, the concerns of wartime were substantially more pressing; with soldiers on the frontlines and families in bomb-ridden cities to worry about, the loss of a few— or even few million— books appears comparatively negligible.

Even so, British publishers themselves firmly believed in the wartime significance of the written word; most such belief, however, was placed in the established canon of English classics. Pelican fervently declared to its readers that "Shakespeare was of us," and that "Milton was for us," but while each figure certainly made a great exemplar of English virtue, civility, and

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[301] Calder, *The People's War*, 167.
[302] Brophy, *Britain Needs Books,* 32-33.

literariness, neither were particularly quotidian, accessible, or relevant.[303] It should, perhaps, go

without saying that most Britons did not read Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, or Chaucer on a

daily basis. Rather, wartime conditions militated escapism. As one Library Committee noted in

1940, "the demand today is for stories of adventure and romance, detective and sea yarns,

'shockers' too; but, above all, those rich in humour— the lightest of light literature… Cheery

books such as there are just what we need at the moment, something to carry us away to new

worlds where wars and rumours of war have no place."[304] And even when readers opted for more

serious volumes, as they did increasingly over the course of the war, it was not to the classics

that they turned. Rather, they reached for "more political" books, such as those on current affairs,

or works of modern fiction that dealt with pressing issues; *The Grapes of Wrath, And Quiet*

Flows the Don, and *Love on the Dole* were each listed by Mass Observation as exceptionally

popular, but deemed "works of fiction which really belong to the serious class."[305]

Of course, Britain's working classes were more literarily-involved and -discerning than

the degree to which both Britain's publishers and intelligentsia gave them credit; but if the

nation's literati sought to stress the significance of an achingly stiff, rigid, and highbrow literary

canon, they perhaps missed their mark. A century earlier, Britain's working classes had largely

been the ones to re-popularize Shakespeare, and Jonathan Rose credits them with providing

much of the impetus for the fervent "bardology" of Victorian Britain. Yet, as he also notes, the

modern world challenged the supremacy of the 'classics'— drama especially. Increasingly

accessible and inexpensive editions of popular fiction, together with the entertainment provided

music halls and cinema, melted away any "proletarian following" for Shakespeare and other

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[303] Josiah Wedgewood and Allan Nevins, *Forever Freedom* (London: Pelican, 1940), 19.
[304] "Books All Will Enjoy," *Leven Mail*, 24 January 1940, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[305] "Books and the Public" Report, 1940, SxMOA1/2/20/4/G/1, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 181-183.

canonical writers. Even *Everyman's,* which typically clung stubbornly to those works it viewed as classic and canonical, refused for some time to carry Shakespeare out of market concerns.[306] Britain's autodidact tradition remained strong, but as a means of entertainment, the time of the "People's Bard" had largely come and gone.[307]

In a sense, then, one could view the Shakespearean hagiographies and Miltonian martyrologies of the Second World War as an attempt by Britain's publishers to maintain, or perhaps reassert, the primacy of the nation's great writers. In fact, British publishers and booksellers made little secret of their desire to guide readership in the right directions, and to steer their readers away from any volumes they deemed of inferior substance.

Everyman's made its purpose clear on the frontispiece of every edition, which acknowledged that either the publisher or its books— the wording was notably imprecise— would "go with [and] guide" the reader in life and learning.[308] The attitude of many publishing companies and bookstores in this regard—at least those of the literary old guard which, for the most part, orchestrated the nation's bookish propaganda— becomes even more evident in one of Mass Observation's social surveys. One bookseller, Zwemmer's of London, mockingly decried those booksellers— he curiously termed *them* "reactionary"— who only sought to "give the public what it wants." At Zwemmer's, he declared in words which neatly summarized the attitudes of many of Britain's publishing organs, "we try to give it what we think it really does want, although" he noted, "the demand isn't always expressed."[309]

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[306] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 123.
[307] Ibid*,* 124.
[308] Sir George Young, *The Dramas of Sophocles, Rendered in English Verse Dramatic & Lyric*, edited by Ernest Rhys (London: *Everyman's Library* & J.M. Dent, 1920), frontispiece.
[309] "Newsagents and Bookshops," 1940, SxMOA1/2/20/3/B, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 181-183.

By and large, then, the literary canon for which the nation so readily and passionately stood was rigid, arbitrary, and exclusive. Yet, excluded from canonization into its talented ranks were all of Britain's female writers. Positively no British publishers, nor even the MoI, broached mention of Austin or any Brontë; Shelley appears only occasionally and in passing, though this can perhaps be explained by the awkwardness of mentioning Percy while omitting Mary. Ward, in his *Literary Journey Around Wartime Britain*, at least gave them some meritorious mention. Promptly and rudely, though, he dismissed them all the same: "The caprices of women," he declared, "are stabilities compared to the caprices of high explosive."[310] With one line he was away from Austin and on to Milton.

That British publishers and even the MoI chose to exclude female authors was decidedly curious. Given that the readership of Austin and Brontë seemed hardly to have waned as did that of Shakespeare, Milton, and others, the choice appears even nonsensical. Mass Observation certainly found plenty of Austin fans among its surveys. One respondent, who had recently purchased a copy of *Sense and Sensibility*, even apologized to the interviewer for not having read it sooner: "I know it's a classic," she sheepishly replied.[311] So what, then, explains such an exclusion? The social upheavals of wartime, and especially changing gender dynamics, could pose some answer. As notes the historian Lucy Noakes, the Second World War saw the "widespread movement of women to both the armed forces and what had previously been seen as 'men's work.'" Of course, such disturbances of the established order engendered a great deal of pushback from more social conservative elements in Britain. After all, as she notes, many felt that "the social upheaval of 'total' war should not be too great."[312] Such exclusions, then, could

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[310] Ward, *A Literary Journey*, 9.
[311] "Diary Extracts," 1940, SxMOA1/2/20/5/C, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.
[312] Noakes, *War and the British,* 51.

well have been semi-intentional attempts to push back against the encroachment of women into more prominent positions. Then again, and leftist political leanings aside, British publishers were largely a conservative crowd; embodying to the utmost the MoI's opinion that Britain stood for "*balanced* and *gradual* social improvement (italics mine)," they may have merely been apprehensive to elevate Austin alongside Dickens, or Brontë alongside Blake.[313] And female authors were hardly the only exclusion. Even the works of 'great' men were omitted when they showed questionable moral integrity; D.H. Lawrence and Oscar Wilde could each testify to this fact.

Censorship and Intellectual Blackout

Surprisingly, British book publishers regarded wartime censorship as something of a non-issue. Censorship, in wartime conditions, came in two forms. The first, security censorship, applied only technically and impractically. The MoI controlled the release and transmission of news, which in a sense cut the problem off at its root; the Ministry, however, still prohibited publishers from releasing any information on military matters "likely to prejudice the efficient prosecution of the war."[314] By and large, however, such proscriptions were impractical. While newspapers could publish sensitive information immediately, book publishers could only do so belatedly and clumsily. What is more, at the head of the Standing Interdepartmental Committee on Censorship, which oversaw the entire affair, was Sir Walter Monckton. Viewing his office as only temporary, Monckton viewed censorship poorly and himself as ill-suited to his posting; in fact, he turned in his resignation four times in a single month.[315] Making manuscript submissions

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[313] Aldgate, *Britain Can Take It,* 141.
[314] Holman, *Print for Victory,* 92.
[315] Ibid.

voluntary, Monckton worked closely with publishers to avoid any embarrassments on either side. This he did successfully, to the point that no works were published and then later prohibited.[316] Despite initial concerns, censorship of opinion, too, turned out to be a non-issue. Publishers, faced with paper shortages already, felt reluctant to carry any volumes which could prove especially incendiary or which would offend the sensibilities of the wartime nation (a sense of economic caution which hardly kept them from tightly clinging to a largely underread, more traditional canon). The MoI, in turn, worried that censoring books on the basis of opinion would do more harm than good. In order to do so, they would quite publicly be forced to belie their own statements regarding the literary freedom which the nation championed.[317] As Angus Calder notes, "while pacifists might not express themselves over the radio, or in most of the press," they were generally free to do so in books.[318] Vera Brittain's pacifist and anti-war book *Humiliation with Honour* sold ten thousand copies over a five month span in 1942-1943.[319]

Ultimately— and somewhat ironically— it was none other than the nation's publishers who stood responsible for the majority of censorship. Theirs, however, happened to be on moral rather than political grounds. In truth, British publishers took their duty as "guides" somewhat too seriously. Today, the list which *Everyman's* refused to carry is even laughable: *Madame Bovary, Moll Flanders,* Rosseau's *Confessions* and Bocaccio's *Decameron*, just to name a few.[320] And as Ernest Rhys asserted, "the standards of immorality" were impossible to keep up with.[321] Of course, the government had some role in this affair: D.H. Lawrence certainly found this out when he tried to publish *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the 1920s and 1930s. Not only did

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[316] Ibid, 93.
[317] Ibid, 62.
[318] Calder, *The People's War,* 511.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 134.
[321] Ibid.

his publishers baulk at its sexual explicitness, but the work was even banned for obscenity well

past the Second World War.[322] Moral censorship, then, became just another strand of the

intellectual elitism which guided British publishers. While moral censorship was hardly a new

development— after all, it began well before and ended well after the war years— to some

degree it undermined the wartime rhetoric of literary freedom which they so readily promoted.

Of course, they themselves certainly did not view matters as such: as the *Runcorn Weekly News*

argued, so negative an appellation as "censorship" could hardly be applied to what were really

just the "demands of decency and cleanliness."[323]

Yet how many Britons, as readers rather than citizens, truly cared for Shakespeare and

Milton? Publishers may have championed the values and virtues of 'high' literature, but in

omitting any true reference to the 'low,' they largely remained out of touch. Instead, they treated

any such 'inferior' literature with something resembling disdain. As much as they wished to

avoid it, even "scandalous" books found ample audiences, yet these remained anathema. "Very

badly written [and with] no literary merit," such works aimed— in verbiage perhaps reflective of

how publishers viewed "the masses"— merely "for a simplicity of mass appeal."[324] Mass appeal

was right: nearly a fifth of all working-class individuals Mass Observation counted at bookstores

purchased "titles of a calculatedly pornographic nature."[325] In its "Books and the Public" report,

Mass Observation even included one "amusing incident" observed at a bookshop outside of

Charing Cross station, memorably the site of the NBC's "Books and Freedom" exhibition:

> A young girl comes into a shop to sell an armful of second-hand books. Among
> them is a copy of "No Orchids for Miss Blandish" [a scandalous novel]. She
> smiles rather shamefacedly at the assistant. "It doesn't matter about that one if

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[322] D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, edited by Michael Squires (London: Penguin, 1994), xv.
[323] "Books for Freedom!," *Runcorn Weekly News*, 9 May 1941, *The British Newspaper Archive.*
[324] "Books and the Public" Report, 1940, SxMOA1/2/20/4/G/1, Mass Observation Archive, The Keep at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 51-52.
[325] Ibid.

you don't want it" she sayd nervously (sic). "May be we don't want it" answers the assistant "but if you are not doing anything tomorrow morning, come round here and watch the queue for it … there will be one."[326]

Shakespeare and Milton, one might readily note, drew no such queues.

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[326] Ibid.

Epilogue:
Shakespeare's Legacy

As a point of curiosity, one might consider it something of an irony that Shakespeare was an expert propagandist in his own right. Of course, he wrote at a time when "national identity" existed only in its most protozoan form. Shakespeare wrote less for a "nation" than he did for a dynasty; he was but one cog in the robust machine of Tudor propaganda. His histories gave a poetic preamble to the Tudors, and functioned to cement their claim to the throne.[327] In a sense, then, the propagandists of the MoI and marketeers of Britain's publishing houses followed more in his wake than they may have supposed. Their propaganda campaigns, in their most basic, abbreviated sense, would have been familiar to the Bard.

Over the course of the first years of Britain's Second World War, a small crowd of British writers, propagandists, booksellers, publishers, and newspapermen turned to the written word to define the nation. Like the Bard, they were largely women and men skilled in letters. In a perverse sense, the outbreak of war had largely treated them well; as the historian Angus Calder notes, when came the "call for propagandists and cultural impresarios," Britain's literati soon "realized that no writer of proven merit need starve in a garret."[328] They counted among their ranks authors, newspapermen, poets, playwrights and propagandists. As such, they were marginally more endeared to bookishness than were most. For a reasonably small crowd, they surpassed most in sheer literary output, defining the nation by the virtues of their own profession. For both those writers in the employ of the MoI, and for those who staffed the marketing departments of British publishers and bookstores, the language of national literariness made for good business.

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[327] Charles Ross, *The Wars of the Roses: A Concise History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 9.
[328] Calder, *The People's War*, 513.

As a concept, British bookishness fit neatly into the milieu of Second World Wartime-British identity. The cultural groundwork had been laid in the interwar period, when Britain came to redefine itself in the wake of the devastation of the First World War. For a nation which had increasingly come to view itself as principally domestic, overwhelmingly civilian, and curiously individualized, books operated as profound symbols. With the outbreak of the Second World War, in which Britain struggled against the bombs dropped and blazes wrought by the German Luftwaffe, books similarly encapsulated the national spirit. Unconquerable, stoic, and enduring, books rose from the ashes of the great conflagrations into which they were tossed just as the British nation incessantly rose from the blackened rubble of its bombed-out cities. The social context of the People's War proved no less accommodating to the rhetoric. Mass readership meant that bookishness could be said to stretch across class lines as a universal British value; meanwhile, the proponents of British bookishness hardly hesitated to draw ready equation between the "ordinary man" of the People's War and the "common reader" of the nation's "new reading public."[329] All in all, bookishness squared neatly with the preexisting tenets of wartime identity.

Yet the advocates of British bookishness also did well to carve out their own propagandistic niche. Finding some of their most active and powerful voices within the pages of English literary history, they marshaled the great figures of the nation's literary past as a part of the war effort. Virtual hagiographers of Britain's literary saints, they graced Shakespeare with a seemingly Christ-like second coming and tasked the puritanical Milton with defeating their modern, "demoniac" threat.[330] According to those who dwelt in the halls of the MoI's Senate House, who worked in the office blocks around the publishing centers of Paternoster Row, who

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[329] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life,* 13; Light, *Forever England*, 8.
[330] V.V., *Books and Freedom*.

manned the typewriters on Fleet Street, and who stood on the theater stages of the West End, the wartime nation stood on and fought for the words of England's literary heroes.

None of this is to say that the language of British bookishness was not without its flaws. However much the propagandists and publishers at the heart of the rhetoric may have wished to ignore the fact, it was a largely classed venture. They championed the intellectual curiosity of Britain's ordinary citizen while paternalistically arbitrating his choices and, in some cases, even belittling his literary proclivities. Largely out of touch, the rhetoric lamented the losses of books even while the nation lost mothers and fathers, daughters and sons. Just the same, it argued for rabid literary consumption and— as a corollary— purchasing, even while many Britons found themselves financially incapacitated by the war. And however much the nation may have figuratively championed equality along class lines in the wartime context, such claims never quite extended to gender; reading only the literary propaganda of the MoI or the marketing materials of *Everyman's,* one would be forgiven for thinking that British women had never once picked up the pen. Beyond these issues, even the basic claims of the wartime nation's reverence for books were drawn into question by the demands of paper recycling programs which, over the course of the war, destroyed thirty times as many books as did German bombs. [331]

I would not only be overzealous, but simply incorrect to assert that British bookishness existed as a be-all-end-all of Second World Wartime-British national identity. The mythos which arose from the rhetoric of the MoI, NBC, British publishers, press, and booksellers ultimately drew breath as little more than a minor facet of wartime identity. Indeed, it cannot even be said to have been largely popularized outside of small crowds of literarily active individuals. Broadly limited to the propaganda and marketing campaigns of a specific cadre of Britain's literati,

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[331] Thorsheim, "Salvage and Destruction," 432-433.

whether they worked in the chambers of the Ministry of Information or the office blocks of the nation's publishers, even here it did not always go uncontested. Nevertheless, the mythos of British bookishness received a disproportionate amount of rhetorical lip service. It punched above its weight class, finding fervent supporters among what amounted to, as Angus Calder asserts, "a closely knit literary society [of English] intellectuals."[332] Ultimately, if Second World Wartime-British national identity cannot be said to have *centered* around notions of literariness, then it can at least be said to have been imbued with an unmistakable and unconventional— and I would argue unprecedented— literary ambiance.

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[332] Calder, *The People's War,* 513.

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