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by [Richard Tillinghast](#)

On *Selected Poems* by Louis MacNeice.

Louis MacNeice

Selected Poems, edited by Michael Longley.

Faber & Faber, 240 pages, £12.99

Just as Ernest Dowson, Oscar Wilde, Lionel Johnson, and the young W. B. Yeats were known in their day as “poets of the Nineties,” Louis MacNeice, W. H. Auden, C. Day-Lewis, and Stephen Spender are known as “poets of the Thirties.” What opium, thwarted love, and alcohol were to the Decadents, Marxism, rejection of the old order, and alcohol were to the young poets of the 1930s, arguably the most volatile decade of a volatile century. Auden is the most remembered and revered of this group. Yet MacNeice, who published his own take on some of the same events Auden bore witness to, seems in retrospect saner and more prescient. His centenary last year was celebrated with a certain amount of fanfare in his native Ireland and in his adopted home, England. Faber has recently issued a paperback *Selected Poems*, nicely chosen by the Northern Irish poet Michael Longley.

Auden has been roundly—and justifiably, in my view—criticized for the naïveté of his political views reflected even in a poem as brilliant as “Spain 1937,” with its dramatic contrasts between a moribund past and an imagined future:

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
To-day the expending of powers
On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

To-day the makeshift consolations: the shared cigarette,
The cards in the candlelit barn, and the scraping concert,
The masculine jokes; to-day the
Fumbled and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

George Orwell, in his essay “Inside the Whale,” scathingly called this poem “a sort of thumb-nail sketch of a day in the life of a ‘good party man.’ In the morning a couple of political murders, a ten-minutes’ interlude to stifle ‘bourgeois’ remorse, then a hurried luncheon and a busy afternoon chalking walls and distributing pamphlets... . Mr. Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible if

you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled.”

MacNeice went to Spain, too; he reports on the gathering conflict in “Autumn Journal” (1939) in the detached, cynical manner of someone less eager than Auden to believe in utopias. His view of the old order in Spain is deflationary:

... slovenly soldiers, nuns,
and peeling posters from the last elections
Promising bread or guns
Or an amnesty or another
Order or else the old
Glory veneered and varnished
As if veneer could hold
The rotten guts and crumbled bones together.

But unlike the Auden of “Spain 1937,” he does not fashion for himself the imaginary guise of a soldier in the revolution, but rather presents himself as a tourist, sympathetic but detached:

... next day took the boat
For home, forgetting Spain, not realizing
That Spain would soon denote
Our grief, our aspirations;
Not knowing that our blunt
Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit
Would find its frontier on the Spanish front,
Its body in a rag-tag army.

“Autumn Journal,” MacNeice’s masterpiece of poetry as journalism and personal witness, gives us a valuable record of what it felt like to be living in London, waiting for a war that was either going to happen or not going to happen.

Hitler yells on the wireless,
The night is damp and still
And I hear dull blows on wood outside my window;
They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill
They want the crest of this hill for anti-aircraft,
The guns will take the view
And searchlights probe the heavens for bacilli
With narrow wands of blue.

And how did Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler at Munich strike a contemporary?

The crisis is put off and things look better
And we feel negotiation is not vain—
Save my skin and damn my conscience.
And negotiation wins,
If you can call it winning,
And here we are—just as before—safe in our skins;
Glory to God for Munich.
And stocks go up and wrecks
Are salvaged and politicians’ reputations
Go up like Jack-on-the-Beanstalk; only the Czechs
Go down and without fighting.

For a picture of London in crisis as experienced by those who lived through the buildup to war, the Blitz, the grinding attrition of the struggle and eventual victory over fascism, this poem deserves to be read alongside novels like *The Camomile Lawn* by Mary Wesley and *The Heat of the Day* by Elizabeth Bowen. Bowen's life—incidentally, like MacNeice's—was lived between Ireland and England.

The failure of Ireland, newly liberated from the British Empire, to take sides in what many of us would have regarded as a battle between good and evil, was galling to people like MacNeice and Bowen, with a foot on each of the neighboring islands. Ireland's head of state, the American-born, half-Spanish Éamon de Valera censored the news coming into his country. The conflict that everyone else called a world war was known in the neutral Republic of Ireland as "The Emergency." "Cushenden," also published in 1939, closes with a poignant vignette of a cottage in Northern Ireland dramatizing the contrast between the two islands:

Forgetfulness: brass lamps and copper jugs
And home-made bread and the smell of turf or flax
And the air a glove and the water lathering easy
And convolvulus in the hedge.

Only in the dark green room beside the fire
With the curtains drawn against the winds and waves
There is a little box with a well-bred voice:
What a place to talk of War.

High self-regard would seem to be one thing all countries share. This seems particularly true of nations that have recently gained their independence. Ireland's nationalist myths are among the most vigorous I know of. MacNeice virulently opposed the Irish tendency toward self-congratulation. He had reason to be bitter. His paternal grandfather, who ran the (Anglican) Irish Church Mission School on Omey Island off the coast of County Galway, had a run-in with the local Roman Catholic priest, who was incensed by the school's attempts to proselytize those who went to him for the food that saved many of them from starvation. In the course of the dispute, the elder MacNeice and his family were attacked by a Catholic mob who entered their house, knocked them down, and repeatedly kicked them. Only the intercession of another Catholic priest, this one more friendly, saved them. Soon afterwards they left the island. MacNeice's father became a minister in the Church of Ireland and was later elevated to the rank of bishop.

As Stefan Collini points out while reviewing a new biography of C. Day-Lewis in a recent *London Review of Books*, the MacSpaunday poets had in common an upper-middle-class professional background with a generous sampling of clergy in their family trees. Both of Auden's grandfathers were clergymen, his father a prominent doctor. Day-Lewis's father was also a gentleman of the cloth, while Spender's father was a Liberal journalist and literary man. Quoting Shelley to the effect that "Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present," Collini speculates that their class and family backgrounds might have predisposed them to play the role of political seers vis-à-vis "a large public which expected poets, above all others, to take the pulse of the age."

Since almost all the distinguished British literary generation from the 1920s through the 1940s came from upper-middle-class or aristocratic backgrounds and were products of the same educational system, one might speculate why some of them analyzed the conflicts of the 1930s and 1940s correctly while others got things so wrong. Perhaps it boils down to something as simple as

experience and good judgment. Some became enamored of Communism, some of fascism. Since the Mitford sisters lived the protected lives of girls from the aristocracy and since their father didn't believe his daughters should go to school, it is not really surprising that two of them should so disastrously fall prey to the charms of fascism, Diana marrying the British fascist Oswald Mosley, Unity becoming infatuated with Hitler himself. Their sister Jessica, meanwhile, joined the Communist Party.

In comparison, the travel writer and art historian Robert Byron had seen Soviet Russia firsthand and taken the trouble to acquaint himself with the realities of the Nazi regime (his friendship with the Mitfords gained him a front-row seat at the Nuremburg rallies). Byron was as early and outspoken a foe of appeasement as Churchill himself, who learned from many mistakes through a long and checkered political career. Xenophobes and curmudgeons though they both were, John Betjeman and Evelyn Waugh were thoroughly grounded in a native English empiricism that forms part of the genius of the nation. MacNeice was cut from the same durable cloth. Perhaps this transplanted Ulsterman's firsthand knowledge and distrust of extremism, whether religious or political, gave him the clearest vision of the "poets of the Thirties."

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