The Age of Reform

William Butler Yeats 1865-1939

James Joyce 1882-1941

Virginia Woolf 1882-1941

D. H. Lawrence 1885-1930

Katherine Mansfield 1888-1923
The Modern Period

1914-Present

George V 1910-1936

George VI 1936-1952

World War I 1914-1918

Elizabeth II 1952-Present

Great Depression 1929-1939

World War II 1939-1945

Ireland Act 1949

Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister 1979-1990

Falkland Crisis 1982

Treaty of European Union 1993

Death of Princess Diana 1997

Robert Graves 1895-1985

Louis MacNeice 1907-1963
The Modern Period

1914 to the Present

After a century of peace England in 1914 entered the first of two great wars that would tax her endurance to the limit. Twice she held back the collapse of free Europe until the Allies tipped the scales against Germany. After enormous losses in human and material resources, Britain became a second-class power, militarily and economically. Her empire virtually disappeared. Her economy lay in shambles.

England's recovery was hindered after World War I by the Great Depression and after World War II by socialist economic policy. Top-heavy with bureaucracy and throttled by taxation, graft, and union demands, England staggered for decades on the verge of bankruptcy. Personal necessities now eclipse public concerns in the minds of most citizens, whose time and attention are taken up with the practical challenge of making ends meet. The state church, which lost its influence when it lost its gospel message, is ignored by the people.

Thus the history of Britain is a lesson in the rise and decline of great nations. For nine hundred years unconquered from without, she has sadly crumbled within, a victim of her own spiritual waywardness and neglect. Her abundant cultural monuments, of stone and brick and of pen and parchment, recall past greatness but also rebuke present defeat. Although England is still honored, and rightly, as the mother of great nations and as the seedbed of ideas and movements that have blessed mankind, the words given by Shakespeare to the aged John of Gaunt seem more applicable now: "That England that was wont to conquer others/Hath made a shameful conquest of herself" (Richard II, II.i). The example of Britain that once inspired the world now warns the world.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

England was moving toward drastic social change when Germany's invasion of neutral Belgium drew her into the Great War along with France. Soon the war settled down to a grinding stalemate with terrible losses on both sides. By 1917 British troops manned more than half the trenches of the Western Front stretching across France. By the end of the war (1918) England had suffered two-and-a-half million casualties, including 750,000 dead; had lost more than a third of her merchant fleet; and had become a debtor rather than creditor nation.

By 1929 the nation had regained a measure of prosperity only to be plunged with the rest of the world into the Great Depression (1929-39). By 1932 one of every four British citizens was unemployed, and seven million out of forty-five million subsisted on the dole. Iron and steel production and exports were reduced to half, and shipbuilding stopped entirely. These conditions, like those of wartime, favored governmental intervention in private enterprise, and the 1930s saw increasing bureaucratic control of industry, utilities, transportation, and communication. Three-sevenths of the national budget of 1933-34 was allotted to social services, three-sevenths to payments on the national debt, and only one-seventh to defense. Within a year, however, the terrible cycle would begin again. Peacetime recovery
would be derailed by a new threat of war, and the government once more would have to emphasize national defense.

The years 1936-39 were increasingly disturbing for England. On the domestic front, the British witnessed the first voluntary abdication of a monarch in British history. After the death of George V (1910-36), his socialite son, Edward VIII (1936), renounced the throne in order to marry an American divorcée. The throne passed to his brother, George VI (1936-52). More alarming, however, were the developments on the foreign front. The rise of Hitler threatened not only England's weak economy but also her political future. England tried first to ignore, then to appease, the Nazi aggressors. But she only deceived herself. Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939 shattered England's dream of neutrality and forced her to declare war on Germany. The Nazi drive to annex eastern and northern Europe gave England a short reprieve. Then an overwhelming German air and ground attack on the Low Countries and France in May of 1940 began one of the bleakest periods of British history. It also brought to the fore a leader of great ability, energy, and courage when Winston Churchill, Lord of the Admiralty, was called to replace Neville Chamberlain as prime minister.

With the fall of France Churchill's most pressing problem was the evacuation of 338,000 British troops from the Continent, which was now under German control from Scandinavia to the Pyrenees. For nine days under cover of dense fog, the British brought home their fighting men. Naval vessels, trawlers, pleasure craft, and even small motorboats crossed and recrossed the Channel ferrying troops to safety. This magnificent operation was one of the most thrilling stories in the annals of war.

Day after day British Hurricane and Spitfire fighter planes rose from their scattered airfields to challenge the waves of enemy aircraft that darkened the sky, as many as 1,800 at a time. They destroyed the attacking planes two to one, foiling Hitler's plan to gain air superiority over the Channel for an invasion of England.

"Never in the field of human conflict," remarked Churchill, "was so much owed by so many to so few."

In August of 1940, bottled up on their island, the defiant British sent bombing raids over Berlin. Hitler, infuriated, ordered the saturation bombing of London and other civilian targets in order to break the will of the people. For two terrible years—and, to a lesser extent, for three more—air-raid warnings followed by thundering fiery devastation broke the daily and nightly routine of the plucky British, a routine that continued with amazing efficiency in spite of all. Both military and civilian personnel were mobilized to a degree scarcely imaginable, with almost every capable adult, regardless
of age or sex, having a responsible job to perform. In the heartening speeches of the eloquent Churchill, as John F. Kennedy observed, even the English language was mobilized and sent into battle.

By 1945 after the surrender of Germany in May and of Japan in September, British casualties totaled almost a million, of which more than a third were dead or missing and the rest disabled. Though the total loss of life was less than in World War I, the destruction came closer home—indeed to the very doorsteps—with sixty thousand civilians having been killed and central London heavily damaged by the bombing. The next six years of transition from a wartime to a peacetime economy would require further sacrifice of the British, a sacrifice they would endure with their usual fortitude.

These postwar years also brought lasting internal changes. A populace, sick of war and yearning for security, immediately voted into power an aggressive Labour administration under the prime ministry of Clement Attlee (1946-51). The Labourites lost no time achieving their socialistic goals. Major industry, transportation, communications, mining, and the Bank of England were nationalized—a simple continuation of wartime controls. The National Insurance and Health Service Acts of 1946, extensions of previous legislation, completed England’s transformation into a welfare state. Deficit spending and severe taxation financed universal and compulsory cradle-to-grave health care. The resulting loss of initiative and productivity made it difficult for Britain to compete with capitalistic nations in the world market.

The postwar years saw the passing not only of capitalism but also of the empire. By the time of Churchill’s death, Britain had granted independence to India, Burma, and Pakistan (1947-50) and to African territories (1957-65). Geographical reduction affected even the British Isles. The Ireland Act of 1949 declared England’s neighbor island—with the exception of the six northern counties of Ulster—no longer a part of Great Britain, while guaranteeing Ulster’s right to remain with the mother country. By this act Parliament hoped to remedy an old and festering problem. Irish nationalist revolutionaries had become sufficiently troublesome in 1920 for Britain to grant home rule to southern Ireland, followed by dominion status in 1921. But even merely formal connections were objectionable to the militants, who insisted on full severance of ties with England and on unification of the entire island under Dublin rule. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), a terrorist organization motivated increasingly by Marxist rather than religious or patriotic ambitions, has kept pressure on Britain to disregard its commitment to the Protestant north. The irresolution and duplicity of British conduct toward the loyal counties of Ulster are striking evidences of the moral weakness of the nation, whose policy, both foreign and domestic, owes more to expediency than to ethical principle.

RELIGION

The suffering of Great Britain during two world wars, a depression, and the postwar economic austerity has not brought her back to God. The Anglican church, dead in ritualism and rationalism, serves mainly a ceremonial function. Most Nonconformist or ‘‘Free’’ churches have gone over to liberalism and, with the Anglican church,
support the apostate ecumenical movement to unite Christendom. Religious indifference prevails among the laity, for whom the churches are only relics of antiquated belief. The period has produced few hymns worth notice and few commanding evangelical preachers since John Henry Jowett (1864-1923) and G. Campbell Morgan (1863-1945), successive congregationalist pastors of the Westminster Chapel in London. The last real sign of vigor in English Protestantism was from among the laity rather than the clergy: the rejection of a revised Book of Common Prayer by the House of Commons in 1927 and 1928. The revision—actually a new liberalized version—did not clear Parliament until 1965. England, the birthplace of modern missions, is now herself a mission field, one of the most difficult in the world.

CULTURE

The two world wars shattered Victorian faith in progress and left a mood of pessimistic resignation. These events and their aftermath encouraged the attitude known as pluralism, which favors a multiplicity of viewpoints and assumes that no single one of them may be considered universally valid. It is natural, in the absence of belief in permanent truths and principles, for individuals to construct their own viewpoints and then, recognizing the fallibility of what they have constructed, to question the value of other viewpoints along with their own.

This skepticism produces disunity in a culture, a sense of separateness among individuals, which in turn gives rise to a counteremphasis on togetherness—political, social, and religious. It is difficult therefore to identify any single viewpoint as typical of the modern period other than that there is no reliable viewpoint and that all opinions must be respected in the democracy of thought. In philosophy and the arts, romantic optimism has given way to romantic pessimism, and the prevailing message is one of futility and self-contempt. "It is equally dangerous to man," said the French philosopher Pascal (1623-62), "to know God without knowing his own wretchedness and to know his own wretchedness without knowing God."

Language Democratic pluralism with regard to language appears in a growing scorn for the Received Standard in pronunciation and for prescriptivism in grammar. Traditionalists, on the other hand, feel that the relaxation of such standards indicates cultural decadence. They decry the relativism of progressivists, who cite the work of continental scholars and American grammarians as proof of the absurdity of standards.

Neither view is correct. For an accurate account of the language—its history, structure, and norms of usage (spoken and written, popular and educated)—we must look to the historical and scientific linguists. For a philosophy of usage we must consult ourselves, since science cannot determine values. Empirical investigation can tell us what the educated standard is and where it differs from the popular practice. It cannot tell us which of the two we should prefer and why. Christian language usage obviously must be based on reliable linguistic data if it is to be accurate but also on Biblical principles if it is to achieve its aim of glorifying God in the world. It seems only obvious that ambassadors of Christ must speak and write according to the educated standard of those to whom they are sent in order to create no unnecessary resistance to their message (I Corinthians 10:32-33).
The British have not entirely abandoned conservatism in vocabulary. Pockets of resistance still exist, for example, to the blitz of Americanisms descending on the island from the west. Purists decry such New World expressions as cafeteria, highbrow, filling station, fan (for enthusiast), radio (for wireless), and, most disgusting of all, O.K. Though the battle was lost in the nineteenth century against backwoods, blizzard, prairie, cloudburst, belittle, and many other American words, it continues with some success against gasoline (for petrol), truck (for lorry), hood (for bonnet [of an automobile]), shoes (for boots), and suspenders (for braces). It is in keeping perhaps with the ascendency of modern America over Great Britain that linguistic influence, like the flow of trade, now runs more strongly from west to east across the Atlantic than from east to west.

**Learning and thought** The main currents of modern thought, with one exception, flow from nineteenth-century England. The Victorian conflict between traditionalism, romantic transcendentalism, and rationalism has played out with the failure of the first two to supply new answers. Rationalism still maintains a hold on the modern mind in the general prestige of science. Darwin's influence continues in the emphasis upon adaptation and development (though gradual evolution is now being questioned within the scientific community itself). The rationalistic economic theory of Karl Marx became popular in England during the 1930s, inspiring many university students to write, speak, and act passionately in its defense. Though the atrocities of Stalin and his successors disillusioned most Marxist enthusiasts of the Depression era, Marxist theory reinforced socialistic belief in governmental economic controls.

Romantic pessimism extends into the realms of philosophy, religion, and ethics in **existentialism**, the intellectual position most characteristic of the modern period. Agnostic, anti-intellectual, skeptical of science as well as of all dogmatic systems, existentialism teaches that man can be certain only of his own existence and can be sure of that only by asserting his will in making choices. Subjectivity in religion and art, moral relativism, and rebellion against social customs and codes of behavior are the fruit of this pernicious view. At its pessimistic extreme, existentialism becomes **nihilism**, a morose denial of all meaning and values, including those generated by the self.

These results were anticipated and partly fostered by the work of the Austrian physician Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Freud, the founder of modern psychology, is the third in the triumvirate of thinkers responsible for the main currents of modern thought. Stressing the priority of the unconscious over the conscious mind, the unhappiness caused by moral restraints, and the need to express pent-up emotional urges, Freud used rational analysis to reinforce romantic values. His writings, beginning in the Victorian period, became well known between the world wars. It is easy to understand the hold of Darwinism, Marxism, and Freudianism on the imagination of a rebellious age, for all deny man's duty to God. Existentialism, in encouraging antisocial behavior, undermines even man's responsibility to man.

**Literature** Pluralism has influenced modern literature toward freedom of form and indeterminacy of meaning. The typical modern poem relies on rhythm rather than on meter and rhyme and communicates its meaning indirectly rather than directly, of-
ten with deliberate ambiguity. The typical modern work of fiction reduces plot to happen-
stance and disrupts normal time sequence, imitating the irrationality of the uncon-
scious mind. Artistic richness is equated with complexity; and the depth of thought is
associated with obscurity. All too often, surface difficulty compensates for poverty of
thought and insecurity of conviction. The sublimely simple but fathomless truths of
Biblical revelation have been displaced by vanities of the finite mind.

There is also a pretense of impersonal detachment. The typical modern writer
sees himself as not acting upon his environment or his literary materials but being
acted upon: as not dominating the experience he presents but being dominated by
it. The world speaks through him, rather than he through the world—that is, those
elements of the world that appear in his writing. Plain didacticism, he insists, is
fatal to art. The business of poetry, declared W. H. Auden (1907-73), is not "telling
people what to do."

This downgrading of clarity in favor of indirectness and subjectivity is obviously
romanticism, fortified by Freud and darkened by twentieth-century disillusionment.
The romantic poet, in his role as inspired prophet, becomes in a pessimistic age an
archcynic. The Byronic hero, shorn of his pride, becomes an antihero, a despairing
victim of forces beyond his control.

Modern antididacticism is also a romantic holdover. It is, of course, only a pose.
The modern writer is as much a preacher as was his Victorian predecessor. His me-
ssage, usually, is that there is no message—that all religion is a fraud and all hope, de-
lusion. Influenced by the romantic philosophy of existentialism, he either calls for or
celebrates freedom or, more typically, bewails the rebel’s loss of security and hope.

The bitter pessimism of much modern literature distances it from the Christian,
just as its obscurity alienates the ordinary reader. Few knowledgeable readers would
maintain that theme and meter are necessary to poetry (cf. the Psalms) or that an
explicit moral is essential to narrative (cf. the book of Ruth). The Christian objection
to modern literary style and form therefore is not entirely to the techniques them-
selves but rather to the cynical mindset responsible for them.

The preceding generalizations are not universally applicable to modern writers
and their works. Much that is worthy exists for our enjoyment and instruction. But
we must read even the best of this literature with special critical alertness and judge
rigorously by Biblical standards. We are summoned to this duty by no less an
authority than the poet-essayist T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), a leading influence on
modern literature but also one of its severest critics.

What I believe to be incumbent upon all Christians is the duty of maintaining
consciously certain standards and criteria of criticism over and above those
applied by the rest of the world; and that by these criteria and standards
everything that we read must be tested. We must remember that the greater
part of our current reading matter is written for us by people who have no
real belief in a supernatural order, though some of it may be written by people
with individual notions of a supernatural order which are not ours. And the
greater part of our reading matter is coming to be written by people who not
only have no such belief, but are even ignorant of the fact that there are still people in the world so "backward" or so "eccentric" as to continue to believe. . . . We shall certainly continue to read the best of its kind, of what our time provides; but we must tirelessly criticize it according to our own principles, and not merely according to the principles admitted by the writers and by the critics who discuss it in the public press.

(excerpt from "Religion and Literature," in Essays Ancient and Modern [London: Faber, 1936])