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The Thirties Poets at Oxford

A. T. Tolley

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

THE THIRTIES POETS AT OXFORD A. T. TOLLEY You know the terror that for poets lurks Beyond the ferry when to Minos brought. Poets must utter their Collected Works, Including Juvenilia. W. H. Auden: "Letter to Lord Byron" Twenty-five years ago, the names of Cecil Day Lewis, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender seemed to go together quite naturally. They were the leading poets of their generation—the poets of social awareness, and (except perhaps for MacNeice) the poets of the Left. Nowadays this connection is disputed and disdained. In a tribute to Louis MacNeice, Auden wrote: "From a literary point of view, the contemporary journalistic linkage of the names of Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice, Spender, is, and always was, absurd." And Day Lewis, in his autobiography, was nearly as emphatic: "... in the sense of a concerted effort by a group of poets to impress themselves upon the public, to write differently from their predecessors or about different subjects, it was not a movement at all. Though Auden, Spender, MacNeice and I have all known each other personally since the mid-Thirties, each of us had not even met all three others till after the publication of *New Signatures* in 1932, while it was only in 1947 that Auden, Spender and I found ourselves for the first time in one room. We did not know we were a movement until the critics told us we were." One of

these critics, one might remark, was the author of *A Hope for Poetry*. Day Lewis. In his foreword of February, 1934, he said: "The object of this book is to make the reader look-or look again-in a certain direction. It is based on the belief that some of the post-war writers, notably W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender, are true poets having more in common than mere contemporaneity. . . ." The book goes on to present the Left-wing movement as the "hope for poetry." It is not my aim to discuss directly to what extent these poets were a "group" in the thirties, but rather to "look again-in a certain direction." Volume XXXVII, Number 4, July, 1968 THE THIRTIES POETS AT OXFORD 339 These poets undoubtedly were a group in the purely chronological sense that their years at Oxford overlapped. Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice all knew Auden there, and have written about the great impression he made upon them. Spender and MacNeice were also friends at Oxford. Perhaps an examination of their work and relationships as undergraduates can throw some light on their later connections. There is an unusual amount of evidence: six volumes of poetry and three autobiographies, to mention only the principal pieces. Between the wars, Blackwell's in Oxford published annually a series of volumes called *Oxford Poetry*, devoted to undergraduate poetry and edited by undergraduates. A very good idea of the early development of these poets and of the literary atmosphere in which it took place can be got by reading through the volumes of *Oxford Poetry* from 1925 to 1930. One of the spectacles of Oxford in 1923, when Day Lewis first arrived there, was that of "Harold Acton tittopping along the High, his Oxford bags banging, his big head rolling and nodding like a toy mandarin's as he chatted vivaciously with the group that trailed beside him-a group which often included the undistinguished-looking figure of Evelyn Waugh. . . ." Acton's poems, accomplished, bizarre, dominant Oxford Poetry for 1925-the volume in which Day Lewis appeared for the first time. The great question of the day-as aired in the prefaces of those years-was whether the modern or the traditional in poetry was most representative of Oxford. Day Lewis's two contributions in 1925, while purged of "thou's" and of poetic inversions, do not stand out as strikingly modern. (This was to be true of most of his contributions in later years, too.) However, his first poem does open in a way that might be recognized as his by someone who had read his *Transitional Poem* (1929) or *From Feathers to Iron* (1931): Now heart, be strong. Strip off, if there is...

THE THIRTIES POETS AT OXFORD

A. T. TOLLEY

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Understanding visitor attitudes towards seafood and tourism in the Nelson/Marlborough and Golden Bay Region in New Zealand to foster innovative sustainable forms, the bill of

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