CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The present study has sought to discuss the social commitment of the British poets of nineteen thirties mainly through an attempt to identify the perspective they held on the outstanding social issues of their times. The governing assumption behind this study is that such an exercise is necessary for understanding the real significance of the radical postures adopted by these poets in the context of the abrasive challenges of the British society of the period. The main endeavour here was to offer a detailed analysis of selected poems of four major representative poets of the thirties—W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice—and evaluate the artistic worth of their work in the light of the social perspective reflected in those poems. The specific character of the social awareness underlining their sincere involvement in the social causes and the peculiar nature of their response to the challenges of the prevailing situation are brought out in this way.

The fact that the poetry of the thirties marked a point of departure from that of the preceding decade was, of course, the starting point of the present study. The poets of the thirties rejected the philosophic approach of the poets of nineteen twenties
under which tradition, religion and mythical beliefs acquired a special significance. The approach adopted by the poets of the thirties was also distinguished from that of the Leavisites who advocated moral reform of the individual as a proper answer to the existing social dilemmas. The acute social sensitivity of the poets of the thirties and the conviction and enthusiasm this generated in them are highlighted in this work as important contributory factors towards the artistic worth of their literary creations. These poets did not merely acknowledge the existence of the crisis in the society but also tried to examine its nature and go into its historical roots through the medium of their poetry. They took upon themselves the important task of investigating into the concrete social causes that led to the crisis and did not rest satisfied with abstract philosophical generalisations. The sharp focus on concrete social reality necessitated a manner of expression that was forthright and straight and maintained a close connection with the themes taken up for treatment. These poets chose direct and simple language intelligible to the common man and discarded the obscure idiom and esoteric symbolism which had characterised the poetry of the previous decade. Their consistent use of imagery taken from the contemporary urban scene has been duly recognised in the present study. But the main emphasis here has been on analysis of thematic preoccupations of the poets and on determination of their social perspective. References to stylistic patterns and poetic
techniques of individual poets have, of course, been made wherever they are helpful in clarifying the position taken by these writers on different social issues.

The factors which exerted influence on the literary sensibilities of these poets have been broadly traced and specified in the thesis, particular emphasis having been given to the economic crisis in the society which created large scale unemployment and misery not only among workers in factories but also middle-class households. These poets who belonged to the middle class felt emotionally disenchanted with the values of their own class under the stress of this economic crisis. They experienced a sense of guilt in belonging to a privileged section which enjoyed a modicum of facilities when the broad masses were deprived of them. Their radicalism could not be contained within the limits set by passive liberal traditions, which they felt had lost much of their humanistic substance. Auden and Spender both suffered from this class-guilt. Spender looked upon his privileged position with a self-accusing conscience and this prompted him to revolt against his own class and take a radical position on social issues. Auden's response was less turbulent but behind his satire too we can witness a similar dissatisfaction with the values and attitudes of the middle classes which was derived primarily from an acute sense of guilt and complicity. However, in the case of Auden we find, on the surface, an air of
objective concern with external factors and psychological factors like class-guilt are pushed back to the unconscious level and are usually hidden from our sight.

Marxism and Freudianism both contributed significantly to the building up of the social perspective of these poets in different ways. They took recourse to Marxism and Freudianism to execute the fulfilment of their social vision. This study shows that it became possible for these poets to appropriate these philosophies with apparently contradictory social orientations because their own outlook on life was that of petty bourgeois radicalism which can accommodate both Marxism and Freudianism by modifying them and making them suitable for their own ends.

It was a limitation of earlier criticism on these poets that the exact character of the social perspective of these poets was not properly defined. In the present study it has been shown that all the four poets under discussion looked upon the world around them from a petty-bourgeois perspective which was radical without being revolutionary. In their analysis of the poetry of thirties the critics had not given due weight to this distinction and often felt puzzled by seemingly inconsistent positions these poets took despite their militant radicalism. In this context, the parameters of the social perspective of the four poets under discussion have been defined with a greater degree of precision.
It is true that every socially committed artist seeks to expose the dichotomies of social reality and raises social issues in his poetry not merely to put them before us as they are but because he wants to bring about a qualitative change in the social set-up. However, the understanding of the issues and the resolutions offered by him depend in large part on the real character of his overall perspective. The social perspective of the poets has been clearly identified in the present study as that of radicalised middle class liberal's. This implies that these poets wanted to bring about great reforms in the society without transforming its basic framework. They confronted the crisis, explored its multidimensional facets and opted for collective struggle to resolve it, quite unlike their predecessors whose art never went beyond an anguished awareness of living through a crisis ridden situation which can never be changed. The poets of the thirties were genuinely involved in the cause of bringing about radical changes in the existing system but their basic class affiliations often obstructed their radical fervour and created certain contradictions in the position they took on various issues. They did come forward to meet the contemporary challenges with profound concern and wanted to remove poverty and deprivations. They wanted the capitalist system to be completely shorn of its defects without realising that this would remain merely a subjective wish. Our analysis of their poetry shows that they made very sincere efforts to rise above
their class interests and take an objective view of the social reality around them. Our critique has proved the validity of the socially-radical character of their poetry even when it has highlighted some of its limitations. It has shown that the poets of the thirties were genuine reformers with definite ideas about society and they were fired by a strong zeal for building up a well-ordered society marked by justice and equity.

In addition to providing a sharper focus on the shared social awareness and perspective of the four poets, the present study has also underlined significant differences which characterised their approach to social reality. They were similar in the choice of themes and manner of expression, but their response to the problems which engaged their interests differed in some important ways. Their involvement in politics being the outcome of emotional as well as objective factors acquired an individual colouring from their subjectivity which cannot be ignored. Auden's involvement was of an intellectual kind and he had a cooler temperament. Spender, on the other hand, had a more excitable temperament and his sensibility had a stronger romantic streak. C.Day Lewis was more optimistic and confident than Stephen Spender or Auden - both of whom had a tendency to fall into pessimism. Lewis's sanguine faith in future differed from Spender's sporadic outbursts of hope and was marked by a greater stability. MacNeice was more individualistic as far as the
character of his perspective and sensibility was concerned and hence, he was quite different from the rest of the prominent radical-liberals of the thirties in putting greater emphasis on personal relationship than on collective solutions.

Our study has shown that the reactions of these poets to the communist party and its ideology were also not identical. Spender and C. Day Lewis were members of the party. Auden and MacNeice did not seek party membership though both of them felt sympathy for the working class. Even the impact of the final disillusionment was not alike on all these poets. Auden's petty-bourgeois radicalism received a shock on finding the churches closed in Spain during the Spanish Civil war. He felt so disillusioned that he grew inclined towards religion in the later phase of his poetry. The impact of dirty politics during the Spanish Civil war also disturbed Spender very much and he was also pushed by this disillusionment towards some kind of mysticism. C. Day Lewis sought retreat into traditional poetic heritage as he was a man of deeper national moorings. MacNeice had never been over-enthusiastic about politics. His social attitudes remained more consistent because he did not experience the kind of shock which both Auden and Spender had to go through.

In the evaluation of the social perspective of these poets, the study has also taken cognizance of the shifts of emphasis in
attitudes and responses which manifested themselves in the poetry of these writers. It has been shown that there are varying degrees of radicalism and militancy in their poetry at different stages of their poetic career but one fact which stands out clearly in their case is that even in their most radical and militant phase, they could not go beyond the limits of a radical-liberal stance indicating that their social vision was consistent and integrated inspite of the shifts of emphasis in the radical posture adopted by them. The study also brings out the main points made by the poets in their analysis of the social evils that afflicted the contemporary society. They come back again and again in the poems to the problems of unemployment, economic injustice, inequality, exploitation and social segregation etc. They also take up issues of technology, war and love and the treatment they give to these themes reveals the peculiar character of their radical-liberal perspective. Their attitude to middle class to which they themselves belonged and their attack on its pretensions and hypocritical behaviour occupies a major place in our critical analysis of their social perspective.

We have found that in the treatment of the issues taken up by these poets, they felt greatly disturbed by the exploitation of the unprivileged sections under the capitalist system and they rightly put the blame on the functioning of the system rather than on the failings of individuals. These poets felt indignant
at the socio-economic injustices and deprivations caused by the excesses of the system. The study has gone into the viability of the solutions offered by each one of these poets. Auden displayed acute scientific understanding in registering the social tensions and disruptions. He also strongly condemned fascism and gave a call for active social action in his poetry of the early thirties, but towards the end of the decade he started vacillating and he put the blame on individual wish and self-regarding love. Spender turns out to be more impressionistic than Auden in his treatment of social reality. His approach is of a romantically oriented liberal and his solutions are generally idealistic. C. Day Lewis recognises the outer chaos but he breezely asserts his optimism which remains unruffled by this chaos. His vision of bright possibilities sometimes looks rather complacent in the context of the chaos and misery his poetry brings before us. MacNeice is individualistic in his appreciation of social reality and his treatment of the major problems of the times seems to be more perfunctory and piecemeal than that of the other three poets.

As far as their attitude to the middle class is concerned it was also marked by significant divergences. Auden exposes the distortions of the middle class and warns it against the ultimate collapse. Stephen Spender is also equally severe in his critique of the middle class and holds them squarely responsible for the disease, filth, squalor and helplessness of the unprivileged. C.
Day Lewis too exposes the drawbacks and inconsistencies of this class but does not show the ardour of Stephen Spender. Like C. Day Lewis MacNeice's attitude also remains that of mild condemnation and his warning to the middle class against the impending doom is always in an idiom which is free from rancour or bitterness. The discussion of social perspective of these poets obviously entailed an analysis of their attitude to the material progress through science and technology. Spender who is more actively interested in questions relating to technology seems to adopt an ambivalent attitude towards it. In his poems he appreciates the advancement of technology but he seems to be disturbed by the onslaught of technology on pastoral beauty. C. Day Lewis accepts technology as an inevitable fact of sociological change but objects to its misapplication by the system which exploits all technological innovations to strengthen vested interests. His approach on this issue is quite rational. He takes into consideration the adverse impact of technology on the society while recognising the validity of its extended use for betterment of society. Auden's attitude to technology is more positive but his emphasis falls mainly on the consumer-oriented culture which usually goes with technology. His poem "Get There If You Can" demonstrates the impact of industrial collapse on the major consumer society rather than its impact on the life of the members of the working class who were rendered jobless in large numbers as a consequence of the economic crash. MacNeice
appears to be most conservative in his attitude to science and technology. He highlights the evil impact of science and technology by pointing out the problems of the suburban masses. He is more concerned about aesthetic consequences of the extensive use of technology than the other progressive poets of his generation.

This study has also dealt with the attitude adopted by the poets towards the general phenomenon of war and the Spanish civil war in particular. These poets wrote a number of war poems which show that they recognised war as a manifestation of the contradictions and tensions generated by the functioning of a social system based on exploitation and profit-making. On the question of war, Auden adopts a most consistently partisan attitude. He takes sides with the republican forces and condemns fascist tendencies. Spender's attitude to war is that of liberal pacifist. He arouses feelings of pity for the war victims in general. Spender is afraid of struggle and hence strongly pleads for stopping war to save humanity as against Auden, who, on the contrary, exhorts for direct action in his poems like "Spain" and "It's Farewell To The Drawing-room's Civilized cry". C.Day Lewis's approach to war like spender's is that of a pacifist. Its focus, however, is largely on the economic miseries brought out by the crash after the first world war and the consequent social and economic inequalities. He suggests humanistic solutions like love to overcome this evil. MacNeice looked at Spanish
Civil war as something which exposed the hollowness of the ruling bourgeoisie rather than a fight between two competing ideologies. He finds in war a sense of ruin and a sign of degradation of values. Together the war poems of these poets provide an effective criticism of ravages caused by war and the misery it inflicts on humanity whenever it breaks out on a big scale.

The study also discusses the treatment of love by the poets of the thirties. All these poets believe in the constructive role of love for the establishment of a better social order. The emphasis Auden gives to love enables him to understand social realities. In his later poems he tends to believe that change of heart will also eventually effect a social change. Stephen Spender's attitude to love is mystical. He believes that man is basically good and love with the magical impact will change human nature and hence would absolve society of all its evils. He differed from the Romantics who tended to exalt love to a point of transcendence from social existence and spiritualised it so much that the social reality seemed to interfere with the purity of its functioning. Spender adopted a secular attitude towards love even when he imbued it with great significance. C.Day Lewis is realistic in his approach to love. He has no inhibitions about love as a physical enjoyment. His approach is rational, but this does not mean that he reduces the importance of emotions in life. His private love comforts him and provides him with a temporary
relief. For him one moment of fruitful love is satisfying in itself. Like Spender, he does not attach any otherworldly significance to love. In the sphere of love, MacNeice, unlike Auden and very much like Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis, believes in sensuous and passionate love but on the whole like other radical-liberals he underlines the instrumental role of love in the establishment of a better social order based on healthy human relationships.

As far as the attitude of these poets on the issues of life and death is concerned, C. Day Lewis is more practical and enthusiastic than Spender and Auden. He feels that man can progress towards regeneration by helping the forces of life to grow. He does not mystify life and death like his predecessors but looks at them from materialistic point of view. Unlike Auden who sometimes becomes defeatist and cynical, he believes in new possibilities for the replenishment of old and worn out ways. As a poet MacNeice remained concerned with the shape and substance of what was actually happening around him. His approach was always more pragmatic than that of the other radical-liberals. That is why he did not have to change his former stance in future after the thirties.

While making an overall assessment of the work of the poets of the thirties, this study has highlighted the strength
and weaknesses of their poetry on the basis of the kind of social perspective they held. The main conclusion is that the strength of their poetry derives largely from their subjectively honest commitment to various social issues taken up in their poetry and the boldness they displayed in tackling major social evils. These poets identified themselves with the progressive forces of life and hence remained confident about the future of humanity. The later dramatic somersaults in the attitudes of some of these poets should not detract our attention from their enthusiastic zeal for reform which made a positive impact on the minds of the people in their times. We must appreciate their farsightedness in making people reconsider the mechanism of a socio-economic order which promoted unemployment, poverty, exploitation, injustice and wars. All of them project a similar social ideal but their attitudes have some marked differences. Auden's is scientific and rational, C. Day Lewis moves with cool deliberation of reason. He may not be in a position to give action a sense of urgency and overall public tone. He, however, underlines a need for developing a rational outlook for proper personal development to which he attaches as much importance as to the collective programmes of action in public causes. Spender delves deep into the region of the soul and discovers many radiant beauties there. MacNeice is individualistic in his approach and although he is rational and optimistic, he does not display any extraordinary fervour for political activism.
Our thesis establishes that these poets underline the importance of consistent struggle to rebuild the society on fresh lines. C. Day Lewis emphasises the role of individual as well as collective effort and courage to maintain optimism and thus puts forward the concept of struggle and condemns escapist attitudes. Auden too lays stress on struggle but in "Spain" his stress on struggle is in the form of compensation for past follies. His tone seems urgent but C. Day Lewis is more consistently optimistic. Spender unveils immediate issues in a more poignant manner but his expression sounds impressionistic rather than realistic - emotional rather than rational. MacNeice, in his own distinct way shares C. Day Lewis's commitment which consisted in optimistic and confident tone rather than in any kind of emotional appeals for action.

It may be added that the yawning gaps between what these poets set out to achieve and ultimately ended in achieving can be explained only by a proper understanding of the limitation of their perspective. Despite various flaws, the nature of reformatory zeal displayed by these poets cannot be undervalued.

The efforts of the poets of the thirties directed towards bringing about radical changes in the existing society deserve appreciation even when we recognise that they remained within the framework of a reformist outlook. A proper appreciation of
the poetry of the poets of the thirties this thesis has shown, demands an effort on our part to characterize as precisely as possible, the perspective on society which impelled their creative endeavours. A detailed analysis of the attitudes adopted by these poets towards various social problems and the solutions they offered lead us to the conclusion that this perspective was of radical-liberal reformers who want to remove the ills of a capitalist system without overturning the system itself.