CHAPTER I

The Social Background of the Nineteen Thirties

The thirties of this century in Europe was, generally speaking, a dark decade of global political disasters, economic recession, wide-spread unemployment, ill-conducted democracies, fascism, impending war, and ruthless social persecution. The period has been rightly described by W.H.Auden, one of the representative English poets of the time, as a period of "crisis and dismay" (Poem XXIV, Poems 1931-1936). In Great Britain, the impact of the crisis reached alarming proportions, so much so that by the middle of the decade, economic slump, low wages, mass unemployment, poverty, malnutrition, and slum-squalor became starkly real features, leading to untold human misery and social hardship. "At every phase of the 1930s", Valentine Cunningham observes, "there was good reason for grimly sensing and declaring a crisis, things going wrong, something up." He has referred to a screeching headline of the Daily Worker (October 20, 1936) which proclaimed: "The Crisis Hour is Here." Michael Roberts has talked of "a crisis of a general kind" affecting many poets: "a fractured personality or a decaying society", "academic philosophy", and "the deficiencies of language" - a description well applicable to the poets of the thirties. Auden's above-mentioned poem, titled 'August for the People and their Favourite Islands', says it all:

... now the moulding images of growth
That made our interest and us, are gone.
Louder to-day the wireless roars
Its warnings and its lies, and it's impossible
Among the well-shaped cosily to flit,
Or longer to desire about our lives
...
we look again:
See Scandal praying with her sharp knees up,
And Virtue stood at Weeping Cross,
The green thumb to the ledger knuckled down,
And Courage to his leaking ship appointed,
Slim Truth dismissed without a character,
And gaga Falsehood highly recommended.

Greed showing shamelessly her naked money,
And all Love's wondering eloquence debased
To a collector's slang, Smartness in furs,
And Beauty scratching miserably for food,
Honour self-sacrificed for Calculation,
And Reason stoned by Mediocrity,
Freedom by Power shockingly maltreated,
And Justice exiled till Saint Geoffrey's Day.

The period was one of deep analysis by the poets of the socio-political evils; a pressing period of public alarm, social surveys, and a leaning to left-wing politics.

The roots of the social discontent prevalent in the thirties obviously lay in the very wake of the Twentieth Century, which heralded great social changes. The new rationalism of Victorian times became bolder in the years that followed, resulting in a total disintegration of the old structure of English society. The rise of the scientific spirit led to a gradual weakening of religious faith and conventional social belief and tradition. The outlook of the young was marked by scepticism, and they were not prepared to accept the authoritarian pattern in private and social life. The relation between the generations became considerably strained, thus resulting in the 'generation gap'. The material conditions of life also underwent significant changes with the new technology bringing in motion
pictures, wireless broadcasting, and quicker transport. Changes were further seen in the realms of science and learning, and in the commonly held concept of human behaviour. Psychology played a major role in rejecting reason as a guide to conduct. Indeed, it was the rapidly developing study of psychology, particularly in the work of Sigmund Freud, that heightened the atmosphere of perplexity. Commenting on this aspect of the situation, Boris Ford observed:

Man's private behaviour has been profoundly affected, both by the atmosphere of moral perplexity within which he lives and by the public realm which characterizes our age.

The years of the Great War (1914-1918) had already accelerated the tensions and frustrations of the age. It unleashed in its wake a turbulent wave of political and social disorder. As explained by H.E. Priestly and J.J. Betts,

The period after the First World War was like the end of a storm, with the ship of state badly buffeted striving to ride the seas which were still perilous. In the first ten years, the worst dangers were negotiated, and then when men could reasonably hope for a period of calm security there followed ten years of anxiety and preparations against the menacing clouds once more growing on the horizon.

A sense of uncertainty about the days ahead unnerved everybody. Soldiers returning home from the war were once more forced into despair and frustration, as the compromises made by peacetime society, with all the old inequalities and injustices, left them in a state of total defeat. Jenni Calder has thus commented on their predicament:

They had been rendered unfit for a normal existence of grim inactivity. War had brought full employment and higher wages. Peace brought unemployment and wage reductions.
Worse, it brought cynicism and a lack of direction.

Many members of the old ruling class emerged from the war as financially insolvent, and their sad state warranted serious consideration of business of sorts. Ex-officers had to settle for jobs as sales representatives, others hawked goods from place to place. By and large, there was a general sense of loss, frustration, and despair.

On the surface, things were light and frothy with the gay parties, night clubs, speeding sports cars, and jazz music of the 'roaring twenties'. Essentially, however, these were forms of revolt against all manifestations of authority. In times such as these, the old conventions and standards had, indeed, little chance of survival. The prevailing atmosphere was one of general disillusionment, moral dilemmas, and uncertainty. Neurosis and spiritual gloom left their mark upon the consciousness of the generation.

T.S. Eliot's significantly titled The Wasteland (1922) portrays the spiritual loss and decadence of western civilization at the time. The emptiness of modern man is aptly reflected in his poem 'The Hollow Men' (1925):

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

The following passages from Aldous Huxley bring out the cynicism and the aimlessness of life of various intellectuals who represented a bewildered and decadent post-war society:

a) Long-expected one-and-twenty has made me
a fully privileged citizen of this great realm of which the owners of the Daily Mirror, The
News of the World, and the Daily Express are noble peers. Somewhere, I must logically infer, there must be other cities, built by men for men to live in. Somewhere, in the past, in the future, a long way off.6

b) It's not the architecture I mind so much ...
... What disgusts me is the people inside the architecture, the number of them ...
... And the way they breed. Like maggots ...
... Millions of them, creeping about the face of the country, spreading blight and dirt wherever they go; ruining everything.7

Abroad, it was the period of the Russian Revolution of 1917, which heralded five years of civil war. The Spartacist Rebellion took place in Germany, with revolt in Bavaria. In 1919, the Bela Kun commune of Hungary collapsed. There was confusion and violence in the Central European countries. In 1920, there was civil war in Ireland. Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922, and in India in the same year, Mahatma Gandhi's six year jail sentence led to a decade of riots and strikes. The British Empire was on the verge of collapse in Palestine and Egypt as well. In a world caught in an unrelenting spate of crisis of such dimensions, the future of mankind appeared indeed terribly bleak.

What really shook the post-war period in Britain were the industrial troubles that rose to a frenzied pitch. These had been kept at bay during the war, and the trade boom that followed was short-lived. The period was one of disintegration and despair, with numerous strikes and lockouts. In May 1926, disputes between capital and labour culminated in the General Strike, which greatly disrupted the even tenor of Stanley Baldwin's government. The general feeling
of resentment among the workers was initially sparked off by the Coal Strike of April 1926, which caused immense hardship and suffering to the general public. The union's support to the miners' fight for rational wages intensified the General Strike. The failure of negotiations led to another bitter general strike. Those who went back to work were either refused, or accepted on terms of reduced wages. Others were accepted on the condition of commitment to leave their unions. The union leaders failed to consolidate their demands for the national pool and the national wage system, thus defeating the very purpose of the General Strike. However, although the workers' challenge did not achieve its desired goal, it was significantly influential in providing a political impetus for some intellectuals who were sympathetic towards the working class. In course of time, left-wingers began to pin their hopes on communism.

In 1929, stocks crashed on Wall Street in America. Consequently, the lavish American loans to many countries came to an abrupt end. It was an event which caused catastrophic consequences the world over, leading to the Great World Depression in 1931. In David Thomson's account,

The world economic crisis burst with the collapse of the stock exchange boom in New York in 1929. Wild and reckless speculation had driven the value of stocks and shares to fantastic heights. As soon as confidence was shaken a little, equally wild selling of stocks followed, which snowballed into a spectacular collapse of the stock market. Within one month, stock values crashed by 40 percent and by 1932, 5000 American banks went bankrupt. Because Americans withdrew their investments from abroad, and bought less imports from abroad, the collapse quick-
ly spread to other countries. Britain, whose trade had been part of one great capitalist system, faced serious economic crisis, and as depression set in, it spelt a major calamity of mass unemployment. Although the cyclical depression had begun in 1920, the thirties were the years of the Depression, because it was in this period that unemployment shot up to dizzy heights, affecting not only manual workers, but members of the middle class as well. As economic depression in agriculture extended to other commodities, Britain went off the gold standard. Other nations followed the example set by Britain. Such contraction of international trade and upheavals in the international monetary system left a world full of unemployed people numbering nearly thirty million. The decade which now opened has been called the 'Anxious Thirties'. There was, in the words of G.D.H. Cole, "a disquieting insecurity" among young intellectuals; more and more attention began to be focused on politics, as economic depression, unemployment, over-population, poverty, and hunger, and such other serious problems increased the hardship of the average man.

The decade opening with 1930 brought to light the worsening international situation. It was one of those intervals of history, when events piling up upon one another, shook the very foundation of free societies. The year 1930 witnessed the ascendancy of Mussolini and the continued disastrous decline of the German economy, along with the gradual rise of Nazi barbarism. In 1932, the British union of fascists was formed under Oswald Mosley. Hitler appeared on the international scene in January 1933 as Chancellor of Germany,
and shortly afterwards, the Reichstag was burnt. Indeed, Hitler's assumption of the German Chancellorship may be taken to be the outset of disaster. Germany took over the destiny of the rest of the world to the extent that a new Axis had to be formed in the political world. February 1934 brought the fall of the Daladier Government in France, following scandalous corruption. In July 1934, Chancellor Dollfuss, who had been repressing the Viennese socialists, was assassinated by the Nazis. In 1935, Hitler violated the disarmament provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, and in March 1936, he occupied the Rhineland. In May 1936, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia. Sometime later, General Franco's fascist coup against the Republican Government of Spain, led to the long and bloody civil war. In July 1937, Japan launched an undeclared attack on China. March 1938 saw Hitler's troops occupy Vienna, and between the Autumn of 1938 and March 1939, Germany took possession of Czechoslovakia by an agreement negotiated at Munich by Hitler, Mussolini, Daladier, and Chamberlain. In September 1939, the historic crisis came full circle, and the Second World War broke out. The wave of violence and hysteria in the totalitarian regimes of Germany, Italy, and Russia, created paranoia on a massive scale. Neal Wood reports:

Street fighting in Germany, and the rise of Nazi barbarism were witnessed by young intellectuals like David Guest and Humphrey Slater, who returned to Britain convinced that communism was the only defence against fascism and war. Other intellectuals such as Auden, Isherwood, Spender, John Lehmann and Naomi Mitchison saw fascism at work in Germany and Austria. Militarism was also gaining a foothold in the Far East. 10

In Great Britain, as already mentioned, the thirties were
marked by confusion, personal frustration, disillusion, and despair. When the first signs of the economic crisis appeared, the Labour Government (1929-1931) under Ramsay MacDonald was found totally incompetent to handle the problem. A National Government followed, with MacDonald still as Prime Minister. It was a coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, and Labour, but Labour support was hardly forthcoming. Left-wingers viewed the formation of this coalition as a betrayal on the part of MacDonald and his political circle. Within four years, Baldwin, leader of the Conservatives, returned to power. However, despite his attempts to restore confidence among the public, he, too, proved to be another easy-going politician, and failed to do anything positive to the steadily worsening situation. W.H. Auden's 'Letter to Lord Byron' (Part II), projects with sharp, caustic, and cynical accuracy the government's attempt at hoodwinking the public into a false sense of security:

To start with, on the whole we're better dressed;

For chic the difference to-day is small
Of barmaid from my lady at the Hall
It's sad to spoil this democratic vision
With millions suffering from malnutrition.

Again, our age is highly educated;
There is no lie our children cannot read,
And as MacDonald might so well have stated
We're growing up and up and up indeed.
Advertisements can teach us all we need;
And death is better, as the millions know,
Than dandruff, night-starvation, or B.O.

The government's policy was to rationalize industry by amalgamating and closing down obsolete plants. So it launched the British Iron and Steel Federation, which, while increasing light steel production,
left the traditional industries in Mossend in Scotland, and Dowlais in Wales, paralysed. The founding of the National Shipbuilders Security also left adverse side-effects. It imposed restrictions upon the running of the shipyards of Jarrow, a centre in which many men were employed. Also, attempts to embark on an alternative light steel industry proved a lost battle against the Iron And Steel Federation.

The government tried to deal with the depression by imposing tax on foreign items. This process of 'protection' impeded the smooth flow of free trade, but the problem of unemployment remained unsolved. Britain's handling of the depression was quite opposite to the 'new deal' of the American Government a few years later. Whereas Roosevelt encouraged lavish spending for the creation of work and the circulation of money, the British Government believed in cutting down expenditure through wage reduction, which caused a reduction in the demand for goods. Thus, the weakening of mass purchasing power led to a shrink in mass production, and that led to more unemployment.

Mark Abrams reports that in the first years of the decade, 10,682,000 men and women out of the 12,486,000 insured against unemployment, had jobs, and that 1,804,000 or 14.4 percent were jobless. This percentage increased alarmingly towards the late thirties, with domestic and agricultural workers having been added to the unemployment insurance scheme. Neal Wood also informs that in 1934, out of the entire lot of professional and clerical operations, between 300,000 and 400,000 were unemployed.

The heavy and prolonged unemployment was a frightfully se-
rious matter. Those who somehow managed to find jobs, with meagre
salaries, were the bourgeois and the university educated. Most young
university educated intellectuals turned to teaching and tutoring as
a decent way out of financial insolvency. Some of them were W.H.
Auden, Arthur Calder Marshall, C. Day Lewis, Michael Redgrave,
Edward Upward, and Christopher Isherwood. Auden has expressed
the situation in his 'Letter to Lord Byron', Part IV, thus:

The only thing you never turned your hand to
Was teaching English in a boarding school.
To-day it's a profession that seems grand to
Those whose alternative's an office stool;
For budding authors it's become the rule.
...

More, it's a job, and jobs to-day are rare: (emphasis
added)

But, by and large, the thirties bring to mind the gloomy and squal-
id spectre of a sad unemployed Britain, with its seedy beggars
selling matches or shoe-laces, the newspaper canvassers and cut-
price stores, shuttered shops and dilapidated houses, silent railway
sidings, idle coal-pits and shipyards, smokeless factory chimneys,
the Welsh mining valleys numb with distress, the derelict towns and
industrial centres, and the "threadbare" common man "Begot on Hire-

The plight of the unemployed was hardly alleviated by the
government's dole of payments of one sort or another from public
funds. In the industrial regions of the Midlands and the North,
among silent factories and empty store-rooms, nearly seven million
men, women, and children, were living on the dole which was below
subsistence level. Their lives were drab and miserable, their living
conditions deplorable. Instances of children deprived of substantial food, school dropouts, despairing unemployed fathers and husbands, postponed marriages and broken engagements, family separations, prisoners in cells, patients in mental hospitals, were common features of the time. So were the homes, stripped of items considered as luxury under the Means Test which took into account all the earnings, pensions, savings, and other assets of a family, and whenever it was found that the family could not really prove need, its unemployment benefits were drastically reduced. Then, there were the numerous strikes, lockouts, and hunger-marches. Miners from Rhonda in Wales, and the coal areas of England, ex-servicemen and shipbuilders from Glasgow and Jarrow, often undertook long and arduous hunger-marches to show their plight to those living in the comfortable counties. The leaden atmosphere of the "Distressed Areas" of the old industrial North and the Midlands such as Jarrow, Merther, Wigan, Gateshead, Hebburn, Wallsend, Crook, and Stockton-On-Tees, were non-apparent to those living comfortably in the South. These distant places were seldom visited by outsiders, except for the concerned social workers and undergraduates. The misery and the degradation in the stricken areas were a glaring contrast to the prosperity of the busy Home counties of the South. Valentine Cunningham provides an insight into the situation:

...South Wales, the old industrial north, the old industrial parts of Scotland, tended not to share in the new prosperity of the mid-30s that boomed the places that became landmarks of the mid-30s imagination - particularly the centres of the motor trade and other new luxury goods such as wireless sets,
gramophones, and vacuum cleaners, places like Coventry, Cowley, Dagenham, Slough, and other locations west of London. J.B. Priestly began his English Journey (1934) on the Great West Road where the new industries were - 'little luxury trades', 'all glass and chromium plate and nice painted signs and coloured lights' - but he was right to 'feel there's a catch in it somewhere' and to give the impression that unemployment was rather widely diffused elsewhere in Britain. The 'catch' he detected was a regional one. Like English Journey, Orwell's The Road to Wigan Pier (1937) about the impoverished north, and James Hanley's Grey Children: A Study in Humbug and Misery (1939), a journey into the misery of industrialized South Wales, are also perfectly correct in suggesting that in particular regions of the country, severe depression continued.

W.H. Auden's 'The Witnesses' (Poem XI, Poems 1931-1936) is a brilliant eye-opener to the shocking disparity between the conditions of life of the rich and the poor:

You dowagers with Roman noses
Sailing along between banks of roses
well dressed,
You Lords who sit at committee tables
And crack with grooms in riding stables
your father's jest;

... You stokers lit by furnace-glare,  
And you, too, steeplejacks up there
singing,  
You shepherds wind-blown on the ridges,  
Tramps leaning over village bridges
your eardrums ringing;

During the period between 1929 and 1939, social surveys were carried out by investigators in several places for detailed information as to how badly off a family was, by taking into account the unemployment benefits, house rent, and other expenditure. Mark Abrams thus observes,
In each city, in the middle thirties, the average working-class family, in an average week had enough money coming in to meet its "overhead costs" - rent, insurance, fuel, etc., and enough left over to buy at least the necessary minimum of food and clothing required to maintain physical health. But, unfortunately, these "averages" often remained outside the grasp of many working-class families; for them the "average income" and the "average week" were only too frequently unattainable. In every city the investigators brought to light a substantial body of citizens, who, at the time of the survey, were living in poverty. For some, this poverty was of long standing - the consequence of old age, or low earnings in an over-crowded and decaying industry. For others it was the result of a passing mischance - a few weeks' unemployment or illness. Nowhere was the amount of poverty insignificant. These surveys of long-term unemployment brought into focus its psychological as well as physical consequences, "the dismal progression from 'optimism' to pessimism and from pessimism to fatalism". For many it was a harrowing experience. Their despair knew no ends, as they came to a feeling of uselessness and bitterness. The young felt cheated of their manhood, while for the old, deprived of their self-respect, there was nothing besides defeat and humiliation. In J.B. Priestley's Angel Pavement (1930), Herbert Smeeth, the ageing clerical worker is out of his job with the collapse of Twigg and Dershingham. One can understand his predicament as he tells his wife,

And if you think I'm going to get another job as good as that, or a job worth having at all, in a hurry, you're mistaken Edie. I know what it is with office jobs; and it'll have to be an office job because that's what I've always done. I'm nearly fifty and I look it. I dare say I look older.

For the majority, however, unemployment brought about apathy, and
they accepted the spell as one long holiday. They killed time reading in public libraries, going to the cinema, taking part in plays, going for long walks, playing football, keeping poultry, or doing amateur carpentry. This aspect of resignation is clearly portrayed in Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933):

> He was standing there as motionless as a statue, cap neb pulled over his eyes, gaze fixed on pavement, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched, the bitter wind blowing his thin trousers against his legs. Waste paper and dust blew about him in spirals, the papers making harsh sounds as they slid on the pavement.17

George Orwell, who shared the life of the down-trodden, presented his factual findings in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). He observed that people got so used to the idea of the ‘dole’ that they began to make the most of it, by cutting down on necessities and indulging in cheap luxuries:

> You can't get much meat for three pence, but you can get a lot of fish-and-chips. Milk costs three pence a pint, and even 'mild' beer costs four pence, but aspirins are seven a penny and you can wring forty cups of tea out of a quarter-pound packet. And above all there is gambling, the cheapest of all luxuries. Even people on the verge of starvation can buy a few days' hope ('Something to live for' as they call it) by having a penny on a sweepstake... when you are unemployed, which is to say when you are underfed, harrassed, bored and miserable, you don't want to eat dull, wholesome food. There is always some cheap pleasant thing to tempt you. Let's have three pennorth of chips! Run out and buy us a two-penny ice-cream! Put the kettle on and we'll all have a nice cup of tea! That is how your mind works when you are at the P.A.C. level.18
Such social injustices became much too intolerable to sensitive people. They could no longer remain passive spectators to the rising oppression and misery of the masses. The humbug of politicians was gradually received with skepticism. The desire to get out of the depths of despair made men embrace the ideals of Marx, as a possible solution to their problems. Indeed, all thinking people of the time felt a great urgency for radical political measures to save the world from near annihilation, and by the end of 1933, most writers began to take political sides. Under the political manoeuvres and the extreme complacency of the English Government against the deepening crisis of the time, many intellectuals joined the communist party. They looked up to communism as the sole panacea for the restoration of civilized society, national recovery, and economic stability. As John Maynard Keynes observed in their support,

There is no one in politics to-day worth sixpence outside the ranks of liberals except the post-war generation of intellectual communists under thirty-five. Them, too, I like and respect. Perhaps in their feelings and instincts they are the nearest thing we now have to the typical nervous nonconformist English gentlemen who went to the Crusades, made the Reformation, fought the Great Rebellion, won us our civil and religious liberties, and humanised the working classes last century.

The ideals of Marx seemed to provide men with a vision of a new society that would replace the present one in the near future. The emphasis on class war, as propagated by Marx, had a tremendous impact on society. The focus was on economic problems and social justice; attention was drawn towards a planned development, so that there could be no extreme demarcation between the haves and the
havenots. Marxism brought in its wake the concept of economic planning and men upheld the Marxist belief in the history of the class struggle as the only tool against class oppression. They believed that the working class was capable of liberating mankind from the various evils of class exploitation, and that this final result would be brought about by the communist party - the party of the working class in every society. Communism or socialism in its completed form, aimed at a better and meaningful life through a just world; a world which would disperse the ill-proportioned accumulation of wealth by individuals, a world which would be free from fear and insecurity, cruelty, mass murder, poverty, disease, and exploitation. Not without cause, therefore, Great Britain during the thirties held the Soviet Union in very high esteem. For, unlike Western capitalism stricken with unemployment, the Soviet Union was maintaining full employment with an end to urbanizing a feudal, agricultural land, thereby bringing to the masses greater equality and economic stability.

This was also the time of the phenomenal radicalization of students, and publications such as the Outpost and the Student Vanguard appeared, portraying the menace of middle-class unemployment. Several student societies such as The October Club, The Cambridge Socialist Club, Student Labour Federation were established. The decade brought forth many other new magazines and reviews of varying quality and span of life, all serving to arouse the political and social sensibilities of sensitive young people. Mention may be made of some of the popular periodicals of the period: Action: The New Weekly of the New Movement (8 Oct. 1931 to 31 Dec. 1931); Daily Worker
(1930-1966), continued as The Morning Star; Fact (April 1937 to June 1939); The Left Review (1934 to May 1938); New Verse (1933-1939), New Writing (Spring 1936 to Christmas 1939) and Storm: Stories of the Struggle: A Magazine of Socialist Fiction (1933). Stephen Spender, commenting on the political nature of the periodicals of the time, said:

A daily newspaper, the socialist Daily Herald, and two weeklies, The New Statesman and the Nation, were leftist. Most of the writers who contributed to these periodicals were in general agreement with the editors' politics, even if they believed that their own creativity had nothing to do with their political opinions. The situation is demonstrated by the division of the contents of The New Statesman and the Nation into the front halves, devoted predominantly to politics, and the back halves, devoted entirely to the arts, literature and reviewing, and maintaining a stubborn independence from the politics of the front halves. The literary writers disdained the political journalists, but nevertheless shared the same premises, and it could be assumed that if the literary were put into a position in which they had to express a political opinion, it would, in most cases, be that of the first half of the journal.

Another characteristic feature of the thirties that calls for attention was Mass-Observation - an organization founded in 1937 by Cambridge intellectuals, Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, and Humphrey Jennings, a painter who made waves in Cambridge undergraduate literary life. It purported to study everyday behaviour in Britain from all intriguing angles. By employing the methods of social anthropology, Mass-Observation released leftist journals and reports of facts surrounding the masses. Valentine Cunningham's review is indeed revealing:
Mass-Observation set out to document British life (so as to tap its mystiques and reveal its wide intrinsic worths), but also to educate the British (and not just, as the art-postcards and photographs in pubs and the painting in the streets proved, middle-class Britons). Mass-Observation's ambitions were big. It was the brilliant innovation of Harrison and Madge deliberately to bring anthropology 'home' to Britain, ... democratic anthropology relying not just on special teams of observers ... but on a network of scattered observers, volunteers who agreed to describe daily life where they lived recording their activities and feelings on the twelfth day of each month. ... Mass-Observation was up to the minute as could be characteristically there was an M-O exhibition at the newsy Peckham Health Centre in November 1938. M-O was a delicious period rag-bag. Like leftist art, Mass-Observation aimed to undo the distorting untruths of BBC radio, cinema, bad popular literature, and the sort of newspaper that employed Madge and Humphrey Spender. Charles Madge regarded the good features of mass newspapers as rescuable: in particular, the way they served 'as vehicles for the expression of the unconscious fears and wishes of the mass', and their 'mass-produced character' which was their 'supreme virtue'. Mass-Observation was to be a kind of truth-telling radio. (emphasis added)

During the thirties a very crucial event of tremendous political significance was the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), rightly seen by many as a signal instance of the long apprehended menace of fascism. Already fascism had been let loose in the form of Nazi terrorism in Germany and the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, to which the Western democracies of England, France, and America took only a conciliatory stand. Thus, when fascism began to show its ugly head in Spain, indignant young men saw a final chance to redeem democracy by doing all that they could to help the National Government
of Spain. "... Spain had", says Valentine Cunningham, "long been anticipated." And he continues,

Revolution and inevitable counter-revolution; the coming apocalypse that had already enjoyed rehearsals in Germany, China, Abyssinia; the need for drawing the line and seeking a showdown with Fascism; the necessary immersion in the destructive element: all these had been recurrent and prophetic themes among left-wing intellectuals long before the Spanish generals tried to seize power on 18th July, 1936. Spain was the final confirmation - if one were, by that time, needed - of the Crisis.  

With the involvement of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, and their assistance of armaments and troops to General Franco, the Spanish Civil War became for left-wing supporters, not only a real struggle between the international forces of reactionary capitalism and progressive socialism, but also symbolic of "... a struggle between the forces of good in the world and the forces of evil." Defying the policy of non-intervention adopted by their own vacillating government, hundreds of British volunteers went forward to join forces with the International Brigade, thus lending an overwhelming support to the Republican Government of Spain for the cause of Socialism. Many other men from public life assisted at the front, joining ambulance and propaganda units. Among the many writers who considered it their duty to visit Spain were W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, John Strachey, Cyril Connolly, and T. Wintringham. Some of those who fought Franco and died were Ralph Fox, Julian Bell, Christopher Caudwell, John Cornford, and C. Donnelly. The kind of active service varied from fighting in the war, as in the case of Orwell, to Auden serving as a
stretcher-bearer, to Koestler reporting and propagandising, and to Spender broadcasting in English from a radio station which he found to be defunct.

Although the Spanish War was a complex and confused struggle, it led to a dramatic and significant coming together of thousands of working-class socialists and trade-unionists, left-wing intellectuals, writers and scientists to the European battle-field, thus breaking down the barriers of class. For them all, it was a clear-cut issue, a unified anti-fascist struggle.

In Britain, the Spanish loyalist cause was advanced through a wide circulation of articles, pamphlets and books, lectures, demonstrations, and relief aid. Spain's Popular Front, an alliance of democratic parties against the right-wing parties, including the fascist 'Phalanx', had its equivalent in Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club (1936). With a Selection Committee comprising Victor Gollancz, Harold Laski, and John Strachey, the organization aimed at building a united front against fascism and war, and at paving the way for socialism. Indeed, the Left Book Club was a powerful voice of leftist propaganda.

The Spanish War caught the conscience of the masses, left-wing sympathisers, poets and writers, evoking stirring response. In a description of Barcelona, Cyril Connolly wrote:

The pervading sense of freedom, of intelligence, justice and companionship, the enormous upthrust in backward and penniless people of the desire of liberty and education are things that have to be seen to be understood. It is as if the masses, the mob in fact, credited usually only with instincts of stupidity and persecution, should blossom in-
The war was like a clarion call to poets the world over, most of whom expressed their feelings for the Republican Government and the Spanish people. The heroic stand of the Republicans became a great source of inspiration for the young poets of the left, and their poems in honour of Spain were the best expressions of their profound feelings and anguish. The burning political passion in poems like W.H. Auden's 'Spain', C. Day Lewis's 'The Nabara', George Barker's 'Elegy on Spain', Stephen Spender's 'To a Spanish Poet', John Cornford's 'Full Moon at Tierz: Before the Storming of Huesca', to mention but a few, point to the intense hold that Spain had on the thirties poets. One may turn to Cunningham's compelling description of the cause of the world's obsession with Spain:

The course of the war in Spain filled up the map of Spain with the locations of painful memories, awful fears, large and small disappointments: would Fascism break through there?; so and so died here; these were won or lost; here, there and there Fascism triumphed and the Revolution floundered. The map of Spain, in other words and in the words of the first published version of Spender's poem 'To a Spanish Poet' became 'The map of pain'. This was, in many ways, a prevailing '30s experience, as regions once claimed by ordinary civilians and tourists, travel brochures and songs, ignited into trouble spots possessed rather by soldiers and bullets. What was happening to ordinary travellers' Spain had happened all over the world.

India, too, amidst her own struggle against imperialism, could not remain unconcerned at the events in Spain. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru saw this rising, "with its background of German and Italian assistance, developing into a European or even a world conflict."
Under the shattering international and domestic crisis, the thirties emerged as a period of growing preoccupation with the socio-political ills of the times. This feature rather set the period off from the apolitical twenties, though the twenties themselves saw great political turbulence and social change. In the thirties, young sensitive people became painfully aware of the changing world situation. Everybody, including those with slight to moderate political opinions, talked politics. Against the menace of fascism and the imminence of another great war, the freedom of the individual and the existence of civilization seemed to be at stake. Intelligent young people committed themselves to ideologies, creeds and scientific theories hoping to find some solution to the malaise inflicted upon society. Some were attracted to the Roman Catholic Church, others to psychoanalysis, yet others to the 'Oxford Group' of Frank Buchman. However, it was Marxism that proved to be the greatest attraction, which became somewhat tinged with emotionalism. Works such as The Mind in Chains (1937) edited by C. Day Lewis, The God that Failed (1950), edited by R.H.S. Crossman, and Arthur Koestler's The Yogi and the Commissar (1945), point, albeit critically, to the pro-communist mood of the 1930s. Stephen Spender explains the importance that politics had in the thirties for men like him, for the restoration of world peace and liberty, thus:

Politics now meant for us supporting the victims of Fascism, fighting for freedom of expression, taking the side of beleaguered Madrid and Barcelona, trying to stop the Second World War from happening. It meant choosing life instead of death, and life meant then writing the things one wanted to say, and trying perhaps to project one's
spirit into the cells and camps, to be present with the victims.27

There was, among the young, a growing resentment towards the politically indifferent attitude of the older generation. To turn to Spender again,

The old and the young became in one another's eyes bogyms. To the old their children seemed wild, destructive, dangerous revolutionaries; to the young, the old seemed either dead, or else on the side of things dead. Above all, they were afraid of life, and their England, the England of the last shows of the British Empire, of King George V's jubilee, seemed a painted screen behind which there was a strangled corpse.28

Caught in the web of political contingencies, the young writers of the time, therefore, rightly began a crusade for the restoration of human rights and the salvation of society. Filled with a tremendous urge to contribute to social order and well-being, they, particularly the poets, tried to become the spokesmen of a world in shambles. Unlike the poets of the twenties who remained aloof from the political scene, the thirties poets faced contemporary events more positively and attempted to portray the time as it was. Graham Hough has rightly observed that in the writings of the leftist group of poets of the thirties, "what one cannot forget is the time, and a very bad time it was."29 Certainly, however, the decade brought out the best qualities as well as the more naive enthusiasm of the time-tormented poets of the left.
Notes and References


2. Introduction to The Faber Book of Modern Verse. ed. Michael Roberts, (Faber And Faber, London, 1965) P.4


7. ibid., P.191


12. op.cit., P.38

13. op.cit., P.38

14. op.cit., P.95


18. The Road to Wigan Pier. (Penguin Books Ltd., Great Britain, 1962) PP.79 and 86


20. The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People (1933-75).

21. op.cit., PP.333-4

22. ibid., P.419

   (Cresset Press, London, 1960) P.118


25. op.cit., P.432


28. ibid., P.144