
Introduction to Victorian and Twentieth-Century Literature

Heesok Chang

Unlike the preceding three volumes in this *Companion to British Literature* – the Medieval, Early Modern, and Long Eighteenth Century – the current one attempts to cover at least two distinct periods: the Victorian and the Twentieth Century. To make matters more difficult, the second of these hardly counts as a single period; it is less an epoch than a placeholder. In terms of periodization, the Victorian era is succeeded – or some might say, overthrown – by the Modern. But modernism is not capacious enough to encompass the various kinds of literary art that emerged in Britain following World War II, the postmodern and the postcolonial, for example. We could follow the lead of recent scholars and expand the modernist period beyond the “high” to include the “late” and arguably the “post” as well. But this conceptual as well as temporal expansion does not take in the vital British literature written from the 1970s onward, an historical era distinct from the “postwar” that critics refer to, for now, as the “contemporary” (see English 2006). Of course, all periods are designated after they have finished, including the Victorian, which was very much a modernist creation. Yet it is unlikely we will come to call the period stretching from the middle of the last century to the early decades of the new millennium, from the breakup of Britain’s empire to the devolution of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, “Elizabethan.” And this despite the Victorian longevity of the Windsor monarch’s reign. The queen is one and the same, but the national culture is anything but. It is difficult imagining the contemporary equivalent of *Eminent Victorians* (1918) emerging in the next few years. Who would the emblematic figures of this “period” be? The Beatles, Maggie Thatcher, Salman Rushdie, and David Beckham, perhaps? But this selection – or any selection, even a tendentious one like Strachey’s – would probably not provide fodder for a cultural gestalt in the way that Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold, and General Gordon did.

Given the myriad changes to British culture and society in the past 200 years, what then might serve as a common narrative frame for this volume of essays? One binding premise of this diverse collection is not surprisingly change itself. I do not mean any old change, but irreversible, all-encompassing, and unremitting change of an historically unprecedented kind. In one way or another, the scholarly inquiries advanced here take stock of the social upheavals set in motion by the Industrial Revolution, by an advanced capitalist modernity in which, as Marx put it, “all that is solid melts into air.” This memorable phrase from *The Communist Manifesto* provides the title for Marshall Berman’s oft-cited book about “the experience of modernity.” Berman describes modernity as an acutely divided experience: “To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are” (Berman 1982: 15). This paradoxical structure of feeling arises in response to the “creative destruction” wrought by industrial modernization, a breathtaking series of tectonic shifts that includes the mechanization of production, explosive urban growth, major demographic displacements, globe-circling advances in mass- and tele-communications, the powerful expansion of nation-states and their bureaucracies, the rise of mass movements, and momentous discoveries in scientific knowledge. The heroic modernists of Berman’s saga are those who give voice to the bipolarity, the synchronous exhilaration and misery, of being modern: writers like Baudelaire, Dostoevsky, and Whitman, philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Marx.

It is interesting to note, at least for our purposes, that everyone on this list hails from the nineteenth century and not one of them is British. Why is this? The Industrial Revolution erupted in Britain. Its economy was the first to free itself from feudal structures. Britain was well in advance of its European rivals in industrializing its agriculture, urbanizing its peasantry, and manufacturing goods (principally textiles) on such a mass scale as to create global markets. As Eric Hobsbawm points out, “Between 1789 and 1848 Europe and America were flooded with British experts, steam engines, cotton machinery and investments” (1996: 33). There was no more industrially advanced nation on earth in the nineteenth century. Why then do eminent Victorians figure so rarely as protagonists in sweeping overviews of modernity? A partial answer to this loaded question surely has something to do with the “heavy sinking feeling which . . . accompanies” the very term “Victorian” (Davis 2002: 1). In important respects, “Victorian” obscures the *modernity* (in Berman’s sense) of Dickens and Eliot, the Brontës and the Brownings, the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetes. For example, we tend to remember the “typical Victorian” reaction to the Great Exhibition of 1851, that landmark of British industry and enterprise, as high-brow and disdainful. Ruskin famously dismissed the exhibition’s dazzling centerpiece – Joseph Paxton’s fourteen-acre iron-and-glass Crystal Palace – as an oversized greenhouse. Carlyle called it a “big glass soap bubble,” and Pugin (who would spearhead the Gothic Revival) “a glass-monster.” Less well remembered are Charlotte Brontë’s

impressions of the spectacle. After the second of several visits to the Exhibition, she reported to her father:

It is a wonderful place – vast, strange, new and impossible to describe. Its grandeur does not consist in one thing, but in the unique assemblage of all things. Whatever human industry has created you find there, from the great compartments filled with railway engines and boilers, with mill machinery in full work, with splendid carriages of all kinds, with harness of every description, to the glass-covered and velvet-spread stands loaded with the most gorgeous work of the goldsmith and silversmith, and the carefully guarded caskets full of real diamonds and pearls worth hundreds of thousands of pounds. It may be called a bazaar or a fair, but it is such a bazaar or fair as Eastern geni might have created. It seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth – as if none but supernatural hands could have arranged it thus, with such a blaze and contrast of colours and marvellous power of effect. The multitude filling the great aisles seems ruled and subdued by some invisible influence. (Shorter 1908: 215–216)

Brontë's urbane outlook, phantasmagoric language, and above all, her keen receptivity to the new complicate our received idea of the "Victorian."

This is not to say that the truly representative Victorians were closer to Baudelaire than to Carlyle in spirit. The chapters on nineteenth century literature, science, and culture in this volume do not assume the Victorian period was a proto-modernist one, if by that one means an era governed by metropolitan sensibilities. Rather, the point to bear in mind is that the anti-industrial stance of a Ruskin or an Arnold was itself a politically engaged one. Nor do the chapters on the Victorian era assume its culture was unified and monolithic or its economic development geographically even. Internal divisions were plain to see in the public hand-wringing over the "condition-of-England"; the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots; the symbolic conflict between North and South; the rise of the Home Rule movement and the Gaelic revival in Ireland; the stirrings of modern Welsh and Scottish nationalism. The setting of a good deal of Victorian literature is not Britain or even England per se, the "imagined community" (in Benedict Anderson's sense; Anderson 2006) of a faceless nation, but the actual community of a specific locale steeped in dialect and beset by the forces of change. All these bristly particularities of place and language were also responses to the forward march of modernization. Reading Keith Wilson's chapter in tandem with Robert Crawford's makes clear that Hardy's West Country regionalism was no less innovatory and conflicted – no less *modern* in the expanded sense – than Eliot's and MacDiarmid's intricate attempts to situate and provincialize a seemingly unmoored international modernism.

Studying the great works of British literature in terms of their anxious imaginative engagement with violently changing times goes against the grain of a powerful and tenacious and, in scare quotes, "Victorian" imagining of the national past. This "Whiggish" belief held that revolution and turmoil were the unhappy plight of the

theory-mad French, not the providential lot of peaceful and prosperous, down-to-earth Britons. Britain's distinctiveness was grounded in its solemn parliamentary governance and made conspicuous by its centuries of uninterrupted progress toward ever greater liberty and enlightenment. According to Stefan Collini, in the mid- to late nineteenth century the construction of an English literary canon played a significant role in advancing this "Whig interpretation of history" (1991). Immensely popular anthologies like Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (first published in 1861) and Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse* (first published in 1900) played a significant role in marshaling patriotic sentiment and cementing national identity in an age of intense imperialist rivalry. British literary monuments evinced the distinctive individualism of the British people.

Needless to say, scholars today do not see the canon in quite this way. But there is at least one major assumption that many readers, including the contributors to this collection, share with high-minded Victorian *littérateurs*: they continue to view British literature as "a crucial vehicle for establishing and negotiating the relevant sense of national identity" (Collini 1991: 347). Adam Piette underscores this very point in his chapter on World War I poetry:

The First World War broke the back of European culture, of imperial internationalism, of the semi-feudal landed institutions that had jingoistically thrown their servants into battle, and of the old country ways that still survived nineteenth-century industrialization. It did so thanks to the unstoppable momentum of the forces of modernity boosted by total war, the technologies, bureaucracies, and mass production methods of the twentieth-century state. Industrial warfare, boosted by the new technological tools of automation – automobile, airplane, artillery, munitions, gas, tank, telephone, and wireless – revolutionized through destruction, exploding the quiet landscapes of pastoral Europe. It signaled the end of a specific form of class system, killing so many officers, and forcing on such a democratization of the ranks, that the conventions of respect and condescension no longer worked. What was to replace these old values was unsure, though prophets there were many: Nietzschean demagogues, futurist proto-fascists, socialist visionaries. In light of the unprecedentedly collective mass movements and systems unleashed by the war, it is, then, paradoxical that the most lasting representation of the conditions and subjective experience of the extraordinary four years should be the trench lyric. (ch. 12 below)

To a degree not evident in, say, the United States or Canada, literature in twentieth-century Britain was the chief medium in and through which the national culture was debated and enlarged, dismantled and refortified. Another way of making this point is to note what a major role literary criticism has played in the public life of the nation: more than textual exegesis is at stake in Leavis's *The Great Tradition*, Williams's *Culture and Society*, or Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*. Several of the contributors to this volume treat literary criticism as a primary object rather than as a supplementary aid to inquiry. For them, criticism does not only advance our knowledge about the trench lyric, the historical novel, modernism and empire, or postcolonial literature.

It is also an act of cultural intervention – a vehicle for contestation or containment – in its own right.

One crucial intervention that recent critics and scholars have made is to help broaden and diversify what gets taught, studied, prized, and marketed under the category of “British literature.” Despite the formidable cultural authority of Eliot and the hegemony of New Criticism, their closed canon of “dead white males” (to resurrect a quaint phrase) could not possibly withstand the forces of global change unleashed on English departments in the mid- to late twentieth century. In postwar Britain, the break-up of empire, steep post-industrial decline, the installation of the welfare state, the influx of peoples from non-white former colonies and territories, the coming of second-wave feminism – to name some of these vectors of transformation – could not help but shake up the dominant culture and, in turn, the academic curriculum. Today, a course on postcolonial literature is much more likely to figure as a core requirement for the major than a course on Chaucer. English departments are more likely to offer a seminar on Black Britain or queer fiction than on the Metaphysical poets or Jacobean drama (two staples of Eliot’s “tradition”).

I do not mean to suggest that the academy is the cultural cutting-edge. Thirty years removed from the “Culture Wars” it is easy to forget how long it took for things to change. As late as 1985 an undergraduate taking a survey of British literature could read in a head note of the latest edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (the standard classroom text from the early 1960s to the early 2000s): “These years – roughly 1912 to 1930 – were the Heroic Age of the modern English novel. Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence are the giants, with Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster brilliant minor figures . . .” (Abrams *et al.* 1979: 1756). To be fair, this outmoded assertion and the lofty language used to deliver it were no doubt soon revised in successive versions of this hugely successful and scrupulously updated primer (now on its ninth edition). But the fact that authoritative readers must undergo repeated revision underlines their belated stance in time. As Nigel Alderman makes clear in his chapter on the key role anthologies played in both centralizing and dispersing the post-Second World War poetic canon, even a collection that proclaims a new direction, a literary manifesto in effect, serves to establish yet another orthodoxy.

How anthologies assimilate new literary voices and movements into a dutiful table of contents illustrates academia’s larger powers of cultural containment. The domestication of the “postcolonial” is a case in point. In her critical retrospective of the pitched battles that were once waged around this term, its literature, and its theory, Elaine K. Chang observes,

The social and economic inequities, racial and ethnic conflicts, and other challenging issues one must confront in specific works have been erased or diluted in the very acts of selectively representing and recontextualizing them as “postcolonial.” Postcolonialism may have lost more teeth, ardent proponents, and severe critics since [the Culture Wars], functioning less as the radical intervention into established canons and epistemological practices that it was or could have been than as the blanket term it has largely become, perhaps especially in the classroom. (ch. 23 below)

We the editors hope that this four-volume collection of newly commissioned essays will enliven the classroom, not only by informing discussion but also by fostering dissent. The *Companion* aims not only to advance the current state of literary scholarship and consolidate its gains, but also to unsettle it and open it up to new paths of inquiry. We leave it to others to point out the various critical anachronisms and foreclosures that must inevitably mine this *Companion* like time bombs set to go off at a later date (only these are bombs that blanket rather than explode knowledge). One such ticking anachronism might well be the concept of “British literature” itself. DeMaria notes in the general introduction that neither “British” nor “literature” were historically stable terms. Today, in the wake of Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish devolution, and a movement for an English Parliament on the national agenda, the very relevance of “British” as a presiding cultural category seems somewhat shaky. With the “perceptible waning of English dominance within the canon of contemporary British fiction” (English 2006: 3) it must appear in retrospect that the Victorian and the modernist and the postwar British literary canons were, in fact, English all along. The internal colonization of Scottish, Irish, and Welsh literatures by an Anglo-centric Great Britain was never overlooked, of course, by writers in the “Celtic fringe.” The inclusion of chapters on Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett – none of them British, let alone English – in this volume attests to the persistence of old paradigms and old names.

On the other hand, no anthology, companion, or survey of the literature of “Britain and Ireland” or the “British-Irish Isles” or the “Four Nations” or the “Atlantic Archipelago” that purports to take in the period of high modernism can fail to include Yeats, Joyce, or Beckett. Whether any of these political and geographical rubrics can better encompass these writers’ formidable contributions to the internationalization of English remains to be seen. In the meantime, they are umbrellaed here under the threadbare cover of “British literature.”

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., Talbot Donaldson, E., et al. (eds.) (1979) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. 2, 4th edn. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Anderson, B. (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, new edn. London: Verso.
- Berman, M. (1982) *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Collini, S. (1991) *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Davis, P. (2002) *The Oxford English Literary History: Vol. 8 1830–1880: The Victorians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- English, J. (2006) “Introduction: British Fiction in a Global Frame.” In *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. J. English. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 1–15.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1996) *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Shorter, C. (ed.) (1908) *The Brontës Life and Letters*, Vol. 2. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Chronology 1800–2006

Literary event	Date	Historical event
<i>Blackwood's Magazine</i>	1800	Act of Union with Ireland Population of London reaches ~1 million
	1804	Richard Trevithick builds first steam locomotive railway
	1807	Abolition of British slave trade
	1809	London Royal Opera House opens
	1814–1831	Scott, <i>Waverly Novels</i>
	1815	British defeat French at the Battle of Waterloo, ending the Napoleonic wars
	1817–1980	
	1820	George III dies, succeeded by George IV Antarctica discovered
	1822	Charles Babbage invents first Difference Engine
	1824	National Gallery opened Harrods founded Byron dies in Greece
	1825	Stockton and Darlington Railway, world's first passenger railway, opened

Literary event	Date	Historical event
<i>The Athenaeum</i>	1826	London University founded
	1828–1921	
	1829	
Lyell, <i>Principles of Geology</i>	1830–1833	Roman Catholic Relief Act
Tennyson, <i>Poems, Chiefly Lyrical</i>	1830	George IV succeeded by William IV Liverpool and Manchester Railway opens
Tennyson, <i>Poems</i>	1831	Darwin begins five-year voyage on HMS Beagle Faraday demonstrates first electric transformer
	1832	Reform Act (England and Wales), Scottish Reform Act, Irish Reform Act
	1833–1834	
Carlyle, <i>Sartor Resartus</i>	1833	
Browning, <i>Miscellaneous Poems</i>	1834	Imperial Emancipation Act Poor Law Amendment Act Robert Peel (Conservative) serves as PM (–1835, 1841–1846) Fox Talbot's first photograph
	1835	Madame Tussaud opens Wax Museum in London
	1836–1837	
Dickens, <i>Pickwick Papers</i>	1836	
Dickens, <i>Sketches by "Boz"</i>	1837	William IV succeeded by Victoria
Carlyle, <i>French Revolution</i> Dickens, <i>Oliver Twist</i>	1838	Anti-Corn Law League founded Chartists' "People's Charter"
Dickens, <i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>	1839	Chartist riots First Opium War First Anglo-Afghan War
Carlyle, <i>Chartism</i>	1840–1841	
Dickens, <i>Old Curiosity Shop</i>		

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Browning, <i>Sordello</i> Darwin, <i>Voyage of the Beagle</i>	1840	Marriage of Victoria and Prince Albert Issue of “Penny Blacks,” first adhesive postage stamps
Browning, <i>Pippa Passes</i> Dickens, <i>Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of Eighty</i> <i>Punch</i> founded	1841	
Browning, <i>Dramatic Lyrics</i> Tennyson, <i>Poems</i>	1842	Chartist riots Mines Act
Ruskin, <i>Modern Painters</i> Vols. 1–5	1843–1860	
Carlyle, <i>Past and Present</i> Macaulay, <i>Essays, Critical and Historical</i>	1843	Thames Tunnel opens Victoria declares Hong Kong a Crown Colony
	1844	Royal Commission on Health in Towns YMCA founded in London Turner’s <i>Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway</i> exhibited at Royal Academy
Browning, <i>Dramatic Romances and Lyrics</i> Disraeli, <i>Sybil, or the Two Nations</i> Engels, <i>The Condition of the Working Class in England</i>	1845	
Dickens, <i>Dombey and Son</i>	1846–1848	
A., C., E. Brontë, <i>Poems</i> Lear, <i>Book of Nonsense</i>	1846	Famine in Ireland Repeal of Corn Laws
Thackeray, <i>Vanity Fair</i>	1847–1848	
Brontë, <i>Agnes Grey</i> Brontë, <i>Jane Eyre</i> Brontë, <i>Wuthering Heights</i>	1847	
Thackeray, <i>The History of Pendennis</i>	1848–1850	
Brontë, <i>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</i> Gaskell, <i>Mary Barton, A Tale of Manchester Life</i> <i>The Communist Manifesto</i> published	1848	Public Health Act Popular insurrections in continental Europe, “Springtime of the Peoples”
Dickens, <i>David Copperfield</i>	1849–1850	

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Brontë, <i>Shirley</i>	1849	Cholera epidemic in London
Browning, <i>Sonnets from the Portuguese</i> Tennyson, <i>In Memoriam</i>	1850	
Mayhew, <i>London Labour and the London Poor</i> Ruskin, <i>The Stones of Venice</i>	1851	Great Exhibition, opening of Crystal Palace London–Paris Telegraph opens
Dickens, <i>Bleak House</i>	1852–1853	Victoria and Albert Museum opens
Arnold, <i>Poems</i> Brontë, <i>Villette</i>	1853	
	1854–1856	Crimean War
Gaskell, <i>North and South</i>	1854–1855	
Patmore, <i>Angel in the House</i>	1854–1863	
Dickens, <i>Hard Times</i>	1854	
Dickens, <i>Little Dorrit</i>	1855–1857	
Browning, <i>Men and Women</i> Kingsley, <i>Westward Ho!</i> Tennyson, <i>Maud, and Other Poems</i> Trollope, <i>The Warden</i>	1855	Repeal of Stamp Duty on newspapers
	1856–1860	Second Anglo-Chinese War
	1857–1858	First War of Indian Independence
Browning, <i>Aurora Leigh</i> Hughes, <i>Tom Brown's Schooldays</i> Trollope, <i>Barchester Towers</i>	1857	Reading Room of British National Library opens
Eliot, <i>Scenes of Clerical Life</i> MacDonald, <i>Phantastes</i>	1858	East India Company nationalized British Raj commences in Indian subcontinent (–1947) Installation of first transatlantic telegraph cable Florence Nightingale becomes first female Fellow of the Statistical Society of London
Collins, <i>The Woman in White</i>	1859–1860	

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Darwin, <i>On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life</i> Eliot, <i>Adam Bede</i> Fitzgerald, <i>Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám</i> Mill, <i>On Liberty</i> Tennyson, <i>Idylls of the King</i> <i>Cornhill Magazine</i> founded	1859	
Dickens, <i>Great Expectations</i>	1860–1861	
Beeton, <i>Book of Household Management</i> Eliot, <i>Silas Marner</i> Palgrave (ed.), <i>Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics</i>	1861	
	1861–1865	US Civil War
Browning, <i>Last Poems</i> Rossetti, <i>Goblin Market and Other Poems</i>	1862	
	1863	World's first public underground railway opens in London
Dickens, <i>Our Mutual Friend</i>	1864–1865	
Browning, <i>Dramatis Personae</i> Newman, <i>Apologia pro Vita Sua</i> Spencer, <i>Principles of Biology</i>	1864	
Carroll, <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> Ruskin, <i>Sesame and Lilies</i> Swinburne, <i>Atalanta in Calydon</i>	1865	
Eliot, <i>Felix Holt the Radical</i>	1866	Speaker's corner established in Hyde Park
Arnold, <i>New Poems</i>	1867	Second Reform Bill (Representation of the People Act 1867) Typewriter invented

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Browning, <i>The Ring and the Book</i>	1868–1869	
Swinburne, <i>Ave Atque Vale</i>	1868	William Gladstone (Liberal) serves as PM (–1874, 1880–1885, 1886, 1892–1894)
Arnold, <i>Culture and Anarchy</i> Mill, <i>On the Subjection of Women</i>	1869	Girton College, Cambridge, first residential college for women, founded
	1870	Compulsory education established
Eliot, <i>Middlemarch, a Study of Provincial Life</i>	1871–1872	
Carroll, <i>Through the Looking Glass</i> Darwin, <i>The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex</i>	1871	
Butler, <i>Erewhon</i> Hardy, <i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>	1872	Ballot Act Right of Assembly established; first lawful public meetings held in Hyde Park
	1873–1879	Financial crisis triggers the Long Depression
Pater, <i>Studies in the Renaissance</i>	1873	
	1874–1880	Benjamin Disraeli (Conservative) serves as PM
Trollope, <i>The Way We Live Now</i>	1874–1875	
Hardy, <i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>	1874	
Hopkins, <i>The Wreck of the Deutschland</i> composed	1875–1876	
Eliot, <i>Daniel Deronda</i>	1876	
	1877	Victoria proclaimed Empress of India
Gilbert and Sullivan, <i>H.M.S. Pinafore</i> Hardy, <i>The Return of the Native</i> Swinburne, <i>Poems and Ballads</i>	1878	First electric streetlights used in London
Browning, <i>Dramatic Idyls</i> , first series Gilbert and Sullivan, <i>The Pirates of Penzance</i> Merdith, <i>The Egoist</i>	1879	Anglo-Zulu War
	1880–1881	First Anglo-Boer War

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Browning, <i>Dramatic Idyls</i> , second series Tennyson, <i>Ballads, and Other Poems</i>	1880	
Murray (ed.), <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>	1884–1928	
	1884	Greenwich Mean Time established
Gilbert and Sullivan, <i>The Mikado</i> Haggard, <i>King Solomon's Mines</i> Pater, <i>Marius the Epicurean</i> Owen, <i>Autobiography of Rhys Lewis</i>	1885	Congress of Berlin; Nigeria becomes English colony Maxwell predicts and Hertz generates radio waves
Hardy, <i>The Woodlanders</i>	1886–1887	
Gissing, <i>Demos</i> Hardy, <i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i> Stevenson, <i>The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i> Tennyson, <i>Locksley Hall Sixty Years After</i>	1886	
Hardy, <i>Wessex Tales</i>	1888	“Jack the Ripper” killings in Whitechapel, London
Stevenson, <i>The Master of Ballantrae</i> Yeats, <i>The Wanderings of Oisín</i>	1889	
Frazer, <i>The Golden Bough</i>	1890–1915	
Hardy, <i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i> Morris, <i>News from Nowhere</i> Stanley, <i>In Darkest Africa</i> Wilde, <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	1890	Fall of Parnell as leader of Irish Home Rule Party
Doyle, <i>The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes</i> Gissing, <i>New Grub Street</i> Owen, <i>The Trials of Enoc Huws</i> <i>The Strand</i> publishes first issue	1891	London–Paris telephone line established
Gissing, <i>The Odd Women</i> Pinero, <i>The Second Mrs. Tanqueray</i>	1893	First meeting of Independent Labour Party
<i>The Yellow Book</i>	1894–1897	
Kipling, <i>The Jungle Book</i> Shaw, <i>Arms and the Man</i> Wilde, <i>Salome</i>	1894	
Hardy, <i>Jude the Obscure</i> Wells, <i>The Time Machine</i> Wilde, <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i>	1895	Oscar Wilde trials Marconi establishes radio station on the Isle of Wight

Literary event	Date	Historical event	
Housman, <i>A Shropshire Lad</i> <i>Daily Mail</i> founded	1896	Marconi founds the Wireless Telegraph & Signal Company Victoria's Diamond Jubilee Tate Gallery opens Opening of world's first car dealership in London	
Stoker, <i>Dracula</i>	1897		
Hardy, <i>Wessex Poems</i> Wilde, <i>Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	1898		
	1899–1902		Second Boer War
Conrad, "Heart of Darkness" (in <i>Blackwood's</i>) Symons, <i>The Symbolist Movement in Literature</i> Yeats, <i>The Wind Among the Reeds</i>	1899		
Conrad, <i>Lord Jim</i>	1900		University of Birmingham first "red brick" to be granted royal charter
Brown, <i>The House with the Green Shutters</i> Kipling, <i>Kim</i>	1901		Commonwealth of Australia established Victoria succeeded by Edward VII
<i>Times Literary Supplement (TLS)</i> founded	1902		
Butler, <i>The Way of All Flesh</i> Moore, <i>Principia Ethica</i> Shaw, <i>Man and Superman</i> Yeats, <i>In the Seven Woods</i>	1903		
Hardy, <i>The Dynasts</i>	1904–1908		
Barrie, <i>Peter Pan; or, The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up</i> Conrad, <i>Nostramo</i> Synge, <i>Riders to the Sea</i> Abbey Theatre founded	1904	Entente Cordiale signed, ending a century of enmity between Britain and France	
Shaw, <i>Major Barbara</i> Wilde, <i>De Profundis</i>	1905		
Dent begins publishing Everyman's Library	1906	Labour Party founded "Census of the British Empire" states Britain rules one-fifth of the globe	

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Conrad, <i>Secret Agent</i> Gosse, <i>Fathers and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments</i> Synge, <i>The Playboy of the Western World</i>	1907	Anglo-Russian Entente Daylight Savings Time begins Transatlantic radio-telegraph service established
Ford (ed.), <i>The English Review</i>	1908–1937	
Bennett, <i>The Old Wives' Tale</i> Chesterton, <i>The Man Who Was Thursday</i>	1908	Suffragette protest in Parliament Square First advertising lights used in Piccadilly Circus, London Old Age Pensions Act
	1909	Woolworths opens in Liverpool Selfridges opens in London
Levy (ed.), <i>The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. The First Complete and Authorized English Translation</i>	1909–1913	
Russell and Whitehead, <i>Principia Mathematica</i>	1910–1913	
Forster, <i>Howards End</i> Yeats, <i>The Green Helmet and Other Poems</i>	1910	Edward VII succeeded by George V First Post-Impressionist Exhibition in London
Beerbohm, <i>Zuleika Dobson</i> Burnett, <i>The Secret Garden</i> Conrad, <i>Under Western Eyes</i>	1911	First non-stop London to Paris flight
Shaw, <i>Pygmalion</i>	1912	SS <i>Titanic</i> launched, sinks
Lawrence, <i>Sons and Lovers</i> <i>New Statesman</i> founded	1913	
	1914–1918	World War I
Yeats, <i>Responsibilities, Poems and a Play</i> <i>The Egoist</i> Joyce, <i>Dubliners</i> Lewis (ed.), <i>Blast 1</i>	1914–1919	
	1914	Home Rule Bill <i>The World, the Flesh and the Devil</i> , world's first feature-length color film, shown in London
Brooke, <i>1914</i> Ford, <i>The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion</i> Lawrence, <i>The Rainbow</i> Lewis (ed.), <i>Blast 2</i> Richardson, <i>Pointed Roofs</i> Woolf, <i>The Voyage Out</i>	1915	RMS <i>Lusitania</i> sunk by German U-Boat

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Joyce, <i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i> Yeats, <i>Easter</i> 1916	1916	Easter Rising in Dublin
	1916–1922	David Lloyd George serves as PM
Eliot, <i>Prufrock and Other Observations</i> Yeats, <i>The Wild Swans at Coole</i>	1917	T. E. Lawrence joins Arab Revolt against Ottoman Turks Royal family changes family name from Saxe-Coburg and Gotha to Windsor
Hopkins, <i>The Wreck of the Deutschland</i> published Lewis, <i>Tarr</i> Strachey, <i>Eminent Victorians</i>	1918	Suffrage for women over thirty
Sassoon, <i>War Poems</i> Sinclair, <i>Mary Olivier: A Life</i>	1919	Treaty of Versailles Treaty of Rawalpindi establishes Afghan independence First Paris–London air passenger service
Eliot, <i>The Sacred Wood</i> Lawrence, <i>Women in Love</i> Owen, <i>Poems</i>	1920	Fourth Irish Home Rule Act
Wittgenstein, <i>Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus</i> Yeats, <i>Michael Robartes and the Dancer</i> PEN founded in London	1921	Irish Free State established State of emergency declared due to coal miners striking Cairo Conference divides Arabia Gandhi begins Noncooperation Movement in India
<i>The Criterion</i>	1922–1939	
Eliot, <i>The Waste Land</i> Joyce, <i>Ulysses</i> Mansfield, <i>The Garden Party: and Other Stories</i> Woolf, <i>Jacob's Room</i> Yeats, <i>Later Poems</i>	1922	BBC starts daily radio broadcasts
	1922–1923	Irish Civil War

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Huxley, <i>Antic Hay</i>	1923	Transatlantic broadcasting begins Stanley Baldwin (Conservative) serves as PM (–1924, 1924–1929, 1935–1937)
Forster, <i>A Passage to India</i> Hulme, <i>Speculations</i> Richards, <i>The Principles of Literary Criticism</i>	1924	British Empire Exhibition First Labour government; Ramsay MacDonald serves as PM (1924, 1929–1935)
Woolf, <i>The Common Reader</i> Woolf, <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> Yeats, <i>A Vision</i>	1925	Locarno Treaty signed
MacDiarmid, <i>A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle</i> Lawrence, <i>The Seven Pillars of Wisdom</i> O'Casey, <i>The Plough and the Stars</i>	1926	General Strike
Forster, <i>Aspects of the Novel</i> Lewis, <i>Time and Western Man</i> Woolf, <i>To the Lighthouse</i>	1927	Saudi Arabian independence
Hall, <i>The Well of Loneliness</i> Lawrence, <i>Lady Chatterley's Lover</i> Yeats, <i>The Tower</i>	1928	Equal Franchise established
Richards, <i>Practical Criticism</i> Woolf, <i>A Room of One's Own</i>	1929	
Auden, <i>Poems</i> Eliot, <i>Asb Wednesday</i> Empson, <i>Seven Types of Ambiguity</i> Lewis, <i>The Apes of God</i>	1930	Indian Independence declared; Gandhi arrested
Mitchison, <i>The Corn King and the Spring Queen</i> Woolf, <i>The Waves</i>	1931	
Gibbon, <i>A Scots Quair</i>	1932–1934	
Auden, <i>The Orators: An English Study</i> Huxley, <i>Brave New World</i> Linklater, <i>The Men of Ness</i> MacDiarmid, <i>Scots Unbound and Other Poems</i> Roberts (ed.), <i>New Signatures</i>	1932	BBC experiments with television broadcasts Chadwick discovers the neutron Atom split at Cavendish Laboratory
Gunn, <i>Sun Circle</i> Yeats, <i>The Winding Stair</i>	1933	

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Gunn, <i>Butcher's Broom</i> Waugh, <i>A Handful of Dust</i>	1934	
Eliot, <i>Murder in the Cathedral</i> Empson, <i>Some Versions of Pastoral</i> MacNeice, <i>Poems</i> Penguin books begins selling sixpenny paperbacks	1935	Development of Chain Home early detection radar system
Auden, <i>Look Stranger!</i> Muir, <i>Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer</i> Roberts (ed.), <i>Faber Book of Modern Verse</i> Smith, <i>Novel on Yellow Paper</i> Yeats (ed.), <i>The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935</i>	1936	George V succeeded by Edward VIII; abdicates the throne to George VI Crystal Palace destroyed in fire
Auden and MacNeice, <i>Letters from Iceland</i> Jones, <i>In Parenthesis</i> Lewis, <i>Revenge for Love</i> Orwell, <i>The Road to Wigan Pier</i> Tolkien, <i>The Hobbit</i>	1937	Color television exhibited in London
Beckett, <i>Murphy</i> Bowen, <i>The Death of the Heart</i> MacNeice, <i>Modern Poetry</i> Yeats, <i>New Poems</i>	1938	Munich Agreement Freud relocates his home and practice to London
	1939–1945	World War II
Barke, <i>The Land of the Leal</i> Eliot, <i>The Family Reunion</i> Joyce, <i>Finnegans Wake</i> Rhys, <i>Good Morning, Midnight</i> Yeats, <i>Last Poems and Two Plays</i>	1939	
Auden, <i>New York Letter</i> Greene, <i>The Power and the Glory</i> Koestler, <i>Darkness at Noon</i> Thomas, <i>Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog</i>	1940	Battle of Britain Winston Churchill (Conservative) serves as PM (–1945, 1951–1955)
Coward, <i>Blithe Spirit</i> Gunn, <i>The Silver Darlings</i> Woolf, <i>Between the Acts</i>	1941	Atlantic Charter signed Pro-Soviet paper <i>Daily Worker</i> suppressed by Labour government (–1942)
Gunn, <i>The Serpent</i>	1943	

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Cary, <i>The Horse's Mouth</i>	1944	Operation Overlord (D-Day) in Normandy, France
Green, <i>Loving</i> Isherwood, <i>The Berlin Stories</i> Larkin, <i>The North Ship</i> Orwell, <i>Animal Farm</i> Linklater, <i>Private Angelo</i>	1945	Yalta Agreement
	1946	First General Assembly of United Nations in London Heathrow Airport converted to civilian use
Auden, <i>The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue</i>	1947	Independence of India and Pakistan
Eliot, <i>Notes Toward the Definition of Culture</i> Leavis, <i>The Great Tradition</i>	1948	British Nationality Act <i>Empire Windrush</i> carries first large group of West Indian migrants to UK Treaty of Brussels Independence of Burma (Myanmar) London Underground nationalized
Bowen, <i>The Heat of the Day</i> Eliot, <i>The Cocktail Party</i> Orwell, <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> Thomas, <i>All Things Betray Thee</i>	1949	NATO pact signed Republic of Ireland created
Lessing, <i>The Grass Is Singing</i>	1950	
Powell, <i>A Dance to the Music of Time</i>	1951–1975	
Beckett, <i>Molloy</i>	1951	
Jones, <i>Anathemata</i>	1952	George VI succeeded by Elizabeth II Great Smog caused by coal pollutants kills over 4000 people in London
Beckett, <i>Watt</i> Clarke, <i>Expedition to Earth</i> Fleming, <i>Casino Royale</i> Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i>	1953	Watson and Crick propose double-helix model of DNA
Amis, <i>Lucky Jim</i> Eliot, <i>The Confidential Clerk</i> Golding, <i>Lord of the Flies</i> Murdoch, <i>Under the Net</i>	1954	Food rationing ends in Britain, nine years after end of WWII End of British occupation of Egypt

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Beckett, <i>Waiting for Godot</i> (first British performance) Greene, <i>The Quiet American</i> Jenkins, <i>The Cone-Gatherers</i> Larkin, <i>The Less Deceived</i>	1955	Commercial TV begins broadcasting in England
Conquest (ed.), <i>New Lines</i> Jenkins, <i>Guests of War</i> Osborne, <i>Look Back in Anger</i> Selvon, <i>The Lonely Londoners</i>	1956	Clean Air Act Sudanese independence Egypt nationalizes Suez Canal, leading to Suez Crisis Death penalty abolished Installation of first transatlantic telephone cable
Beckett, <i>Endgame</i> Pinter, <i>The Birthday Party</i> Pinter, <i>The Dumb Waiter</i> Spark, <i>The Comforters</i>	1957	
Beckett, <i>Krapp's Last Tape</i> Jenkins, <i>The Changeling</i> Williams, <i>Culture and Society: 1780–1950</i>	1958	First transatlantic passenger air service between London and NYC Notting Hill race riots
Braithwaite, <i>To Sir, With Love</i> MacInnes, <i>Absolute Beginners</i> Sillitoe, <i>The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner</i> Snow, <i>Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution</i>	1959	
	1960–1966	Cyprus, Somalia, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, Zambia, Maldives, Gambia, Botswana, Barbados, Lesotho gain independence
Pinter, <i>The Caretaker</i> Spark, <i>The Ballad of Peckham Rye</i>	1960	The Beatles form in Liverpool
Beckett, <i>Happy Days</i> Spark, <i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</i>	1961	
Alvarez (ed.), <i>The New Poetry</i> Burgess, <i>A Clockwork Orange</i> Lessing, <i>The Golden Notebook</i>	1962	The Rolling Stones form in London
Thompson, <i>The Making of the English Working Class</i>	1963	Profumo Affair

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Friel, <i>Philadelphia, Here I Come</i> Larkin, <i>The Whitsun Weddings</i>	1964	Harold Wilson (Labour) serves as PM (–1970, 1974–1976) Radio Caroline begins pirate broadcasts from ship off Suffolk coastline
Muir, <i>Collected Poems</i> Orton, <i>Loot</i> Pinter, <i>The Homecoming</i>	1965	
Heaney, <i>Death of a Naturalist</i> Orton, <i>The Erpingham Camp</i> Rhys, <i>Wide Sargasso Sea</i> Scott, <i>The Jewel in the Crown</i> Stoppard, <i>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead</i>	1966	<i>Daily Express</i> names Twiggy “The Face of 1966”
Henri, McGough, Patten, <i>The Mersey Sound</i>	1967	Abortion Act of 1967
Hill, <i>King Log</i> Prynne, <i>Kitchen Poems</i> Stoppard, <i>The Real Inspector</i> Crisp, <i>The Naked Civil Servant</i> Booker-McConnell Prize established	1968	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Signed (May)
Heaney, <i>Door into the Dark</i> Fowles, <i>The French Lieutenant's Woman</i> Friel, <i>Grace and Miss Partridge</i> Orton, <i>What the Butler Saw</i>	1969	“Monty Python’s Flying Circus” debuts on BBC
Hughes, <i>Crow</i> Spark, <i>The Driver's Seat</i>	1970	
Forster, <i>Maurice</i> Pinter, <i>Old Times</i> Spark, <i>Not to Disturb</i>	1971	Immigration Act
Beckett, <i>Not I</i>	1972	Bloody Sunday
Ballard, <i>Crash</i> Murdoch, <i>The Black Prince</i> Shaffer, <i>Equus</i> Williams, <i>The Country and the City</i>	1973	
Larkin, <i>High Windows</i> Lessing, <i>Memoirs of a Survivor</i>	1974	Direct rule of Northern Ireland established

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Ballard, <i>High Rise</i> Jhabvala, <i>Heat and Dust</i> McIlvanney, <i>Docherty</i>	1975	The Sex Pistols form in London
Dhondy, <i>East End at Your Feet</i>	1976	
Murdoch, <i>The Sea, the Sea</i>	1977	Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee
	1978	
	1979–1990	
Churchill, <i>Cloud Nine</i> Friel, <i>Aristocrats</i>	1979	Margaret Thatcher (Conservative) serves as PM
Friel, <i>Translations</i>	1980	
Gray, <i>Lanark</i> Rushdie, <i>Midnight's Children</i>	1981	
Churchill, <i>Top Girls</i> Morrison and Motion (eds.), <i>The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Verse</i>	1982	
Eagleton, <i>Literary Theory: An Introduction</i> Swift, <i>Waterland</i>	1983	Falkland Islands War
Amis, <i>Money: A Suicide Note</i> Ballard, <i>Empire of the Sun</i> Carter, <i>Nights at the Circus</i> Kelman, <i>The Busconductor Hines</i> Lodge, <i>Small World</i>	1984	US invasion of Grenada
Byatt, <i>Still Life</i> Winterson, <i>Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit</i>	1985	Hong Kong again put under Chinese control
Banks, <i>The Bridge</i>	1986	
Crozier and Longville (eds.), <i>A Various Art</i> Winterson, <i>The Passion</i>	1987	Introduction of national educational curriculum
Allnut <i>et al.</i> (eds.), <i>the new british poetry</i> Hollinghurst, <i>The Swimming-Pool Library</i> Jenkins, <i>Just Duffy</i> Rushdie, <i>The Satanic Verses</i>	1988	

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Amis, <i>London Fields</i> Kelman, <i>A Disaffection</i> Massie, <i>A Question of Loyalties</i> Ishiguro, <i>The Remains of the Day</i> Winterson, <i>Sexing the Cherry</i>	1989	Berlin Wall falls Tiananmen Square protests <i>Fatwa</i> issued by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie
Byatt, <i>Possession: A Romance</i> Dhondy, <i>Bombay Duck</i> Friel, <i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i> Kureishi, <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i>	1990	Nelson Mandela freed
Barker, <i>Regeneration</i> trilogy (–1995) Massie, <i>The Sins of the Fathers</i> Self, <i>The Quantity Theory of Insanity</i>	1991	First Gulf War Damien Hirst exhibits tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde at Saatchi Gallery
Carter, <i>Wise Children</i> Spark, <i>Curriculum Vitae</i>	1992	
Welsh, <i>Trainspotting</i> Winterson, <i>Written on the Body</i>	1993	
Gray, <i>A History Maker</i> Hollinghurst, <i>The Folding Star</i> Kelman, <i>How Late It Was, How Late</i> Prynne, <i>Her Weasels Wild Returning</i>	1994	Channel Tunnel opened
Hornby, <i>High Fidelity</i> Kureishi, <i>The Black Album</i>	1995	
Deane, <i>Reading in the Dark</i> Fielding, <i>Bridget Jones's Diary</i> Heaney, <i>The Spirit Level</i> Madden, <i>One by One in the Darkness</i> Swift, <i>Last Orders</i>	1996	Panic over Mad Cow disease
	1997–2007	Tony Blair serves as PM
Rowling, <i>Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone</i> Roy, <i>The God of Small Things</i>	1997	Death of Princess Diana
Kay, <i>Trumpet</i> McEwan, <i>Amsterdam</i> Waters, <i>Tipping the Velvet</i>	1998	Good Friday Agreement establishes devolved Northern Irish government Scotland Act establishes devolved Scottish Parliament and government

Literary event	Date	Historical event
Hill, <i>The Triumph of Love</i> Patterson, <i>The International</i> Waters, <i>Affinity</i>	1999	
Fitt, <i>But n Ben A-Go-Go</i> Newland and Sesay (eds.), <i>IC3: The Penguin Book of New Black Writing in Britain</i> Smith, <i>White Teeth</i>	2000	
Carson, <i>Shamrock Tea</i> McEwan, <i>Atonement</i> O'Neill, <i>At Swim, Two Boys</i>	2001	9/11
Waters, <i>Fingersmith</i>	2002	US invades Iraq with support of UK
Hollinghurst, <i>The Line of Beauty</i>	2004	
	2005	Freedom of Information Act 7/7 London bombings
Heaney, <i>District and Circle</i>	2006	