

Militancy, Commitment, and Marxist Ideology in the Fiction of  
Dan Billany

By

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Submitted in accordance with the regulations governing the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy, University of Leicester.

1999

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### *Abstract*

Dan Billany (1913-1943?) published only four novels, yet in those novels he engages in the debates that preoccupy Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Billany's view of the period, however, differs from that of his more famous contemporaries. As a young working class man, he challenges contemporary assumptions about this literary period, arguing that the more bourgeois writers have a false view of the working class. This study aims to recast the political and literary memory of the 1930s and 1940s in order to show how a young working class writer from the North of England defines and shapes Marxist and literary tradition to further his revolutionary ideals. The ultimate goal of this dissertation is to provoke the debate that will give Billany, badly underrated, the attention he deserves. Due recognition of his fiction will help to expand the critical view of the 1930s and 1940s. Billany actively engages not only with the period but with those writers who have traditionally been seen as defining that literary period. His attacks on writers such as John Galsworthy and W.H. Auden show that Billany is trying to develop a truly radical Communist working class literary tradition. As an educated working class man and a committed Communist, Billany offers an alternative view to the traditional and conservative attitudes associated with pre-war and wartime writing.

Word Count: 95,768



**Dan Billany**  
(1913 - 1943?)

**This work is dedicated to the memory of  
Dan Billany and the men and women who,  
like him, did not return home.**

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank Joan Brake, Dan Billany's sister. Without her help and encouragement this study would be a pale imitation of the final work. I would like to thank Dr. Patrick Quinn and Dr. Bernard Bergonzi for their tireless work as my supervisory team. My thanks also goes to my examiners, Dr. Christopher Ringrose and Dr. Roger Bowen. Richard Bapty, who has since moved on, was indispensable in the library, as was Joseph Cahoon at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas at Austin. Mike Sanders was a constant source of helpful advice and suggestions, and Dr. Peter King offered great assistance in helping to fill in the historical background. I would also like to express my deep gratitude to everyone at the Nene Centre for Research: Prof. David Briggs, Lynn Timson, Charlotte Spokes, Michelle Webster, Maria Isaac, and Steve Varty.

A doctoral candidate also needs a great deal of personal support, and I have been lucky enough to have a number of people to help me through the rough times, whether they were aware of their help or not. Without the support of the following people this dissertation would not have been possible: John Denny, Michelle Denby, Christine Simmonds, Ahmad Al-Khattat, Janet Jackson, Robert Gunn, Laurence Marriott, Elizabeth Hurren, Charlie Blake, Dr Steven Trout, Debra Rae Cohen, Dave and Ruth Scales, Kay McCarthy, Gordon White, Tom Sullivan, Chris-Anne Stumpf, Irini Charitou, Charlie and Sue Murphy, Louise Scarff, and Jenny Townend.

I would also like to thank my parents, Denis and Sharyn Cloutier, and my sister and brother-in-law, Shelley and Joseph Gudger, and my niece, Alicia.

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## Chronology of Dan Billany's life

- 1913 - born in Hull
- 1927 - leaves the Selby Street West Council School, becomes an errand boy
- 1929 - becomes apprenticed as an electrician
- 1929-30 - attends Boulevard Evening School and studies Mathematics, English, Technical Drawing, Elementary Science, Electrical Engineering, Mechanics and Heating
- 1931- 33 - attends the Hull Education Commission's Munciple Technical College (studies Chemistry, Mathematics, French, and Physics), as well as the City of Hull College of Commerce
- 1932 - went on the dole, came before the Means Test Committee which forced him off.
- 1935 - passes University of London Intermediate Exam in Arts for external students (November)
  - wins a scholarship to Hull University
- 1936 - passes University of London Bachelor of Arts Honours exam for external students in the subsidiary subject of French (June)
- 1937 - takes an Honours degree in English
  - gives lecture to the Fellowship of Debate club on "The Platonic Spirit in English Poetry" (December 21)
- 1938 - earns his teaching certificate with a probationary period of one year (June 7)
  - begins teaching at Chiltern Street School with annual salary of £204 (August 23)
- 1940 - appears in front of medical board in York (August 27 - letter dated 19 August)
  - joins the army and commissioned as a Second Lieutenant with the Fourth Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment. *The Opera House Murders* is published.
- 1941 - stationed at Helston (letter dated 21 January)
  - family home in Hull destroyed by a seamine in a German raid, mother and father seriously injured; the family relocates to Somerset (April 25)
  - Cadet Number 223914 stationed at Vyrnyw West End Pwllheli, North Wales (May 8)
  - stationed at Bodmin, Cornwall C Company, 7 East Yorkshire Regiment (December 11)
  - battalion disembarked at Suez after an uneventful trip on the *Empress of Russia* (late)



- 1942 - in the Western Desert, Billany's Battalion sees its first action (March)
- Germans and Italians under the leadership of Rommel launch a counterattack against the Allied forces (May)
  - Billany is taken prisoner and the battalion virtually wiped out after five days of sustained armour attack which Rommel personally led (June 1)
  - officially reported missing (June 4)
  - family receives telegram that he has been reported missing (June 23)
  - family receives news confirming that he is missing (June 25)
  - family receives telegram reporting that he is an Italian prisoner (June 26)
  - POW Number P/194844
  - held at Camp No. 66 P.M. 3400, Italy (July 28)
  - promoted to Lieutenant (effective October 1)
- 1942 - 1943 - POW, first held at Capua near Naples, then was sent North to Rezzanello near Piacenza, and finally transferred to Fontanellato near Parma in Northern Italy. At some point he meet and became close friends with David Dowie who co-wrote *The Cage* with him. Both *The Cage* and *The Trap* written during this period
- 1943 - held at Camp No. 17 P.M. 3200, Italy (January 27)
- *The Magic Door* published
  - Italy surrenders to the Allies, Billany escapes from camp. Germany invades Northern Italy; Billany stranded behind the German lines, depending on the kindness of Italian farmers for protection (September 8)
  - prisoners move six miles away from camp as German soldiers are expected; Billany and Dowie begin living on a farm (September 9)
  - Billany, Dowie, and two other escaped POWs (John Fleming and Alec Harding) discovered by German troops. They had decided to head south before it began to snow in order to meet the oncoming Allied forces. Fleming and Billany attempt to recover a diary Billany has kept. Fleming becomes separated from Billany and never sees Billany or the other two POWs again. Fleming escapes the German patrol. (October)
  - the paperback edition of *The Cage* and Alan Munton both report Billany and Dowie were seen in Mantua. This is so far unsubstantiated. (December)
- 1945 - a former fellow-prisoner reported that Billany was killed near Fermo, on the Adriatic coast of Italy, when he and another man went to confront a third former British POW who was betraying his fellow countrymen to the Germans. This story is unsubstantiated.
- 1946 - the manuscripts of *The Cage* and *The Trap*, which had been given to a friendly Italian farmer who lived near Soragna (near the prison camp) for safe keeping, sent to Billany's father (Spring)
- 1949 - *The Cage* is published
- 1950 - *The Trap* is published (1 September)

## Chapter One: Dan Billany: A Life of Commitment

Writing the first full length study of Dan Billany's fiction is fraught with problems. The most serious problem is that, unlike other writers of the period (Auden, Isherwood, Orwell), serious discussion of Billany's work is almost non-existent. Those critics who do write on Billany place him within the larger context of the Second World War. Any discussion of Billany has, therefore, become subordinate to the larger subject. The most extended examination of Billany's work to date is in Alan Munton's *English Fiction of the Second World War* (1989). His book, however, is, by his own admission, intended merely to be an introduction upon which subsequent critics would build. As a result, his discussion of Billany is brief. An earlier book, Ken Worpole's *Dockers and Detectives* (1983) also provides a useful, if even more brief, discussion of Billany. Both Munton and Worpole, who deal with only two of Billany's four published novels (*The Cage* and *The Trap*), are more concerned with exploring the larger issue of wartime fiction. Billany becomes an interesting but passing figure in their studies.

Billany is briefly mentioned in Holger Klein's chapter "Britain" in *The Second World War in Fiction* (1984) and in Adam Piette's *Imagination at War* (1995). Piette uses Billany's novel *The Trap* merely for descriptive purposes, to show what life was like in the Desert War. Klein groups, wrongly as I will argue later, *The Trap* in a list of novels that support the idea of the Second World War as "The People's War". Klein never explains why he believes that Billany supports the People's War as he merely mentions the novel in the midst of a longer list. Andy Croft, in *Red Letter*

*Days* (1990) and the introduction to *A Weapon in the Struggle* (1998), points to Billany's work but never discusses him, only mentioning him in passing. In fairness to Croft, it must be noted that Billany does not fit into the subject of either book. Any critic writing on Billany, then, is exploring new areas, finding his or her own way through Billany's thought and work. Any discussion, then, must rely heavily on contemporary reviews of Billany's novels, which were usually well received. For example, *The Times Literary Supplement* reviewed three of Billany's four novels (*The Magic Door* being the exception). Luckily, there is primary material available. The manuscripts of *The Cage* and *The Trap* are held at the Imperial War Museum in London. Also, Billany's surviving sister, Mrs Joan Brake, holds a number of letters and documents, including unpublished fiction and poetry. These papers provide an insight into Dan Billany the man and his relationships with those around him<sup>1</sup>.

With the lack of any real discussion of Billany's work, all attempts to place him within the tradition of not only British literature but also working class literature must be initially tentative. Even with the various primary documents, there are still gaps in the knowledge of Billany and his life. For example, there is no evidence whether Billany was a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain or not. His political sympathies certainly lie with the Communists more than any other Party, but whether he was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party is, at this point,

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, a number of letters from T.S. Eliot, concerning the publication of Billany's novels *The Opera House Murders* (published by Faber) and *The Magic Door* (declined by Faber and ultimately published by Thomas Nelson and Sons), form a part of these papers.

unknown. Joan Brake, in a letter dated 16 November, 1997, writes that “in my opinion Dan was a member of the Communist Party, but his membership lapsed, probably pre-war.” Whether Billany was a member of the party or not, his sister is right to believe he moved away from the Party by 1939. Certainly his attitude toward the Second World War was at odds with the change in policy of the Communist Party. As later chapters will show, Billany always saw the war as a war between two imperialistic powers, even after the Communist Party abandoned that view of the war following Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.

One of the major aims of this study, as a consequence, is to explore Billany’s political and literary ideas, in an attempt to connect him to Marxist ideology. The study will explore his literary and philosophical view points, comparing his ideas to those of his better known contemporaries. Billany explore many of the same issues that writers such as the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and the poet W.H. Auden do. Billany’s particular type of Communism, his particular interpretation, is difficult to ascertain. He did not leave a manifesto or a clear statement of his Communist beliefs. All the critic is left with are, and perhaps this is as it should be, his novels. Even the novels themselves are problematic, as they do not always follow an orthodox Communist line. As the next chapter will show, Billany followed a very individualistic view of Communism and attacks other more bourgeois writers, such as John Galsworthy and W.H. Auden, whom he sees as pseudo-revolutionaries. A name that will crop up in comparison with Billany quite often is George Orwell. Billany, in some ways, follows a similar path as Orwell. Both follow individualistic political directions which, at times, are at odds with orthodox Communist thought. Billany’s sense of community and commitment to others is what drives his political convictions

rather than an adherence to a Party. In Billany's published work references to political parties are rare. The only party that gets a brief mention in *The Cage* is the Liberal Party. Billany's concern in all his published novels is not with party politics but with the effects of capitalism on the individual. As a later chapter will show, Michael Carr, Billany's narrator in *The Trap*, recognises, as he stands in a prisoner-of-war camp with a letter from his wife in his hand, that only the connections between people matter. Billany echoes E.M. Forster's idea of "Only connect" from *Howard's End*. Carr states that "Only the sufferings are real. The causes for which we suffer are contemptible and ridiculous" (380). The causes to which Carr refers are the war, capitalism, and global politics. Looking at the postmark on the letter, Carr writes

God, the barbed wire itself seemed to melt away from round me as that hand stretched in for me. And there I stood looking at that letter: seeing Elizabeth's writing: knowing that when I broke the censor's sealing-strip, I should have her with me again: knowing that the period of separation was over. (380)

If one were to look for a passage that encapsulates Billany's main purpose in his all work, this would be the one. A letter from his wife frees him from his captivity. Nothing matters for him just the knowledge that Elizabeth, his wife, is there. The connection between individuals is all important.

Billany's focus on the individual is, at times, almost American. His views resemble those of the nineteenth century American philosopher Henry David Thoreau. Billany fuses the ideas of Thoreau with what Billany sees as the best elements of Communism. Billany follows Thoreau's dictum in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" that "[t]he only obligation which I have a right to assume, is to do at any time what I think right" (223). Thoreau argues that a citizen in any society is only

bound to do what he or she thinks is right, even if the citizen conflicts with and opposes what society deems to be law and order. Thoreau famously spent a night in prison in 1845 for refusing to pay taxes. Billany's fiction begins from the same assumption. Billany's positive characters follow their own consciences even though it brings them into conflict with authority. In his children's fantasy, *The Magic Door*, the group of schoolboys on whom the novel focuses ignore their teacher and the school superintendent in order to continue to enjoy the adventures that the magic door holds. In *The Opera House Murders*, Billany's narrator-detective, Robbie Duncan, risks death to protect those who surround him. In *The Trap*, Michael Carr struggles, and ultimately fails, to protect the soldiers under his command.

There are fundamental differences between Billany and Thoreau, however. In "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience", Thoreau writes that

[t]he government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war, the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for, in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure. (222)

Here Thoreau points to ideas of government and war that Billany will discuss in his work. Thoreau implies that the people can exert their influence through the government, even though, he acknowledges, the government is "at best but an expedient" (222), arguing that the government has merely been co-opted by a minority before the people (i.e. the majority) can have their say. Billany, on the other hand, never sees the government as a way for the people to execute their will, as Thoreau does. Billany agrees that the government is co-opted by a small group of people, but Billany, the Communist, sees the system as being the fundamental problem. Thoreau has an idealistic view of the power of the masses, writing that "the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority

are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest” (223). Thoreau believes that the mass through sheer physical superiority can rule the minority, that the will of the people *can* be achieved through the means of a “democratic” government. Billany, being a Communist, argues that the minority, the capitalist minority, will always rule the majority, who will continually suffer under the current system. In Billany’s view, the government will never reflect the will of the people. As later chapters will show, *The Trap* is the novel in which Billany attacks the capitalist system, showing that the government is nothing more than an extension of capitalism. In *The Trap*, the government and capitalism are one. Michael T. Gilmore in “Walden and the ‘Curse of Trade’”<sup>2</sup> writes that Thoreau “sees the marketplace not as a discipline in self-reliance, an arena where the man of enterprise can prove his worth, but rather as a site of humiliation where the seller has to court and conciliate potential buyers to gain their custom” (103). Billany, in the highly industrialised twentieth century, views the marketplace with a harder edge than the nineteenth century Thoreau. Billany shares Thoreau’s idea that the marketplace is a site of humiliation but not for the seller, as Thoreau argues, but the buyer. Billany reverses Thoreau’s idea, turning Thoreau on his head. Instead of the seller being forced to humiliate him or herself by courting and conciliating potential buyers, the buyer, especially the working class, is trapped in a cycle of economic exploitation by the capitalist sellers.

For Thoreau, his individualism and his social concern became increasing at odds with each other. Joseph Wood Krutch, in *Henry David Thoreau*, writes that “throughout the rest of [Thoreau’s] life the need to reconcile his defiant individualism

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<sup>2</sup> Originally published in *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985); reprinted in *Modern Critical Interpretation: Henry David Thoreau’s Walden* (1987) from which I quote.

with his concern over a public matter was to trouble him more and more” (133). Billany has no such trouble; he is able to bring together his individualistic impulses (as seen in the likes of Robbie Duncan) and a desire to help others. Billany uses his individualism to motivate his social concerns. For Thoreau, individualism and social concern increasingly become contradictory influences that pull him in opposing directions. Billany’s Communism allows him, perhaps ironically, to reconcile the forces of individualism and social concern. Disillusionment sets in for Thoreau when he realises that change within the existing system becomes increasingly unlikely. Billany does not have that inherent belief in the existing political structures. For Billany, individual freedom comes not from the existing governmental structure, as Thoreau believes, but through a social, Communist, revolution.

This individualism gives his characters the freedom to follow their own consciences. For example, Robbie Duncan, in *The Opera House Murders*, works well with Detective-Inspector Ted Fraser who is investigating the murder on behalf of Scotland Yard. Readers would normally not expect the easy relations between Duncan and Fraser. To begin with, one would assume that Duncan, as a Socialist, would distrust Fraser as the representative of the State, the police enforcing the oppressive capitalist law and order. In terms of genre, a reader would expect Duncan to be at odds with Fraser, as traditionally, detectives and the police distrust each other. Sherlock Holmes enjoys baiting Lestrade, and Philip Marlowe, in Raymond Chandler’s novels, works with the police only when he is forced. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, Randall from the Los Angeles police department is, at times, forced into threatening Marlowe to get co-operation: “One false move out of you and you’ll be locked up as a material witness” (92). The working relationship between the detective and the police is far more congenial in *The Opera House Murders* in which Duncan tells Fraser, “I’m clear, Ted. Further, since it’s you, I’ll help you all I can” (56). Duncan responds to Fraser as an individual. Unlike the representatives of the police that Marlowe encounters, Duncan knows and respects Fraser. The police in Chandler become nothing more than faceless names; Chandler rarely bothers to give Christian



names to the members of the police force. Duncan and Fraser, having met before, call each other by their Christian names. Duncan's individualism allows him to trust Fraser and together they solve the murder, consulting and testing out theories on each other.

Billany's fiction, then, celebrates commitment to the individual. He cuts through the dogmatic attitudes toward Marxism and posits ideas that Marx explored early in his career. David Fernbach, in the introduction to the first volume of a Penguin collection of Marx's writing (*The Revolutions of 1848*), states that Marx's early thought was influenced by the humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach (14). Alex Callinicos, in *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx*, writes that Feuerbach's main thesis was that "philosophy's starting point had to be, not God or the Idea, but human beings and the material conditions in which they live" (24). This is an idea that Billany approves of; in fact, it is the basis of Billany's entire political philosophy. Feuerbach's influence hung over Marx even after he had converted to Communism and wrote works such as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Marx was, however, eventually to reject Feuerbach's ideas; Fernbach writes that Marx had made an "a desperate but untenable attempt to integrate the realities of political economy and communism into the philosophical humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach" (16). For Marx, according to Fernbach, humanism and Communism became incompatible, and Marx would turn to historical materialism and scientific Communism to explain his theories. Alex Callinicos simply states that "Marx's criticism of Feuerbach was that he did not go far enough" (76). Feuerbach, in the end, did not propose the radical solutions to social problems that Marx sought. That may be true, but, for Billany, the essential idea is that humans need to be placed at the centre of thought and concern.

Modern humanist thought holds humanity at the centre of attention and eschews the will of God<sup>3</sup>. Billany, like the Humanists, is concerned with and focuses on humans. The difference is that Billany combines this with a belief in Communism. Communism becomes the tool through which humans can achieve happiness. This fusion of humanism and Communism sets Billany apart from those Marxists, such as Louis Althusser, who move toward a more scientific view of Marxist ideology and away from the Hegelian aspects of Marx's early works.

Billany, unlike Marx, is able to maintain a sense of humanism and individualism while still being a committed Communist. Billany clearly is steeped in the language Communism. Carr's statement in *The Trap* that he will "not cease to smash my fist into the vacant, grinning face of our cant civilization" (366) and Alan's comment (and reference to Marx) in *The Cage* that "Philosophers interpret the world, but it is also necessary to change it" (181) show Billany's knowledge of Communist rhetoric. Even with an understanding of Marxist theory, Billany is able to remind the reader constantly that Communism must be based on the bond of love, affection, and commitment between human beings. All the positive characters in Billany's fiction (Robbie Duncan in *The Opera House Murders*, the children in *The Magic Door*, Dan and David in *The Cage*, and Michael Carr in *The Trap*) constantly fight and struggle not for their own selfish needs but for the other characters in the novels. They work either collectively (as in *The Magic Door* and *The Cage*) or independently (as in *The Opera House Murders* and *The Trap*) to help other people survive in an oppressive society. The schoolboys, trapped in the past, and the prisoners, trapped in a prisoner-of-war camp, learn to depend on each other for survival; they can only withstand their

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<sup>3</sup> According to Alan Lacey in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Renaissance Humanism still maintained a belief in God as the creator, while modern Humanism moved away from a belief in God, in the nineteenth century, as a result of the debates caused by the ideas developed by Darwin.

trials through collective action. Robbie Duncan and Michael Carr fight as individuals to protect the weak, those who cannot protect themselves. All negative characters, including faceless bureaucrats, (William Bailey in *The Opera House Murders*, the teacher Rocket in *The Magic Door*, Henry in *The Cage*, and the government and the army in *The Trap*) are unwilling to concern themselves with others and hold their own interests above all else.

What experiences and background, then, helped to shape Billany's highly individualistic views? This study is intended to begin to answer that question, to fill in some of the gaps in the understanding of Billany. In particular, I hope to place Billany within a radical, working class tradition by focusing largely on his politics. The literature of the 1930s and 1940s tends to be dominated by the more middle class responses to the period. Samuel Hynes dubs the 1930s "The Auden Generation". This is a very narrow definition of what constitutes a "generation"; Hynes writes that "[w]hat makes a generation aware of itself as a collective entity must depend on two things: consciousness of unique shared experience, and a sense that that experience distinguishes persons who have shared it from those who have not, or who live through it in other ways" (17). The inherent problem with such a narrow definition is that a small group of writers, like Auden and his circle, become seen as the representative voices of the larger period, whether they are or not. As a result, other voices, such as Billany's, are pushed to the margins. Hynes, for example, has a very narrow definition of who constitutes the "generation" of the 1930s, writing "I am concerned with one generation of writers, the men and women born in England between 1900 and the First World War, who came of age in the 'twenties and lived through their early maturity during the depression" (9) and that "most of the writers I deal with here came from professional families, and were educated at public schools and at Oxford or Cambridge" (10-11). While an examination of the Auden circle is perfectly legitimate, accepting it as the representative view of the 1930s naturally skews the view of the period. While Auden and his friends are representative of a

certain part of British society, they are not representative of other groups, an idea that Billany will pick up on later and attack.

Literary elites (writers and critics) decide who is included in the canon. John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* argues that in the early twentieth century rewriting “or reinventing the mass was an enterprise in which early twentieth-century intellectuals invested immense imaginative effort, and it naturally generated a wide variety of identities. The aim of all these rewritings was the same, however: to segregate the intellectuals from the mass, and to acquire the control over the mass that language gives” (23). Through language and the presentation of the mass of people, the elite establishes a barrier between them and the mass, creating a canon that excludes marginalised voices. Janet Montefiore writes in *Men and Women of the 1930s* that her book is, in part, “intended to correct the currently available gender-blind accounts of the literature of the 1930s” (1). I would argue that not only are the current accounts gender-blind but are also class-blind. Writing by the working class tends to be excluded. Writing again about women’s literature, Montefiore states that “this work [by women] was being marketed and read as ‘women’s writing’, abstracted from its historical context” (1). This has also happened with working class writing. Literary history has its canon, for the 1930s comprised of the Auden group, and on the outside is a group of various “lesser” writers, the women writers and the working class writers. These “lesser” writers are always outside and rarely accepted into the canon. If they are, like Walter Greenwood for example, they are only grudgingly accepted. Since critics are forced to accept “working class” writers into the literary scene, Walter Greenwood becomes “representative” of the view from the working class, marginalising more radical voices, such as Billany, even further.

This study aims to expand how literary criticism defines what constitutes the “generation” of the 1930s, in order to broaden the canon of the period in an effort to be more inclusive. Hynes’s definition of the middle class, public school writers who attended Oxford or Cambridge excludes Billany who, although born within the dates Hynes states, was not born into a professional family, was not educated at a public

school, and graduated from Hull. While it could be argued that Hynes is concentrating on, in Gramscian terms, the hegemonic, Hynes seems moves beyond merely discussing those who have cultural control when he makes statements such as “Virtually no writing of literary importance came out of the working class during the decade” (11), a statement Gramsci would never make. This is certainly true in the limited terms that Hynes defines as the 1930s, but is it true in the larger literary scene? By broadening the canon and allowing writers like Billany in, critics can get a true sense of the socio-political and literary context of the 1930s and 1940s. Only through discussion of writers who have been pushed to the margins, like Dan Billany, can a true “generation” be defined.

Billany was born in Hull in 1913 and was well educated in militancy. Billany’s family has a tradition of militancy, as his great-grandfather Neiles Boynton Billany stood for Parliament in 1885. The Hull Radical Club had nominated N.B. Billany, “a radical working-class intellectual, and member of the local Painters’ Society” (Brown, 7-8), to run as a candidate in the election for Hull Central. As Raymond Brown points out, it was the first time a working man had ever stood for Parliament (8). He lost the election to the Tory candidate Seymour King and garnered 735 votes (Brown, 8). N.B. Billany eventually became, according to Brown, “more involved with Secularism, Republicanism and general Radical politics (14) and moved away from trade unionism.

Growing up in northern England early in the twentieth century would have also exposed Dan Billany to increasingly radical politics in society at large. His fiction reflects the shift in politics that took place between 1880 and 1939. Late in the nineteenth century, Hull moved toward more radical, working class politics. Raymond Brown writes that, while “Hull was a stronghold of the Liberal Party until the mid 1880s” (6), the political situation

began to change after 1894, and the Hull Council then became more enterprising and less dedicated to a particularly barren ideology of the self-made man. It seems likely that one of the factors leading to this new municipal dynamism was the

appearance of working-class representatives in local government. (6)

This shift in the political landscape was widespread. Keith Laybourn, in *The Rise of Labour*, explains why the Liberal Party lost influence among the working class and writes that

Even as late as 1890 the Labour movement was a weak vehicle for the political aspirations of the working class. Trade unionism was patchy and trades councils were only just beginning to emerge in many areas. In truth, the Liberal party had little to worry about and was confident in its estimation that at least two-thirds of the working-class voters would continue to vote Liberal in the future. It was the almost endemic weakness of organized Labour which deluded the Liberal party into thinking that it could stand still in the face of the 'little breezes' of discontent that occasionally emerged. What the national Liberal party, and its local organizations, failed to appreciate was the seething discontent which had erupted among trade unionists from the late 1880s onwards. This neglect combined with working-class anger and frustration to produce an independent Labour movement. (18)

British politics, therefore, witnessed a shift from a more moderate Liberal position to a more radical working class position. Billany's fiction clearly shows an extreme dislike of those who would call themselves "Liberal"; at times, his denunciations are almost hysterical. Billany and others like him felt that the Liberals were not fundamentally concerned with the working class, and Billany felt that a more radical solution to the problems of the working class was necessary. The Liberal Party failed to recognise the extreme dissatisfaction among the working class. To be fair, some Liberals did attempt to prevent this shift in working class consciousness, trying to adapt Liberal thought. Keith Robbins, in *The Eclipse of a Great Power*, writes that

Liberal philosophers, social theorists and journalists had been busy formulating a doctrine of 'positive liberty', a 'New Liberalism' which united a concern for the freedom of the individual with a willingness

to use the power of the State to give the masses a 'real' rather than merely theoretical liberty. (124)

There was considerable debate within Liberalism about these new ideas. Martin Pugh, in *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939*, argues that New Liberalism "came, for many, to imply drastic social reform" (114). This new brand of Liberalism dominated late Victorian and Edwardian Britain and for a while, it seems, held off more radical ideas. Martin Pugh argues that it was Lloyd George who made the ideas popular, writing that Lloyd George "contended [that] Liberalism represented the interests of those who created wealth, that is employers and workers, who were in conflict with a parasitic landowning class and their political agents" (119-120). Not that all discontent was stopped, however. In 1893, the Independent Labour Party was formed in Bradford, as a radical alternative in British politics. In the end, Laybourn argues that the reason New Liberalism failed to make a lasting impact on the working class was that only "in areas where the Liberal party needed to change in order to increase its political support was there much evidence of a New Liberal presence" (30). New Liberalism failed to gain the popular support needed to make the radical changes that would satisfy working class radicals like Billany.

It was the First World War that finally killed the Liberal Party's commitment to radical change. The war is crucial in understanding Billany's attitude toward Liberalism. Billany would, after all, be responding to the post-World War One Liberal Party. Martin Pugh argues that during the war the Liberal party moved away from the Radicalism evident in the early part of the century and further states that "the radical politicians entirely failed during the war to arrest their party's gradual severance from the organized working class which had been a pillar of its Edwardian

triumphs” (157). This shift away from radicalism in the Liberal party was almost complete by the 1920s, by which time, as Keith Robbins in *The Eclipse of a Great Power* points out, that “Lloyd George still had a reputation for radicalism, but it was now combined with a concern for social order” (130). This concern for social order damns Lloyd George and the Liberals in Billany’s eyes; for Billany, the Communist, believes that the existing social order is responsible for the hardship and inequality of the working class.

The war of 1914-1918 also drives Billany, who always maintained an anti-war stance even while serving in the army, further away from the Liberal Party. Billany, most obviously in *The Trap*, sees war as merely an extension of capitalist policies. In *The Trap*, war, Billany will argue (in relation to the Second World War), is fought merely in “the maintenance of a steady five per cent” (166). For Billany, war is merely another instrument for capitalists to increase their wealth and to oppress the working class. The Liberal Party’s willingness to drag the country into a destructive war would force Billany to reject them as nothing more than militaristic capitalists. In *The Trap*, the First World War exposes the limitations and hollowness of the dreams of the working class, as the war allows John Pascoe, Carr’s father-in-law, to discover the variety that life has to offer, but after the war, is forced back into the old way of life, destroying his hopes and dreams that his time in the merchant navy nourished. Billany will eventually argue that the Second World War also destroys the hopes and the dream of the working class. To alter Carl von Clausewitz’s words, war is a mere continuation of *capitalism* by other means.

A second reason the war alienates Billany from the Liberal Party is the consequence of the war: the rise of totalitarianism. John Keegan, in *The First World*



*War*, argues that the Great War “damaged civilisation, the rational and liberal civilisation of the European enlightenment, permanently for the worse and, through the damage done, world civilisation also” (8). While not writing from a Marxist point of view, John Keegan takes a similar position to Billany, writing, within “fifteen years of the war’s end, totalitarianism, a new word for a system that rejected the liberalism and constitutionalism which had inspired European politics since the eclipse of monarchy in 1789, was almost everywhere on the rise” (8). The British Liberal Party, by committing the country to war in 1914, helped to destroy the very ideals it upheld. Keegan and Billany both recognise that the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s was a result of the 1914-1918 conflict. Hitler used the harsh conditions of the Treaty of Versailles to fulfil his ambition of power. Alan Bullock writes in *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* that a 1929 plan, by American banker Owen D. Young, to settle the war reparations imposed on Germany in 1919 not only allowed Hitler to “whip up feeling against the Allies and the Weimar regime which acted as their tool, but it also gave added impetus to the rapprochement already under way with other right-wing nationalist groups [...] from which the Nazis had been estranged since 1926” (162). Many Germans felt that the war had been unfairly blamed on Germany, and Hitler was able to use this feeling of persecution to consolidate right-wing feeling and his own political position. For Billany, the Liberal Party must share the blame for the rise of fascists like Hitler. As a major Allied partner in the war, the British government not only brought the British people in the world’s most destructive war but also helped sow the seeds that grew into totalitarianism. They were part of the vindictive peace process that allowed Hitler to feed the anger and humiliation of the defeated German people.

This antipathy toward Liberals finds expression in Billany's novels. William Bailey from *The Opera House Murders*, a particularly negative example of a Liberal, is the thorn in the side of detective Robbie Duncan. Bailey is far more interested in himself than trying to help those around him who are in trouble. In the end, Bailey endangers the life of the one witness to a murder that Duncan and the police are trying to investigate. The description of Henry in *The Cage* is less spiteful, but still as damning. Both Bailey and Henry describe themselves with the same phrase as liberals "of the old school" (*The Opera House Murders*, 15; *The Cage*, 145). By this, Billany seems to mean Gladstone liberalism. In *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867-1939*, Martin Pugh writes that Gladstone

cultivated the lower classes because he discerned in them a capacity for moral and responsible behaviour that would improve political life. He therefore engaged in a dual enterprise of trying to govern through the best representatives of the traditional ruling class, while involving the lower classes in morally improving issues rather than pandering to their material welfare. (27)

The emphasis on moral rather than material issues angers Billany. Gladstonian Liberalism does not attempt to improve the material condition of the working class but, instead, helps to maintain the cycle of exploitation and hardship. In *The Opera House Murders*, William Bailey is far more concerned with morality and "civilisation" than anything else. Robbie Duncan writes that Bailey "took it to be his duty to instruct Jack [the boy who is tutored by Duncan and witnesses the murder in the novel] in the way he should go, and the many ways he should not go" (19). Jack's morality is what Bailey takes it upon himself to teach and is oblivious to the threat posed by a gang of murderers to the Kirby family and Jack in particular. By implication, Billany's comment is that Liberals ignore the problems faced by the

working class, that appearances are more important than confronting and solving social problems.

Henry, the Liberal in *The Cage*, is described as “believing in free trade and the small manufacturer” (13). Billany, thus, links liberalism to market capitalism, tightening the connections between the oppressive system and Liberal ideology. Henry is, however, a man whose beliefs are out of step with the modern age. In an age of extremes, Henry’s attempt to maintain a moderate position fails, and he does not understand the modern world. Henry states, in *The Cage*,

Minds without souls. It sounds horrid, but it certainly is more comfortable. Enthusiasms without devotions. Powerful emotions tend to make one blush. It may be due to civilization. Anyway, one can’t *always* live at white-heat — and is it *ever* really necessary? (144)

Henry is out of touch with the realities of the world; Billany would argue that, of course, there are times when one must live at white-heat. Billany the Communist knows that extreme measures are sometimes necessary to solve extreme measures. Billany knows that a more aggressive response to Hitler might have prevented the war. When faced with the unpleasant aspects of modern life, Henry’s solution is to turn away:

Some people tell the things they are interested in in such a way that you see the nervous heart of the speaker blushing behind the words. It is embarrassing. I turn away. It is like telling intimate dreams. (145)

It is no wonder that Billany, a man dedicated to confronting the world, dislikes Henry’s attitude with such intensity.

In *The Cage*, Billany recognises the political irrelevance of the Liberal Party. The queue for a latrine in the prisoner-of-war camp is referred to by one graffiti artist

as “GROUP OF LIBERAL PEERS WAITING TO ENTER THE HOUSE” (19). A joke at the expense of the Liberal Party which, after the 1920s, was no longer a major force in British politics. The meaning is clear: their political ambitions are headed for the toilet. The death of liberalism has long been recognised. Even as early as 1935, George Dangerfield could write in his book *The Strange Death of Liberal England* that

1910 is not just a convenient starting point. It is actually a landmark in English history, which stands out against a peculiar background of flame. For it was in 1910 that fires long smouldering in the English spirit suddenly flared up, so that by the end of 1913 Liberal England was reduced to ashes. From these ashes, a new England seems to have emerged. (13-14)

Dangerfield, recognising that there will always be a group calling themselves “Liberal”, continues to say that “the true pre-war Liberal — supported, as it still was in 1910, by Free Trade, a majority in Parliament, the ten commandments and the illusion of Progress — can never return” (14). These political ideals sound very much like the those that Henry holds in *The Cage*: “Middle-class liberal, tolerant, reasonably religious, believing in free trade and the small manufacturer” (18). People like Henry are doomed to remain isolated from the political mainstream, at least in Parliamentary terms, as the Labour Party, which formed its first government in 1924, grew into the major opposition to Conservative ideology.

Billany is not the only writer to attack the liberal position. Rex Warner in his 1938 novel *The Professor* shows that a moderate liberal attitude is unable to stem the tide of fascism. Warner argues that only a radical, and armed, left position can defeat the threat posed by the fascists. In the novel, a classical liberal Professor is offered the Chancellorship of his country. The hope is that the Professor will be able to

mediate between the extremes of the left and the right. To that end, the Professor refuses to arm the opponents to the fascists. This enables the fascists, who have been secretly arming themselves, to overthrow the government and kill the Professor. As Samuel Hynes in *The Auden Generation* writes, the “position that the novel proposes is absolutely clear: liberalism has created its own destroyers, and is guilty of its own death” (313). This is a point explained to the Professor not only by his Communist son but by those on the right as well. A religious fanatic cobbler tells the Professor

You urged us to be ambitious, to make good, to rise in the world, sometimes encouraging the most blatant and outrageous motives of greed and self-indulgence, sometimes pointing us towards the pleasures of the soul — culture, poetry, beauty of manners. Did you never observe that if we were to follow your advice we should have to fight and kill our brothers? For there can be no culture and no self-expression without power, and power must always corrupt the soul. (217-218)

Writing about this passage from Warner, Hynes observes that “the liberal tradition is a tradition of competition, and so eventually of exploitation and violence” (313).

Competition and violence feed the capitalist system, forcing society into a cycle of domination and exploitation that is endlessly repeated.

Billany brought his belief in activism to his own life. Major G. Matheson, who had been at the same prisoner-of-war camp as Billany, writes<sup>4</sup> that “Dan had lectured on Communism at Capua [the prisoner-of-war camp]” and that “I used to ‘argue’ with Dan about Communism.” Billany’s belief in Communism comes from

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<sup>4</sup> The Imperial War Museum holds a letter dated 18 July, 1946, from Matheson; included with this letter are notes that about *The Cage* by Matheson. The quotes attributed to Matheson come from these notes.

personal experience. After leaving school at the age of fourteen, he held a variety of jobs and went on the dole in the early nineteen-thirties before being forced off by the Means Test Committee. After gaining admission to the local Technical College, Billany won a scholarship for Hull University. In 1937, he took an Honours degree in English and earned his teaching certificate the following year. In 1938, he began teaching at Chiltern Street School, Hull, with an annual salary of £204. Billany seems to have been an active teacher. In a letter of reference, dated 23 March, 1938, A. Victor Murray, professor of education at the University College of Hull, writes

Mr. Billany is a man of marked individuality who may easily turn into a teacher of distinction. His experiences in the ordinary world before taking an academic course have given him a hatred of mediocrity and a warm sympathy with children, especially those who are victims of their social environment, and these qualities have characterised his teaching practice.

Murray begins by praising Billany's individuality and past experience. These qualities, in Murray's view, help Billany in his teaching profession. Murray goes on, however, to cast doubt on that ability when he writes that

He has little belief in orthodox methods of discipline and he treats the boys with a frankness and good humour which win their attention. He has also his own views about the content of teaching as well as its form, but while I doubt if he would ever get boys through an external examination he will make school-life interesting and memorable for them.

These comments seem, on the surface, rather strange. Surely the goal of every teacher of the time would be to get their pupils through external examinations. What Murray highlights, and ultimately disagrees with, is Billany's dislike of conventional teaching methods. Billany's second published novel, the children's fantasy, *The Magic Door*, shows Billany's contempt for the teaching profession with the character of Rocket.

Rocket is a teacher who is not really interested in teaching the boys under his care; he is more concerned with maintaining his position in the educational system. Billany's views are far more radical than Rocket's, or Murray's for that matter. Billany's sister reports that he visited and approved of A.S. Neill's school, Summerhill. Clearly, Billany believes in Neill's statement from *That Dreadful School* that

a school that makes active children sit at desks  
studying mostly useless subjects is a bad school  
when we consider the psychology of a child. It is  
a good school if we agree that it is desirable to  
have a population of docile, uncreative citizens who  
will fit into a civilisation whose standard of success  
is riches and whose average of living is wage-slavery.  
(8)

This is exactly what Billany argues in *The Magic Door*: that the school system will not allow children to be creative and imaginative but, instead, forces the children into unimaginative conformity, into maintaining the capitalist system. Knowing this helps us to understand why Murray is reserved in his praise for Billany.

Education is an important feature in Billany's work. Billany, as the chapter on *The Magic Door* will show, adopts an unorthodox view of education. A.S. Neill, in *That Dreadful School*, writes that

we set out to make a school in which we should allow  
children freedom to be themselves. In order to do this  
we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all  
suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction.  
We have been called brave, but it did not require  
courage: all it required was what we had — a complete  
belief in the child as a good, not an evil being. (10)

In *The Magic Door*, Billany obviously supports Neill's idea that children should be able to develop in complete freedom. The boys in the novel learn more by their adventures through the magic door than from their teacher, Rocket. They learn to

help and to protect each other. Billany wants the reader to compare the attitudes of the boys with the attitude of their teacher, Rocket. Rocket, educated by the existing system, is arrogant, spiteful, and lazy, whereas the boys who begin to learn outside of the education system learn to be loyal, brave, and inventive. Billany, in *The Magic Door*, adopts the ideas from *That Dreadful School* and presents those ideas in a dramatic form. The boys, freed from the restrictions imposed on them by the education system, learn what it means to be truly human by their independent adventures through the magic door.

Billany also agrees with Neill's inherent criticism of the class-ridden nature of the educational system. Neill, again in *That Dreadful School*, writes that "[w]e could only study children from the upper and middle classes, because our whole scheme depended on our being able to make ends meet" (8). Neill, in this passage, recognises the limitations of his scheme. The scheme is entirely dependent on the moneyed class. Working class children once again are unable to get the help they need. This hampers and undermines Neill's attempt to understand children, as he recognises in *That Dreadful School*:

even from the viewpoint of child study, we have had to study the children of the bourgeoisie only. And it has to be said that sometimes it is difficult to see a child's nature when it is hidden behind too much money and too expensive clothes. (9)

Neill argues that the respectability of the upper and middle classes hides the true nature of children and that in order to understand children all classes must be examined.

He taught until 1940 when he joined the army. What prompted Billany to enlist is uncertain. His sister suggests "that he felt the need to take the same risks as



the next man” (letter to Cloutier, 29 January, 1998). Billany’s attitude seems to be similar to that of the Canadian poet Raymond Souster in his poem “Army Reception Centre”<sup>5</sup> when he writes “That year they scraped the barrel/for the last awkward time/with us at the very bottom” (ll. 1-3). Billany may not feel that the army scraped him from the bottom of the barrel, but both Billany and Souster imply that those motivated by patriotism have already been sent to fight, that Billany and Souster are there for other, more personal, reasons. In Souster’s case, conscription explains his presence. Neither Billany nor Souster have any illusions about the war; they both recognise their inherent unsuitability for a military life.

In spite of his enlistment in the army, Billany never supported the war. George Orwell in “The Lion and the Unicorn” writes that “in moments of supreme crisis the whole nation can suddenly draw together and act upon a species of instinct, really a code of conduct which is understood by almost everyone, though never formulated” (58). Billany, however, would disagree with this statement. Orwell believes that England comes together to protect the English way of life, including the Empire, when threatened. In *The Trap*, Billany critiques this idea, exposing it as propaganda. Writing about the Falklands War of 1982, Kevin Foster sees, in the official response to the war,

a highly structured if on occasions hardly conscious  
process dedicated to the generation of particular facts  
about the war which, collectively, comprised an official  
or preferred account of its origins, aims and salient events.  
(2)

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *Poetry of the Second World War*. Desmond Graham, ed., p. 46.

In other words, Foster writes, “the war had been written before it ever took place” (2).

Foster’s argument is that The British government used the same template to represent the war in positive terms as the British government did in the Second World War.

Foster takes his lead from Paul Fussell’s statement in *The Great War and Modern*

*Memory* that

Every war is alike in the way its early stages replay elements of the preceding war. Everyone fighting a modern war tends to think of it in terms of the last one he knows anything about. (314)

Foster argues that the Second World War became that preceding war for the Thatcher government in 1982. Foster’s position can be used to describe how national identity was manipulated during the Second World War to unify the nation against Nazi Germany.

Those involved in the Second World War thought of war in terms of the Great War and its aftermath. Aside from Siegfried Sassoon’s famous protest in 1917 and individual conscientious objectors, there was no real large scale anti-war movement between 1914 and 1918. What the government had to respond to was the anti-war feeling that developed during the inter-war period. In my article “Not So Hidden Agendas”, from *Focus on Robert Graves and His Contemporaries*, I argue that Wilfred Owen has become so identified with the war that Owen has become seen as a “war poet”. In his introduction to his edition of Wilfred Owen’s poetry, C. Day Lewis writes that “[t]he subject made the poet: the poet made poems which radically changed our attitudes towards war” (12). Owen’s poetry became so inextricably linked to the idea of war that few people view him outside the wartime context. What the British government faced by 1940 was that Owen had become such an influential

figure that the Second World War had to be imagined in a way that negated not only Owen but also the large influx of anti-war novels that flooded the inter-war period. The government had to counter the influence of books like *Goodbye to All That* (Robert Graves), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (Siegfried Sassoon), and *Death of a Hero* (Richard Aldington). Quite obviously, the government needed to unify support for the war quickly. The Churchill government also had to deal with the years of appeasement, the “Phoney War” of 1939, and the string of defeats the British suffered in 1940 and 1941. The official reading of the war stated that the country was fighting for the values of civilisation, values that were inherently British.

The truth is, as always, more complex than presented by the propaganda. Granted, this view of the war is easily imagined when the enemy is a regime as barbaric as Nazi Germany. What Billany argues in his work is that this opposition between the British and the Germans (and all Germans are implicated in the wartime propaganda) is purely imagined. Ultimately, for Billany, the war is fought to maintain the existing capitalist system. Billany is one of the few writers who critiques the aims of the war at the time that the official view of the war is being created. There is some justification for Billany’s position. For example, Angus Calder in *The People’s War* recognises that there were various reasons, other than patriotism, why men enlisted:

there was a great deal of moral and social pressure felt by young men out of uniform. Apart from this, some men wanted adventure for its own sake. Others had studied Nazism and wished to help destroy it (some two thousand Britons, it should be remembered, had volunteered to fight Franco in Spain) — but for all the spate of political best-sellers which had preceded the war, these must have made up a small minority. Others calculated that if they got in early, they might find it easier to come by the safe or prestigious types of service they coveted. Others, more prosaically still, sought relief from a boring job, from the boredom of no work at all, or

from an unsatisfactory home life. (60)

Billany's view of the war is close to that of a Canadian soldier, whose reason for going to war was to exact revenge for the death of a friend, when he says, quoted in *Six War Years, 1939-1945* (edited by Barry Broadfoot), "Who the hell dies for King and Country any more? That crap went out in the first world war" (19). While Billany's motives for enlisting are ultimately unknown, they clearly were not influenced by patriotism. Billany's novels are highly critical of the war and the propaganda that surrounds it. Billany's fiction shows that, in the words of an American Navy Officer, quoted in Thomas B. Allen, "Ghosts and Survivors: Return to the Battle of Midway" from *National Geographic* (April 1999), "Let no one tell you or let you believe that this war is other than a grim, terrible business" (103). In *The Trap*, Billany strips away any glory, any idealism, from the war. Billany differs from Samuel Johnson, who believes, as explained by John Keegan in *War and Our World*, that it "is the rare man who does not think better of himself for having served, in whatever capacity, and even if he had not faced gunfire. To have worn uniform, to have done drill, to have submitted to the discipline of a military community enlarges, particularly in retrospect, and more amply as time passes, a man's opinion of himself" (45). Billany must be a rare man, then. I will show in a later chapter that Billany uses the character of Frank Shaw, in *The Trap*, to demonstrate that war has no beneficial effects whatsoever on a man's character.

Commissioned as a Lieutenant, Billany served with the Fourth Battalion of the East Yorkshire Regiment. The East Yorkshire has a long history. The regiment fought at the Plains of Abraham, Quebec, in 1759, a battle which secured British dominance over the French in North America. The regiment was also dispatched to

North America in 1776 to fight against the rebelling American colonies. More recent history saw the regiment serve at Passchendaele in 1917 and evacuate from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940. In his history of the regiment, A.J. Barker reports that Billany's battalion disembarked at Suez after an uneventful trip on the *Empress of Russia* in late 1941 (119). Moving to the Western Desert, Billany's Battalion saw its first action in March of 1942 (Barker: 120). Life in the desert was hard. Adrian Gilbert in *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War* writes that "the Desert War was characterized by short bursts of violent action followed by longer periods of relative calm as each side sought to rebuild its forces in preparation for a next round of fighting" (ix). The terrain, Gilbert explains "was not the sandy, seaside beach on a large scale that so many soldiers imagined. Rough, rocky ground alternated with patches of soft sand and gravel, while almost sheer cliffs rose up from the coastal littoral to the broad upland plateaux of the desert proper" (29). The biggest problem, naturally enough, was the lack of water. Gilbert writes that apart from "a few wells and desalination plants in the major ports, water had to be laboriously transported up to the front line in tanker lorries. In the desert each man was issued with a daily water ration, ranging from four to six pints, half of it going to the cookhouse for the communal preparation of food, the remainder issued directly as a water-bottle ration" (35). Billany himself, in a letter to his family dated 24 April, 1942, writes that the "most precious thing out here is water, though it contains a heavy percentage of sand and salt." The lack of water becomes an important issue in *The Trap*, when Michael Carr, the novel's narrator, is unwilling to share a drink, in this case a bottle of beer, with his thirsty men; the incident is a turning point in Carr's relationship with his men.

Evidence of Billany's time in the desert is minimal. Gunner L.E. Tutt of the 414 Battery, the Essex Yeomanry, quoted in Adrian Gilbert's *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, gives an idea of the reading material that the troops had, stating that

[b]ecause I was dependent on the reading interests of others my taste became a catholic one. I read *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* followed by *War and Peace*. *Das Kapital* was a strange companion for *The Pickwick Papers*. I still have by me the three utility, war-time printed Penguins by Adrian Bell: *Corduroy*, *The Cheery Tree* and *Silver Ley*, a gentle trilogy about the East Anglian countryside which I read in Tobruk and carried in my side pack all through Burma. One glorious find was an omnibus edition of John Buchan's novels. That kept me going for a fortnight. (24-25)

Presumably, Billany's experience would be similar, but there is scant evidence. Billany, in the existing letters, makes no mention of his spare time. There is no mention of any off duty activities in *The Trap* from which to intuit biographical materials. The time in *The Trap*, which is the novel that deals with life in the desert, is spent digging holes in the sand.

In May 1942, Rommel and the Africa Korps attacked in Cyrenaica. Barker writes that the

attack had been expected and General Auchinleck [who commanded the Eighth Army at that time] had deployed the 8th Army in a series of boxes along a line between Gazala on the coast to Bir Hacheim about fifty miles inland. (120)

Billany's Battalion held the box ten miles North of Bir Hacheim which was held by the Free French (Barker, 120). In the attack the 150th Brigade, of which Billany's Battalion was a part, was cut off, and by June 1, the battalion was virtually wiped out and Billany captured. Shortly afterwards Billany was sent to a Prisoner of War camp in Italy.

With David Dowie, who co-wrote *The Cage* with him, Billany was first held at Capua near Naples and then was sent North to Rezzanella near Piacenza. He was

finally transferred to a POW camp at Fontanellato near Parma in Northern Italy from which he was freed when Italy surrendered to the Allies on 8 September 1943. At this point their movements become less definite. Alan Munton, the one critic who has written at any length on Billany, believes that the two men had unsuccessfully tried to reach Switzerland from Mantua and then went south “in the hope of meeting the advancing British and American [and Canadian] armies” (Munton: 55). This is supported by an unpublished letter (held in the Imperial War Museum in London) from John Fleming, who was held in the same prisoner of war camp as Billany. Fleming states that he, Billany, David Dowie, and Alec Harding decided to go south in the hope of meeting the advancing Allied armies before the snow started. Fleming last saw Billany in October 1943 when they were separated while escaping recapture by the Germans. Fleming and Billany had been attempting to return to the farmhouse in which they were staying to retrieve a diary that Billany had kept.

When *The Cage* was first published in 1949, the dust jacket carried a request for information about the two authors. A former fellow-prisoner responded and reported that Billany was killed near Fermo, on the Adriatic coast of Italy, in 1945 when he and another man (speculation is that this second man was Dowie) went to confront a third former British P.O.W. who was betraying his fellow countrymen to the Germans. This seems unlikely. Accounts by other POWs hiding from the Germans in Northern Italy (such as Eric Newby’s *Love and War in the Apennines*) show how isolated they were, and it seems improbable that Billany would have heard about the activities of other soldiers let alone confront them. Joan Brake, Billany’s sister, believes that Billany died on or shortly after the night in October 1943 on which Fleming last saw him. The German patrol from which they were trying to escape were so close at hand that Fleming himself was lucky to escape. In fact, Fleming was the only one of the four British soldiers to return to Britain. The fates of Billany, Dowie, and Harding are unknown.

Billany published two novels while he was alive: *The Opera House Murders* (a murder mystery, 1940) and *The Magic Door* (a children’s fantasy, 1943). Two

additional novels, *The Cage* (1949) and *The Trap* (1950) were published posthumously. The composition date of the last two novels are difficult to determine. Both were written when he was in the Prisoner of War Camp. Internal evidence suggests that *The Cage* was begun in June or July of 1943: "This book is intended to take you into the strange world where we have been now living for a year" (Billany and Dowie: 8). *The Trap* was most likely written in the P.O.W. camp as well. Again internal evidence suggests that the novel was started before Christmas of 1943, as Michael Carr, the narrator, writes, "if I put in all the stuff which I suppose is relevant I won't finish it this side of Christmas '43" (89). The manuscripts of *The Cage* and *The Trap* were given to a friendly Italian farmer who lived near Soragna (near the prison camp) for safe keeping. The manuscripts were then sent to Billany's father in the Spring of 1946. A fifth novel is said to have existed. Billany told his sister (Mrs Brake) that he had sent this novel to a literary agent. Who that agent was or whether or not the manuscript survived is unknown.

A problem with working on Billany's later work, especially *The Trap*, is that, due to the conditions under which it was written, Billany did not have a chance to edit and revise the final product. A novel like *The Trap*, however, still has emotional power despite this. The publisher, Faber and Faber in the case of *The Trap*, has, therefore, the final decision on what is printed, not Billany. A case in point is a lengthy passage from pages eleven to fifteen in *The Trap*. Faber included the passage that, clearly, has been crossed out in the manuscript.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of this study, the published version of *The Trap* rather than the manuscript is used. The reason for this is thematic rather than literary. In terms of the narrative flow, the passage is better left out as it brings the narrative to a grinding halt. For this study, however, the passage provides added insight into the ideas that Billany is trying to explore in his fiction. With the little information on Billany and his political thought, any piece of evidence that helps in understanding Billany must be used to its full advantage.

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<sup>6</sup> Held at the Imperial War Museum in London.



With so little still unknown about certain aspects of Billany's life, this study is organised around a simple structure. It attempts to build the foundation of what will begin the salvaging of Billany's work. The first chapter attempts to place Billany within two contexts. The first attempts to relate Billany to the "Auden Generation". Billany clearly deals with the same issues that his middle class contemporaries do. He does it, however, from a working class perspective. The study tries to see how a working class man views British society. It also shows how Billany views those middle class writers, such as Auden, who presume to speak on behalf of the working class. The contextual chapter also attempts to pinpoint Billany's view of Communism. Billany, after all, does explore many of the similar ideas that Communist theorists do. In many cases, Billany forms these ideas independently from the theorists who were, largely, unknown to Billany. For example, the Sardinian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and Billany share similar views on art and its place within society. Yet, it is unlikely that Billany had access to the ideas of Gramsci whose works were not translated into English until the 1950s, after Billany's early death.

The remaining chapters focus, in order of publication, on Billany's four published novels. Because it is difficult to tell in which order the novels were composed, publication dates are the easiest and most logical means to organise the current study. For example, *The Cage* and *The Trap* were both written while Billany was in the Italian prisoner-of-war camp. The order in which they were written is, obviously, impossible to tell; they may have even been written simultaneously. What I have attempted to do is to take the ideas from the theoretical and contextual chapter and apply them to each of Billany's novels. The main focus, therefore, is on Billany's political ideas and how he expresses them in his fiction. This naturally leads to some imbalance in the space devoted to each novel. Some novels such as *The Opera House Murders* and *The Magic Door*, while informed by Billany's Communism, are not necessarily driven solely by his political views but by the particular genres of the detective story and the fantasy. *The Trap*, however, cannot be separated from its political ideology. Necessarily, then, two chapters are devoted to that novel, Billany's

most political, and perhaps his best. The chapters that concern *The Trap* have been divided on the basis of Billany's themes. The first chapter focuses on Billany's critique of the capitalist system and British society before 1939; the second focuses on his attitude and attack on the 1939-1945 war.

In *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s*, Janet Montefiore states that her book "is about political memory and the literature of the 1930s: how it has been remembered, how personal and political memories work in the literature itself, and also how much important writing has *not* been remembered" (7). This study aims for similar goals: to cast the political and literary memory in the view of a young working class writer from the North of England. This study is intended to provoke the debate that will give Billany, badly underrated, the attention and recognition that he deserves. Billany does deserve to be remembered. His fiction expands the critical view of the 1930s and 1940s. Billany actively engages not only with the period but with those writers who have traditionally been seen as defining that literary period. His attacks on writers such as John Galsworthy and W.H. Auden shows that Billany is trying to develop a truly radical Communist working class literary tradition. As an educated working class man and a committed Communist, Billany offers an alternative view to the traditional and conservative attitudes associated with pre-war and wartime writing.

## Chapter Two: Communism and Literary Form in Dan Billany's Fiction

Billany, as a member of the working class and a committed Marxist, clearly allows class issues to dominate his fiction. Billany was, in many ways, like George Orwell and developed a very idiosyncratic and individualistic idea of Socialism. Like Orwell, Billany did not look to the Communist Party of Great Britain for direction. This is not to say that Orwell and Billany had identical views. What I intend to show is that, whereas Orwell developed a democratic Socialism, Billany fused a belief in Communism with ideas that are generally found in more humanistic ideology. The main difficulty in analysing Billany's Marxist perspective is that he never wrote strictly about Marxism; he never wrote a manifesto in which he discussed his view of Marxism. There is not even any concrete proof that Billany was a member of the Communist Party. The critic, therefore, is forced back to the novels themselves as the only evidence of his ideological beliefs. The extent to which Billany read many of the Marxist theorists is difficult to tell. The theoretical arguments used by writers such as Marx, Gramsci, and Lukács are used to show the ideas that Billany explored rather than to show the direct influence of, for example, Gramsci on Billany's ideological point of view.

While similar, Orwell and Billany have two separate goals in their writing. David Gervais writes, in *Literary Englands*, that when Orwell "sets out to uncover what England actually is [...] he did not know what he was going to find" (171). Orwell, then, exposes and destroys those myths of England that his class, the public school educated middle class, hold. For example, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell attacks an attitude

by W.R. Inge, writing that “I notice that the Rev W.R. Inge, in his book *England*, accuses the miners of gluttony. From my own observation I should say that they eat astonishingly little” (35). This is a minor point, the eating habits of miners, yet, Orwell recognises that the myth of gluttony could undermine public sympathy for the miners. This myth, then, becomes important in shaping attitudes toward the poor. In works such as *The Road to Wigan Pier*, therefore, Orwell is constantly on the offensive, showing the hypocrisy of English Marxists, exposing the false view of the working class, and, in later books such as *Animal Farm* and *1984*, the dangers inherent in totalitarianism. That is not to say that Orwell is free from his own prejudices. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he suggests that the “unemployment allowances, miserable though they are, are framed to suit a population with very high standards and not much notion of economy. If the unemployed learned to be better managers they would be visibly better off” (93). In a statement that would anger Billany, Orwell shifts the blame away from capitalism and blames the unemployed for their own troubles. The unemployed are not trapped by an oppressive system but are merely unable to manage the little money they do have.

Billany, however, coming as he does from the working class, is not content with merely exploding the myths in the same way that Orwell does. Certainly, Billany’s attacks on bourgeois writers do explode the myths of the 1930s, but Billany, with his emphasis on the humanism in Marxist thought (especially early Marx), also shows what Marxism should be, how it should support and defend humanity rather than impose a dogmatic prescriptive ideology on its followers. Marx himself, in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), writes that the “*human* essence of nature exists only

for *social* man; for only here does nature exist for him as a *bond* with other *men*, as his existence for others and their existence for him, as the vital element of human reality; only here does it exist as the *basis* of his own *human* existence” (*Early Writings*, 349). Marx clearly saw Communism as a way of strengthening human relationships and so does Billany.

Reading Billany’s work, it becomes clear that he has a great deal of sympathy for the humanist point of view. For Billany, this responsibility is the driving force behind his own political commitment. The thoughts of Michael Carr, the narrator in *The Trap*, when he first visits the family home of Elizabeth Pascoe, the woman who will become his wife, conveys this idea:

The first time I entered Elizabeth’s home, I was excited, as if I were finding an extension of her personality. It was a singular home, but the precise nature of its singularity cannot be put into a few words. You will understand it later, when you know Elizabeth and David [Elizabeth’s brother] and their parents. At any rate, when I first went in, and Bonzo [the family dog] had finished licking me, I felt a delightful recognition, that this was in fact the only possible background for Elizabeth. (18)

While not an overtly political passage, it does give the reader an indication of the main concerns of the novel: to present the lives of the Pascoe family. Carr finds a sense of belonging in the Pascoe household. Unlike Jack London’s character Martin Eden, who Charles N. Watson, Jr. (in his study *The Novels of Jack London*) says is “[l]iterally and figuratively [...] always a homeless orphan” (159), Carr finds a group of people with whom he can identify. Watson argues that Martin Eden’s problem is that his “awakened self-consciousness has torn his roots from his own class without firmly replanting them in

the genteel world of the upper middle class” (144). Eden’s literary success separates him from his sense of self and his own class; this divide in himself leads Eden to commit suicide. Carr, on the other hand, finds strength in the connection he finds with the Pascoe family. Even at his lowest moments, for example when he is in the prisoner-of-war camp, Carr uses the memory of the Pascoes (and Elizabeth in particular) to find the resilience to survive. Carr’s concern for Elizabeth and her family (and later the soldiers he will lead in battle) is the main motivation for Carr; all his attacks on Capitalism and intolerance urges Carr to fight his political foes, rather than some dogmatic philosophical reasons.

For Billany, there is no social alternative except a Socialism based on a concern for humanity, a humanist Socialism. Billany believes that any alternative view of life will only lead to working class despair. Billany’s view is similar to Lucien Goldmann’s contention in his essay “Socialism and Humanism” that for the pre-1917 Marxist theorists the dictatorship of the proletariat “would subsequently lead to an integration of the major values inherited from middle-class humanism (universality, individual freedom, equality, the dignity of the human person, freedom of expression)” (38). Billany does attack the bourgeois middle-class, especially in *The Trap*, but his emphasis on the human aspect of Marxism does, clearly, reflect a humanist position. He would reject Louis Althusser’s emphasis on the scientific and Althusser’s statement, in the forward to his collection *Lenin and Philosophy*, that humanism is one of the “bourgeois interpretations” (7) of Marxism. Billany had no love for the bourgeois, but he would agree with Goldmann’s statement (again from “Socialism and Humanism”) that “we now face an urgent task —

that of liberating ourselves from all the slogans that clutter the political life and the thought and theory of the socialist movement, so as to be able to return to the kind of analysis of the world's social and political evolution, since 1917, that would be both positive and accurate" (40-41). Billany would agree with Goldmann's opposition to dogmatism within Marxism. Billany's Marxism is not a Marxism of sloganeering or dogmatic intellectual debate but a Marxism of emotional attachment. Billany's view of the Soviet Union is difficult to ascertain, since he left no formal statement on the subject. Yet, the implications of Billany's work suggest that he would oppose the state oppression evident in the Stalinist Soviet Union. Billany views Marxism in the same way that Marek Fritzhand views Marxism in his essay "Marx's Ideal of Man", in which Fritzhand argues that for Marx "the ultimate legitimisation of communism consisted in its creation of a new free man living in accordance with his human nature and his axiological status" (157). Capitalism oppresses humanity's natural desires for the freedom to choose the direction of their own lives. Billany argues this early in *The Trap* with the character of John Pascoe. John goes to sea briefly; the life he encounters awakes something within him. Billany, through his narrator Michael Carr, writes, "His soul lived avidly, its lips were thirsty for free living: his soul would even have forgone love for freedom" (36). The desire to be free is so strong that he would give up love to be free. Capitalism, however, will not let John live out his dream, and John is forced to return to shore, marries, and begins to raise a family.

Billany also exhibits individualistic qualities. *The Opera House Murders* and *The Trap* deal with characters who stand alone in their opposition to the capitalist system.

Certainly, John Pascoe, in *The Trap*, has a strong individualistic streak that is smothered by life under a Capitalist system. With Robbie Duncan (in *The Opera House Murders*) and Michael Carr (in *The Trap*), Billany shows two characters who constantly struggle against the forces that oppress people. They both follow their own individualistic beliefs. The problem with individualism, according to Robert Bellah and his co-authors in *Habits of the Heart*, is “whether such individuals [who withdraw from public life to pursue private ends] are capable of sustaining either a public *or* a private life” (143). This is a valid point. Billany’s answer would be that it depends on what one means as a “private” life. Billany’s individualism follows more along the lines of the attitude that Bellah and his co-authors see in the American cowboy or the hard-boiled detective which asserts that, to “serve society, one must be able to stand alone, not needing others, not depending on their judgement, and not submitting to their wishes” (146). There is no coincidence that Robbie Duncan is modelled on the hard-boiled detective. Duncan, detective and ex-convict, stands outside of society. The difference between Duncan and the cowboy or the hard boiled detective, as Bellah and his co-writers see it, is that Duncan does not serve society. In *The Opera House Murders*, society is the enemy, and Duncan struggles (and ultimately succeeds – in part) to protect the Kirby family from the criminal danger. Michael Carr does the same; he rails against the capitalist system and tries to protect his in-laws, the Pascoe family, and, later in the novel, his platoon of soldiers.

Billany begins with what Steven Lukes, in *Individualism*, argues is one of the basic tenets of individualism, “the ultimate moral principle of *the supreme and intrinsic value, or dignity, of the individual human being*” (45). This is the fundamental belief in



Billany's work, that all individual human beings have intrinsic worth, whether they are children (as in *The Magic Door*), ex-convicts (as in *The Opera House Murders*), or the working class (as in *The Trap*). Immanuel Kant writes in *The Moral Law* that a person should "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always the same time as an end" (95-96). For Billany, Communism is the means to an end. Everything Billany does is determined to help those exploited by the capitalist system.

Billany, like George Orwell, develops his own left-wing ideology, relating it not to a dogmatic world view but to a concern for others. This ability to define Marxism in a very individualistic way naturally leads to a diversity of interpretation. Orwell believed in what he called, in the essay "Why I Write", "democratic socialism, as I understand it" (186). Orwell's position is, like Billany's, largely free from orthodox dogma. Raymond Williams, in *Orwell*, writes that Orwell "had been critical of what he knew as Marxist theory, of its jargon and its sectarian and factional feuds" (54). Orwell's views developed gradually. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he admits to the naiveté of his earliest views:

I had reduced everything to the simple theory that the oppressed are always right and the oppressors are always wrong: a mistaken theory, but the natural result of being one of the oppressors yourself. I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. (138)

Orwell's experiences in the Spanish Civil War proved decisive to the formation of his ideas. Raymond Williams writes that, for Orwell, before his Spanish experience, "Socialism was a general idea, a general name, against all these evils" (55). In *Orwell: The Transformation*, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams write that "[p]erhaps in a

foreign country, in the midst of a civil war, it might be possible, even for an Englishman of the lower-upper-middle, to de-class himself” (189). Orwell himself recognises the importance of this experience and writes in “Why I Write” that “[e]very line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism” (186). Spain gave Orwell a connection with others; in *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell writes that “[o]ne had been in a community where hope was more normal than apathy or cynicism, where the word ‘comrade’ stood for comradeship and not, as in most countries, for humbug” (83). It took a civil war for Orwell to realise what Billany already knew from personal experience: that only through connection and identification with others can real political conviction and fulfilment happen.

In his essay “The Literature of Communism”, published in *The Criterion*, A.L. Rowse recognises this diversity of opinion as early as 1929 and writes that “compactness and homogeneity are not in the nature of the literature of Communism” (422). The variety of the strains of Marxist interpretation that have developed during the Twentieth Century certainly proves the accuracy of Rowse’s statement. This diversity of Marxist tradition leads a Marxist historian, Alex Callinicos, to state, in his study *Althusser’s Marxism*, “[t]o identify [Marxist tradition] with a selection of texts, as a body of doctrine, opens the way to the worst sort of dogmatism” (8). Like Billany, Callinicos attempts to reject any move toward dogmatic views of Marxism. Yet, this is exactly what has happened. Marxism has been raised to the level of godhood. Eberhard Görner, in his essay “Socialism: Myth and Reality”, writes that “[k]nowledge of human nature was virtually ignored when it came to practical social policy under existing socialism” (107).

Although writing about post-war East Germany, many of Görner's argument can be related to the attitude of some of the English adherents to Marxism. Görner writes that "Marxism-Leninism was elevated to the status of divine liturgy" (112). He also writes that "[s]uccessive generations are involved in building the edifice; it is supported by social forces, passed on, interpreted, analyzed, cemented" (111). Similarly for the Thirties generation, Marxism was elevated to the status of a God, of a religion. Robin Skelton points to this in his introduction to the anthology *Poetry of the Thirties* when he writes that it "is characteristic of the thirties that the poets (with the rather embarrassing exception of Auden, who had already begun his career as an American) entered the war against Hitler as evangelists entering, and exhorting others to enter, a somewhat purgatorial moral gymnasium" (21). Skelton has chosen his words carefully; they did see themselves as evangelists. Like Christian missionaries, the Marxists of the Thirties believed that they were bringing a Marxist salvation to the masses.

There were Communists who deified Communism, even before the Second World War, for example Rex Warner in his poem "Hymn"<sup>1</sup>. Published in 1933, the poem fuses the style of the religious hymn with a commitment to Communism and the workers. The repeating chorus of "Come then, companions. This is the spring of blood,/heart's hey-day, movement of masses, beginning of good" (ll. 13-14, 29-30, 44-45, 57-58) reflects the inclusion of the hymn with its emphasis of good coming from the masses. Warner uses many of the conventions of the religious hymn. Warner uses the elevated language of the hymn to convey his social, rather than spiritual, message: "No more shall men take pride

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Robin Skelton, ed. *Poetry of the Thirties*.

in paper and gold/in furs in cars in servants in spoon in knives” (ll. 15-16). With Biblical echoes, Warner shows the rejection of worldly goods. The difference is that in the Bible worldly goods are rejected for spiritual salvation, while in Warner’s poem it is the Communist salvation. Instead of salvation and the goodness of God, Warner preaches freedom and the goodness of the working class. Warner uses this hymn to attack capitalism:

Come with us, if you can, and, if not, go to hell  
with your comfy chairs, your talk about the police,  
your doll wife, your cowardly life, your newspaper, your  
interests in the East,  
You, there, who are so patriotic, you liar, you beast!  
(ll. 25-28)

In the same way as a Christian preacher attacks Satan so too does Warner, the Communist preacher, attack capitalism. The capitalist in his comfy chair is damned to hell. The poem ends with a repeat of the refrain but not before Warner spreads his message of hope:

Now you can join us, now all together sing All Power  
not tomorrow but now in this hour, All Power  
to lovers of life, to workers, to the hammer, the sickle, the  
blood. (ll. 54-56)

Warner inverts religion’s traditional message of salvation in the next world and promises salvation (“All Power”) in this world, immediate power. The ultimate goal may be different, but Warner clearly equates his role as the poet with the role of the preacher.

Warner is not the only one to see Marxism in religious terms. The collection of essays, edited by Richard H. Crossman and published in 1949, that chronicles the loss of faith in Communism by a group of writers, is entitled *The God That Failed*.

Immediately, the ideas of God and Communism are fused together, even before the reader opens the book. In the introduction to *The God That Failed*, Crossman (Labour M.P. for Coventry and subsequently a Labour cabinet minister) clearly views Communism as the new religion; he states that the ex-Communists featured in the collection “were not discouraged by the rebuffs of the professional revolutionaries, or by the jeers of their opponents, until each discovered the gap between his *own vision of God* and the reality of the Communist State” (my italics, 3). Disillusionment sets in, according to Crossman, because the reality of Communism, represented by the Soviet Union, fails to live up to the ideal. In Crossman’s view, Communists become disillusioned in the same way that Christians lose faith in God. Crossman, then, goes further and connects Communism to the Catholic church, arguing that the “Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism also brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of freedom” (6). Crossman argues that Communism becomes a way for people to lose themselves in something greater than themselves, a way of abandoning responsibility, to allow a centralised power to accept the responsibility for decision-making. Communism, for Crossman, has passed its time because, he argues,

Western democracy today is not so callow or so materialist as it was in that dreary armistice between the wars. But it has taken two world wars and two totalitarian revolutions to make it begin to understand that its task is not to allow Progress to do its work for it, but to provide an alternative to world revolution by planning the co-operation of free peoples. (5)

Crossman ends his introduction by casting Communism in the role of the devil, stating that the “Devil once lived in heaven, and those who have not met him are unlikely to recognize an angel when they see one” (11). Communism is the fallen angel who served God in Heaven. Crossman is not clear about whether or not Communism served a useful purpose, served a “God”. What is clear, however, is that Crossman believes that only those who have seen the Devil (Communism) can appreciate an Angel (Democracy, perhaps).

Norman Podhoretz, in the foreword to the 1983 reprint of the book, continues in a similar vein to Crossman. For Podhoretz, the Soviet Union and Communism remain indistinguishable. In this way, Podhoretz argues that the Soviet Union “was a society in the grip of a totalitarian system as thoroughgoing and as brutal as Nazi Germany” (viii). He argues that the Soviet Union, when it suited them, downplayed the differences between them and the Western democracies: “From the mid-1930s until the mid-1940s, the Soviet Union itself and the Communist parties in other countries (all of which were under the direct control of Moscow) had done everything they could to blur the distinction between Communism on the one side and democratic socialism or liberalism on the other” (i-ii). Yet, in the end, Podhoretz argues that Communism is far more dangerous than Nazism because, in Podhoretz’s words, “Communism was subtler and more insidious” (iii). The Soviet Union, then, has more in common with Nazi Germany than the Western democracies.

While this may be true of the Soviet Union, both Podhoretz and Crossman are wrong to see Communism as a monolith controlled by the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Podhoretz neglects to mention that Yugoslavia and the Communist Party in Greece separated themselves from Moscow. Writing in her book *Yugoslavia*, Phyllis Auty states that Yugoslav Communists “were resentful of foreign interference even though it came from Moscow” (83). This resentment became so great that Auty writes that “the quarrel resulted in a complete break with Moscow” (115). Even Greece, always a close ally of Yugoslavia, had a troubled relationship with Moscow, which Richard Clogg, in *A Concise History of Greece*, reports “precipitated the split in the exiled leadership of the communist party the following year (1968) into two factions, one unwaveringly loyal to the Soviet Union, the other (the Communist Party of Greece of the Interior) broadly ‘Eurocommunist’ in orientation” (163), a split that had developed as a result of the Greek Civil War (1943-1949).

Both Crossman and Podhoretz even neglect the divisions within the British left during the 1930s and the 1940s. George Orwell always was and continues to be a divisive character. Crossman and Podhoretz’s neglect of Orwell’s attack on the Soviet Union in novels such as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* shows that they fail to grasp the divisions within Marxism. They fail to recognise that there are those like Orwell and Billany who do not look to the Soviet Union for guidance. In Orwell’s case, he is bitterly opposed to the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of Great Britain. Not all British Marxists followed the ideology of Moscow or of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Orwell follows his “democratic socialism”, and Billany follows a humanist Socialism.

Billany would oppose attempts to create a religion out of Marxism, opposing the messianic qualities that have been welded to Marxism. Billany would have agreed with Gramsci's statement from "Il Nostro Marx"<sup>2</sup>:

Marx has not written a catechism, he is not a messiah who left a string of parables laden with categorical imperatives, of absolute, indisputable norms outside the categories of time and space. The only categorical imperative, the only norm is: 'Workers of the world unite.' (1)

For Billany, Communism and commitment should come from below, from the people, rather than from a centralised clergy-like power that dictates how Communists should think and act. In *The Trap*, Billany will attack religion as an infantile attitude. Billany's humanist Communism struggles not for Stalin, Moscow, or even Marx, but for people like Elizabeth Pascoe in *The Trap* who are trapped within the capitalist system.

Although the extent of Billany's reading of Marxist theorists cannot be easily determined, Billany does explore many of the same ideas that concern Marxist theorists. Examining the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), the Sardinian Marxist, helps to shed light on Billany's ideas. While it is doubtful that Billany knew Gramsci's work<sup>3</sup>, Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony addresses many of the same issues that Billany explores in *The Trap*. For Gramsci, cultural control is vital to the ruling class. Joseph V. Femia writes that Gramsci "saw in a way that no previous Marxist had done that the rule of one class or group over the rest of society does not depend on material power alone; in modern times, at least, the dominant class must establish its own moral, political and

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<sup>2</sup> Originally published in *Il Grido del Popolo* (4 May 1918) but quoted here from Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought*.

<sup>3</sup> The first translation into English of Gramsci's work, edited by Louis Marks, was published by Lawrence and Wishart in 1957.



cultural values as conventional norms of practical behaviour” (3). Gramsci himself argues that

Every historical act cannot but be performed by the ‘collective man’. In other words this presupposes the attainment of a ‘socio-cultural’ unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed individual wills, heterogeneous in their aims, are welded together for the same goal on the basis of an (equal) and common conception of the world...Since this is what happens, great importance is assumed by the overall question of language, i.e. the collective attainment of single cultural ‘climate’. (156)

Gramsci believes that the ruling class needs more than just control of the means of production; it also needs control of culture and language. Whereas traditional Marxist theory separates the base (the means of production) from the superstructure (social and political activities), Gramsci collapses the base and the superstructure into one. The ruling class, therefore, must create a single cultural “climate” in which all the separate social voices are brought together to attain the same goal. Through this, the ruling class maintains control by forcing discontented voices to disregard their own goals in favour of a common world conception, which is, of course, defined by the ruling class.

Gramsci, as co-founder of the Italian Communist Party, certainly saw his theory put into action by Mussolini and his Fascist government. In his history of modern Italy, Martin Clark, with some irony, states that “To achieve their noble purpose, the Fascists had to ‘mobilize’ every Italian to the cause” (243). Clark shows that the Fascist government “concentrated on other means of persuasion – youth movements, recreation schemes, syndicates...– rather than on mass propaganda. It also ‘took over’ one or two worthy bodies like the Dante Alighieri Society; and it founded both a National Fascist Institute of Culture and a Royal Italian Academy...to mobilize or flatter the intellectuals” (243). Just as Hitler did in Germany, Mussolini controlled every aspect of Italian culture in order to create and maintain support. The Fascist government in Italy was extremely successful in this, for, as Clark points out, while there was no great enthusiasm for

Fascism “Italy was stable, the *Duce* was popular, open dissenters were rare” (247). Possible resistance leaders were dead (like Giacomo Matteotti, the leader of the reformist Socialists, murdered on 10 June 1924), imprisoned (like Gramsci), or in exile (like Palmiro Togliatti, co-founder of the Communist Party with Gramsci, who was exiled in Moscow).

A key idea in Billany’s attack on society is the role the writers play. When Billany attacks British society in *The Trap*, he does it largely by attacking the *creative writers*. While he does attack government and industry, he does not single out politicians or industrialists by name; he does, however, single out specific writers: Dorothy Sayers, W.H. Auden, and John Galsworthy. For Billany all aspects of the British socio-political system are designed to maintain the status quo and keep the working class in poverty, even those writers who, like Auden, profess to rebel against British society. Through Michael Carr, he argues that there is “no break in the chain from Galsworthy to Auden...they may look down their noses at each other, talk contemptuously of the Liberal-bourgeois, but they’re all twisted twigs from the old tree, they all belong between Piccadilly and Park Lane, they’re none of them working-class” (29). Although non-Marxist and writing in a different context (the American educational system), Stanley Fish argues a similar position, writing that left-wing and right-wing commentators “are committed to a similar structure of thought, although they would fill it out in different ways” (vii). To illustrate his point, Fish asserts that Conservatives and Liberals, and even some Marxists may disagree on what literary works constitute the canon, but both ends of the political spectrum will defend the canon’s necessity (vii). This is Billany’s argument as well. The British ruling class may disagree on how the social structure should be constructed (conservative or Marxist), may disagree on how society should be defined, but they are both committed to the existing social structure. Uncommitted and non-revolutionary Marxists like Auden are not interested in destroying the existing social structure but are merely interested in redefining it. Middle class Marxists are reformist

rather than revolutionary, expecting change to come through Parliamentary reform rather than a social revolution. J.B. Priestley (1894-1984), the British writer and reformist Socialist, in *Out of the People* (1941) writes that “Parliament should be the apex of a pyramid of elected councils, and should not, as it tends to do now, drain away all the political life of the country” (153). Priestley clearly feels that social change can come through the existing Parliamentary system, the very system that keeps the working class in poverty. Middle class Socialists, like Priestley and Auden, still wish to maintain their social, Billany would add non-working, status within society and allow others to do the work necessary to support their status. Billany differs from some Socialist writers, especially Upton Sinclair, who William A. Bloodworth, Jr., in *Upton Sinclair* writes, “affirms the ability of the upper class to lead the social revolution, mild or otherwise” (89). Sinclair’s opinions are similar to those of the Mensheviks in Russia who, in Alan Bullock’s words (from *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*), “believed that, in view of Russia’s economic backwardness, it would take a long time before such a revolution could take place, and that the immediate task was to work for a middle-class liberal revolution (28). Billany rejects Sinclair’s view and adopts the Bolshevik attitude that revolution can only come from the working class.

Billany, however, goes a step beyond both Gramsci and Fish. Gramsci posits that the dominant class must control culture; Billany’s key and highly original addition to British cultural thought posits that not only does the dominant class control culture, but it also creates the fiction that working class culture is profoundly different from that of the upper class. Bourgeois writers create the idea of “Two Solitudes”, a term coined by Canadian writer Hugh MacLennan, in the novel of the same name (1945), to describe the relations between Anglophones and Francophones in Canada. Essentially, the Two Solitudes live together in the same society but never really understand or identify with each other. They live separately within the same society. In Billany’s view, Bourgeois writers, like Sayers, Auden and Galsworthy, are directly responsible for creating the

fiction of the Two Solitudes in British society: in Canada based on language (French and English) and in Britain based on class (the working class and the ruling class). In Billany's view, this division within British society is a false one, propagated by the ruling class in order to maintain the oppression of the working class.

Billany contends, in *The Trap*, that the fashion was to see the working class "from a little distance — if not through bars, at least through an impervious psychological screen, so that their actions and emotions were as irrelevant to the gentle Writer and the gentle Reader as those of flatfish on the floor of their aquarium, on the other side of their thick glass and in their own bottle-green element" (26). The working class becomes something of an oddity, like fish in an aquarium. Writers view the working class as seen, "from the place where Real Human Beings lived (such as the Gentle W. and the Gentle R.), from the windows of Rugby Chapel or Eton, from Oxford or from Park Lane, or from the saddle of one's hunter, riding to hounds" (26). The working class, "those droll, non-literary, non-ablutionary, non-intelligent, non-creative masses, made a pleasant background of racy, smelly, ludicrous movement for the activities of the normal non-working world" (26). The working class in Billany's view, then, becomes nothing more than a list of stereotypical physical attributes. In *The Trap*, Billany argues that Dorothy Sayers best exemplifies this attitude:

How the vulgar, 'flashy', 'horsey', persons of the Lower Orders, the bobbies, the sergeants, the plumbers, the butchers and the bellringers become the hilarious laughing-stocks of Lord Peter's, and Dorothy's, wit — that wit so subtle and so sensitive, so delicate and so adroit. (That I may not be misunderstood, my epithets are used in an ironic sense only. I do not find Dorothy Sayers' wit to be possessed of any of these qualities). (28)

Sayers uses the stereotypes to their fullest, reducing the working class to objects of ridicule. The irony of this is that those members of the working class are the plumbers, the police officers, and the butchers that Sayers and Lord Peter Wimsey need in order to maintain their lifestyle. Billany does concede, however, that "Dorothy is in that respect a

relic from a different age” (28). Billany sees a shift in attitude toward the working class. The older attitude, represented by Sayers, sees the working class as comical foils for the author’s wit, whereas the new attitude, while still seeing the working class as a separate entity from the ruling class, centres itself on and presumes to speak for the working class.

Billany traces this new attitude toward the working class from the previous generation of bourgeois writers (represented by John Galsworthy) to the Thirties generation (represented by Auden). These Bourgeois writers are those who claim to attack the British class system and believe they can identify with the working class but will always be defined by their middle class attitudes. Billany argues in *The Trap* that writers like Auden are

hypnotized by the violence of their own Oedipus complex, which set them psychologically in opposition to their own class -- I'm speaking of a rising generation — persuaded themselves that this rebellion gave them identity of interest with the working-class, believed they had actually become working-class by sheer force of will -- unaware, completely, that the thing which divides the Working Class from the Upper Class is, quite simply, not a difference of ideals but a difference of income. (28-29)

Billany’s complaint about these middle class writers is that they are not truly interested in helping the working class. Their identification with the working class comes from their personal conflicts with their own class. These writers are far more interested in rebelling against members of their own class than actually helping the working class. In Billany’s eyes, this rebellion allows the public school, middle class writers to believe that they are working class, even when they retain all the privileges of their class. George Orwell echoed the same sentiment when, five or six years earlier, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he wrote “that most middle-class Socialists, while theoretically pining for a classless society, cling like glue to their miserable fragments of social prestige” (162). He even includes

himself in this group he attacks in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, writing that “[a]ll my notions — notions of good and evil, of pleasant and unpleasant, of funny and serious, of ugly and beautiful — are essentially *middle-class* notions” (149). Orwell explains this pseudo-revolutionary fervour in terms of the great disillusionment and discontent that followed the First World War. Orwell, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, writes that

England was full of half-baked antinomian opinions.  
Pacifism, internationalism, humanitarianism of all kinds,  
feminism, free love, divorce-reform, atheism, birth-control  
— things like these were getting a better hearing than  
they would get in normal times. (129)

The middle class Socialists whom Orwell and Billany attacks, Orwell argues, were caught up in an atmosphere of discontent. The First World War shattered the contentment of British society, forcing new ideas to the forefront. Even a conservative writer like Siegfried Sassoon was caught up in the atmosphere and dabbled in Socialist politics.

The writers whom Billany and Orwell attack still treat the working class as inherently different, a separate entity from the ruling class, when in fact the only difference, as Billany observes, is merely a difference of income and education. Billany’s emphasis on income as the defining difference between the rich and the poor echoes ideas from Orwell’s early writing. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Orwell writes that

Fear of the mob is a superstitious fear. It is based on the idea that there is some mysterious, fundamental difference between rich and poor, as though they were two different races, like negroes and white men. But in reality there is no such difference. The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit. (121)

Both Billany and Orwell argue that, while the only difference between the rich and the poor is economic, society interprets the difference as cultural. This reinforces the divisions within society. By seeing the working class as a distinct entity, the ruling class can justify the inequalities in the capitalist system in the same way as racists, such as the Nazi party, attempt to use cultural and biological reasons to maintain racial oppression.

The names that Billany evokes (Galsworthy and Auden) are important. Both Galsworthy and Auden are traditionally held up as examples of writers who attack the existing system, the status quo, but eventually move to a more traditional view of British society. Although the cultural critic James Gindin argues for a reassessment of Galsworthy's work, he recognises that for "the relatively small high-brow critical audience, the work is dated and pedestrian, the fiction one long, slow decline into conventionality from the early peak of *The Man of Property*" (xi). Gindin is referring to Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, which has traditionally been seen as beginning as social satire with the first novel, *The Man of Property* (1906), and ending in a conservative, almost sentimental, view of the upper middle class by the end of the saga. Billany clearly reads Galsworthy's work in this way. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell writes that Galsworthy "is a very fine specimen of the thin-skinned, tear-in-the-eye, pre-war humanitarian" (146). Orwell, like Billany, sees a more conservative position underlying Galsworthy's fiction. Orwell writes, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, that when

things happen unexpectedly and the world-order which [Galsworthy] has known begins to crumble, he feels somewhat differently about it. So, having set out to be the champion of the underdog against tyranny and injustice, he ends by advocating (*vide The Silver Spoon*) that the English working class, to cure their economic ills, shall be deported to the colonies like batches of cattle. If he had lived ten years

longer he would quite probably have arrived at some genteel version of Fascism. (147)

Both Orwell and Billany attack Galsworthy because they see a hypocrisy in Galsworthy's defence of the underdog; he is quite willing to argue for change, but he loses that commitment when actual change begins and threatens his way of life.

Auden also returns to a more orthodox position later in his career. While Billany would not have known what shape Auden's future poetry would take, he would certainly be aware of Auden's flight to the United States which signalled the end of Auden's commitment to Marxism. In a recent interview, Edward Upward, the Thirties novelist and Auden's friend, suggested that Auden "was never a committed Marxist." This attitude is supported by Stephen Spender's assertion in his autobiography (*World Within World*) that Auden's famous poem "A Communist to Others" is "an exercise in entering into a point of view not his own" (248). This much anthologised poem has been repeatedly used to show Auden's commitment to Marxism, yet Spender, a close friend of Auden's, suggests that the commitment shown in the poem is nothing more than a poetic exercise, rather than an expression of pre-existing beliefs. It is not surprising that Auden explored the possibilities of Communism not only because many of his friends were becoming increasingly left-wing in their views but also, as Upward confirms in an interview, because the Communist Party was more accepting of his homosexuality than other sections of British society. Auden eventually rejected Communism when it became incompatible with his later religious views.

Auden's later poetry reflects his move away from his Marxist influenced poetry of the Thirties. Bernard Bergonzi argues that Auden's poem "September 1, 1939" (famous



for dismissing the 1930s as being dishonest) shows “Auden’s personal shift from the Marxism laced with psychoanalysis that had so affected his poetry of the Thirties to a form of existentialist Protestantism” (1). Although a High Church Anglicanism may be a better term than Protestantism, Bergonzi points out the obvious change in Auden’s poetry. Auden returns to a more religious and conservative point of view in his poetry with poems like “The Prophets”. Monroe K. Spears goes so far as to state that this shift is “not a denial but a fulfilment of his earlier beliefs” (171). Spears argues that these religious elements were a part of Auden’s personal vision from early in his career rather than a later development. This traditional religious feeling is what Billany recognises in Auden’s work. Auden, searching for a world view that reflected his own beliefs, explored Marxism as a possible philosophy, only to discard it when it became clear that it did not suit his purpose, conflicting with his deep religious feelings.

These two writers who begin their careers with savage attacks on the ruling class belie their commitment for social change by turning their backs on their earlier attitudes. Auden goes so far as to reject his earlier poems as “trash” (Skelton, 41). Yet these are the voices that dominate their time and are identified by the dominant literary culture as being representative of the pro-working class, or at least anti-Bourgeois, writers. The respect that these two writers command is quite clear. Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932, and critics have come to see Auden as the personification of the literature of the 1930s. This leads to Samuel Hynes’s extraordinary statement, in his book *The Auden Generation*, that “Virtually no writing of literary importance came out of the working class during the decade” (11). The authentic Working Class literary voices

were and still are pushed to the margins of culture and society. After all, who remembers Dan Billany or Walter Brierley or Ellen Wilkinson<sup>4</sup>? Everyone remembers the middle class writers: Auden, Spender, Day Lewis, and even the idiosyncratic and rather marginalised Orwell.

What becomes clear, then, is that Billany's belief that the concern for and commitment to the working class and to social change is nothing more than posturing is upheld. The fiction of the Two Solitudes of the British working class and the British ruling class has become engrained not only in the writers of the 1930s but also in the critical response to the literature of the Thirties. Enlarging on Billany's image of fish in an aquarium, literary critics have added yet another glass partition between the working class and the ruling class. The working class of the 1930s has become defined by their participation, to use Hynes's words, "in Hunger Marches, in protests, in the East End resistance to Mosley's invasion" (11), all distant and dated historical events. The Bourgeois of the 1930s, however, have been defined as creators of enduring works of literature that are timeless in their appeal. Billany writes, "Proletarian Art? There it was, on the Arty-Crafty walls, proletarian Art, all produced by the younger sons and daughters of the world that dines at eight" (29). The word "Proletarian" is used ironically, of course; Billany goes on to say, sardonically, "When Proletarian Art sets out the beauty of Labour, I begin to consider it's high time the Proletarian Artist did some" (30).

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<sup>4</sup> Ellen Wilkinson is still remembered as a minister in the 1945 Labour government, but her writing has been largely ignored.

In *The Cage*, Billany and Dowie extend this criticism to include other writers; not just Sayers, but C.S. Forester (Horatio Hornblower), Leslie Charteris (Simon Templar, the Saint), and Herman Cyril McNeile — using “Sapper” as a pseudonym (Hugh “Bulldog” Drummond). In *The Cage*, the analysis shifts away from purely literary images of the working class to literary images of British identity. The authors ridicule the stereotypical, yet popular, characters in fiction. They place these characters into the prisoner-of-war camp in *The Cage*: “A brisk wind licked up the dust in successive waves from the compound, chased them, and sent them hissing along the huts. Captain Horatio Hornblower, R.N., braced himself against the gusts and continued his steady pacing” (57). Billany and Dowie examine what it means to be British through literary representations of “Englishness”. The stereotypical representations of “Englishness” in writers can be separated into two groups: the suave, aristocratic charmer like The Saint or Lord Peter Wimsey and the honest, but common, patriot like “Bulldog” Drummond, or Horatio Hornblower who rises through hard work to achieve some level of greatness. Stereotypical images of the English were rife during the Second World War even among writers who considered themselves to be on the left of the political spectrum. Angus Calder, writing in *The Myth of the Blitz*, illustrates this by using J.B. Priestley as his example; Calder argues, that “Priestley’s impatience with theoretical socialism and his inbred egalitarianism were associated with a passionate nostalgia for the Edwardian England of his boyhood” (198). John Lucas, in *England and Englishness*, argues that ideas of Englishness arise so that, in the modern state, “borders can be drawn, and enemies identified as those beyond, while inside them the nation is proclaimed as being at

one” (2). This is certainly the case during the Second World War. The enemy is identified as the efficient, ruthless Germans, while the English are the peace-loving people living in a rural paradise. In *The Cage*, however, the enemy is from within not from without. Despite the stereotypical view of the quintessential Englishman as being aristocratic and refined or, as in the case of Bulldog Drummond, gruff and patriotic, Billany and Dowie show that Britain is far more fragmented. By examining the society of the POW camp, Billany and Dowie strip away the propaganda of the war to show that Britain is far less coherent than otherwise believed. In *Literary Englands*, David Gervais writes that “[t]radition can be an effective weapon against present doubts and divisions; most periods of English history have looked back to some earlier period to exemplify what England is” (1). The novel, written at a time when divisions within the country could destroy it in the face of a foreign aggressor, breaks down the cultural view of what it means to be English. Billany objects to the stereotypical view writers, like Sapper, have of the English and “Englishness”. Sapper, in his Bulldog Drummond stories, certainly uses stereotypes. A clear example of this is Drummond’s thoughts on Samuel Cartwright, a character who is murdered in the novel *Challenge* (1937): “That Cartwright — a confirmed Cockney should have troubled to write down the name of an obscure Cornish village without good reason, seemed very improbable” (257). Drummond makes a connection between Cartwright and a Cornish village purely on the basis of his stereotypical view of a Cockney, and Cartwright is, in Drummond’s words, “a confirmed Cockney”. Drummond makes an important connection between a Cornish town and Cartwright not through clever investigation or induction but by Drummond’s view that all

Cockneys are pragmatic and would only write something down if it was important.

Drummond's assumption that all Cockneys share these qualities reduces them, in Billany's eyes, to stock figures that have no basis in reality.

Billany would also object to the strong anti-Communist strain in the novel. When Drummond suggests that Communism is a "bogey" (meaning an imaginary threat), one character, Humphrey Gasdon, states, "Are you quite sure it [Communism] is such a bogey? [...] What about France recently, and Belgium? And Spain? They're fanatics, you know, and fanatics are dangerous men. Moreover they've always looked on us and our empire as the principal stronghold of all that they're up against" (81). Gasdon obviously sees Communism as a threat, not just to England or Britain, but to the Empire. The Communists become the foreign enemy. Samuel Cartwright, one of the Englishmen helping the "fanatics" (as Gasdon calls them), refuses, in the end, to follow through with his part in the plan and is killed. The novel implicitly supports the maintenance and oppression of the British Empire. In *Challenge*, the way for England to maintain its international strength is to rearm. Attempts at a peaceful resolution to the tensions in the world are ridiculed; Gasdon argues against the League of Nations and for rearmament, bitterly stating that "the League of Nations is the greatest menace to peace that exists in the world today. It is the sand into which, ostrich-like, England has stuffed her great fat head, and believing it to be a safeguard against future war has proceeded to disarm" (78). Menalin, who is a Russian financier, reveals, at the end of the novel, that England's (it is never "British" in the novel) policy of disarmament is the very reason that England was targeted; Menalin explains to Drummond that every "big power was arming feverishly,

with the exception of England, who seemed fundamentally incapable of appreciating the situation” (295). The novel effectively argues for a policy of rearmament instead of advocating peace. Instead of arguing for an easing of tensions between countries, the novel attempts to maintain the balance of power and the military might of the British Empire. Billany will show, again in *The Trap*, that one country is not to blame for the crises within the world. Whereas, in *Challenge*, Sapper argues that the foreign powers, Russia and presumably Germany, are to blame for the troubles in the world, Billany, in *The Trap*, maintains that global capitalism, British capitalism included, is to blame.

Having examined Billany’s indictment of the creative writers, something must be said about what precisely his literary principles are, in order to place Billany within Marxist literary tradition. Marxist writers have always had difficulty when trying to marry their Socialist intentions to artistic achievements. The debate that rages within Marxism concerns what forms a writer should use in order to integrate his or her own personal vision of Socialism into any artistic expression. As a result, there has been constant disagreement between Marxist writers about the role that fantasy has within Socialist literature. In his fictionalised autobiography, *Lions and Shadows*, Christopher Isherwood writes about Edward Upward’s (called Chalmers in the book) struggle between Upward’s obvious talent for fantastic writing and his commitment for social change:

He was to spend the next three years in desperate and bitter struggles to relate Mortmere to the real world of the jobs and the lodging-houses; to find the formula which would transform our private fancies and amusing freaks and bogies into valid symbols of the ills of society and the toils and aspirations of our daily lives. For the formula did, after all, exist. And Chalmers did at last find it, at the end of a long and weary search, not

hidden in the mysterious emblems of Dürer or the prophetic utterances of Blake...but quite clearly set down, for everyone to read, in the pages of Lenin and of Marx (274).

Upward's discovery of Marxism led him to abandon the early fantasy-based Mortmere stories he was writing with Isherwood. Upward's most famous defence of his Marxist literary theory is his essay "Sketch for a Marxist Interpretation of Literature" published in *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution* (edited by C. Day Lewis in 1937). Upward writes that "no book written *at the present time* can be 'good' unless it is written from a Marxist or near-Marxist viewpoint" (1937, 41). He was careful to italicise the phrase "at the present time" in order to argue that literature written in pre-Marxist times (he uses Shakespeare as an example) can have value in the modern world. Only modern books, in Upward's view however, must be written from a Marxist or near-Marxist viewpoint in order to have any relevance.

He argues that literature must necessarily reflect the conflict between social classes, for, he states, "It is an historical fact that literature is produced only after human society has become divided into classes" (1937, 43). A "good" book is a book that recognises and embraces this fact. He believes that a work of literature "is true in so far as the thoughts and feelings it evokes can survive the test of practical experience in the material world" (1937, 47). Those books that can connect themselves to the material world are the only true books. He acknowledged that "Even myths and 'fairy' stories, which were primitive man's attempt to tell the truth about the world he lived in, may still have some real significance – though it will be very slight – in the conditions of to-day" (1937, 48). Modern fantasy, on the other hand, has no relevance to the modern world

because “fantasy implies in practice a retreat from the real world into the world of imagination” (Upward, 1937, 48). Fantasy, in Upward’s view, “may have been practicable and desirable in a more leisured and less profoundly disturbed age than our own it is becoming increasingly impracticable to-day” (1937, 48). His point is clear: the problems facing the world are too great to allow fantasy to be a central form of literature in the modern age, hence Upward’s shift from fantasy to realism in his own work. An interesting note is that later in his life Upward, although retaining his Marxist beliefs, returned to fantasy with books such as *An Unmentionable Man* (1992), accepting that fantasy and Marxist commitment can exist together.

Upward was not the only English author to contemplate the position of Socialist realism in literature. Ralph Fox in his study *The Novel and the People* goes so far as to claim that “the future of the English novel and therefore the solution to the problems which vex the English novelist lies precisely in Marxism with its artistic formula of a ‘Socialist realism’ which shall unite and re-vitalise the forces of the Left in literature” (15). For Fox, realism becomes the saviour, the form that would magically solve every problem facing the modern writer.

The English Marxists took their starting point from the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress at which Soviet writers debated the concepts of Socialist realism and modernism. This conference defined what Socialist realism stood for and examined the goals of the writer. In a speech to the congress, which Fox reproduces in full in *The Novel and the People*, Maxim Gorky linked fantasy with Bourgeois art, arguing that “Bourgeois romanticism, based on individualism, with its propensity for fantastic and



mystic ideas, does not spur the imagination or encourage thought” (44). He continues to say that

Socialism realism means not only knowing reality as it is, but knowing whither it is moving. It is moving towards socialism, it is moving towards the victory of the international proletariat (157).

Literature, then, should not only show “reality” realistically but also show society’s movement toward the Socialist victory. Literature must support the Socialist struggle, following Lenin’s much debated statement that all literature “must become party literature” (1905, 149). Lenin states that literature “must become *part* of the common cause of the proletariat, ‘a cog and a screw’ of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class” (1905, 149). Lenin argues that literature must become a part of the revolutionary mechanism that would ultimately lead to the victory of the working class; literature must become devoted to the party, subsume itself into the revolutionary struggle. Literature, to borrow a phrase from Andy Croft, should become a weapon in the struggle. Subsequent critics have taken their cue from these highly influential statements.

Although not a proponent of Soviet Socialist realism, the Hungarian Marxist Gyorgy Lukács opposed all forms of experimental fiction, especially modernism. Lukács argues in “The Ideology of Modernism” that modernism reduces humans “to a sequence of unrelated experimental fragments” (194). For Lukács, the danger in this was that by reducing people to fragments an author destroyed the relationship between humanity and its environment which furthers “the dissolution of personality” (195). This dissolution of

personality allowed external forces to manipulate and control the individual. His example is the social control the Nazis had over the German population in the 1930s. Lukács believed that the German people, due to the harsh conditions imposed by the victorious allies in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, lost any sense of self. The Nazis were able to exploit this and convinced the Germans to identify themselves not only with the German state but the Nazi party itself. Lukács also claims that modernism destroys meaning and states that “Absence of meaning makes a mockery of action and reduces art to naturalist description” (202). In the end, he claims that modernism “leads not only to the destruction of traditional literary forms; it leads to the destruction of literature as such” (209). So not only is Socialist realism literature’s saviour, as Fox argues, but any deviation from Socialist realism furthers literature’s destruction.

Marxist complaints about Joyce are not so much that he was politically right-wing but that his writing moved into subjectivity. Again Caudwell is the one who best argues the Marxist point when he writes that Joyce (along with Dorothy Richardson and Proust) is one of the “last blossoms of the bourgeois novel, for with them the novel begins to disappear as an objective study of social relations and becomes a study of the subject’s experience in society” (13). This, then, is Joyce’s error. Instead of using his fiction to chronicle socialism’s victory, Joyce turns away from objective observation of society to a highly subjective exploration of an individual in society.

In “Realism in the Balance”, Lukács’s response to Ernst Bloch’s defence of Expressionism, Lukács writes that the goal of every major realist “is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately

perceptible network of relationships that go to make up society” (38). Non-realists, from Naturalism to Surrealism, in Lukács’s view, “all remain frozen in their immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence” (36-37). Yet, non-realist literature need not be frozen within the immediacy of their moment. Billany’s children’s fantasy, *The Magic Door*, while a fantasy, deals with issues not just concerned for the world of 1943 (the year it was published). The novel is a fine example of a political fantasy with affinities with both Edward Upward and Rex Warner. Dealing with issues such as education and concern for the welfare of others, Billany transcends the form to deal with more universal, less immediate underlying nature of the capitalist system.

Billany never rejects realism outright. In fact, *The Trap*, perhaps his best novel, is a realistic novel that shows the oppression of the capitalist system. In *The Trap*, Billany addresses the issue of form, stating that “I don’t feel that any new technique is demanded” (11). He does recognise the possibility that a concern with form could overtake the narrative:

but I know myself: I know how delicate my balance must be if I’m not to be swayed to one side by the Sense of the Dramatic, or to another by the savour of words: or another by outrageous indignation, or another by its converse, humility resulting from fear. So for me at any rate there is the question of a sober, strong attitude to my writing, yet a sensitiveness: I must beat out my own way to the truth which lies behind my eyes and no others. (11)

This passage, which is crossed out in the manuscript<sup>5</sup>, is the closest Billany came to writing a manifesto. He feels that writing is a fine balance between form (“the savour of

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<sup>5</sup> Held at the Imperial War Museum, London.

words”) and meaning (“outrageous indignation”). In the end, he argues, he can only find his own way to the truth; he must struggle to express what he knows as truth. The problem, he recognises, is that “[t]here are as many truths as men, but there are so many reasons for not telling them” (11). The novel, then, is intended to reveal that truth: the truth of the working class struggle and the oppression of the working class.

In *The Trap*, Billany recognises the danger in imitation, especially of Hemingway; Billany writes that “I don’t want the running commentary of Hemingway, indeed I’m scared to fall into that style, because it’s so near to what I want to do, and yet it will betray my purpose completely” (11). While the style of Hemingway is close to his stylistic desires (“it’s so near to what I want to do”), his Communist message could get lost in the stylistic mode (“it will betray my purpose completely”). Billany is aware of the possibility that his message could be misinterpreted. Writing about Jack London, in “*The Call of the Wild and The Jungle*”, Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin writes that “[n]ovels such as *Martin Eden* and *The Sea Wolf*, intended as pleas against individualism, were interpreted as exalting it, which depressed and angered London” (237). Billany’s trouble is that Hemingway’s writing, on a purely stylistic level, fulfils many of Billany’s ambitions for his own fiction. David Lodge, in his essay “The Language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy”, argues that it was possible for Hemingway “to be a realist *and* a Modernist” (490). While it may be pushing the point too far by calling Billany a modernist, he is always willing to experiment with form. His use of fantasy in *The Magic Door* and the detective story in *The Opera House Murders* is clear evidence of that fact. The problem in Billany’s view is that Hemingway’s disillusioned individualism

that expresses itself in violence and the primitive is not the aim of Billany's novel, and Billany's fear is that by adopting Hemingway's style his novel will adopt the themes that Hemingway explores. Michael Carr, the narrator in *The Trap*, is not a Hemingway hero, although I will argue in a later paragraph that Carr's father-in-law (John Pascoe) is a frustrated Hemingway hero. Carr enters what might be called a Hemingwayesque world of violence and brutality, but he is unwillingly pulled into that world. The forces of capitalism impose the brutality on Carr and his world. This is not just in relation to the war which sends Carr to fight in North Africa. The violence surrounds him even in civilian life. Early in *The Trap*, Carr reminisces about his schoolboy friends; he writes that

Fred was drowned in the North Sea seven years ago, which was three years after he left school: George went into the mines, and was killed in an explosion before he was twenty: and Joey was the last to die [of tuberculosis when he was twenty]. I find it a queer, inscrutable thought that out of those four boys who played together, so short a time ago, I alone remain to represent us to the world. (20)

Carr is born into a violent and dangerous world that would destroy those around him with no compunction.

Billany's purpose is inclusive and attempts to bring the reader into the narrative, writing:

I don't want to leave you out as a spectator of my picaresque adventures, and yet I don't want to take you with me on an odyssey in the manner of Stevenson: I'm sorry to be so incoherent, but if you think, you'll see that neither way gives complete truth: there's something missing in both, perhaps it's the undertone of all my reflections, reactions, associations. (11-12)

Billany indicates a clear relationship with the reader. He clearly does not want the reader to read the novel purely as an adventure, as with some of Robert Louis Stevenson's novels (such as *Treasure Island* or *Kidnapped*). At the same time, he does not want to leave the reader out of his picaresque novel. His uses of the term "picaresque" is telling. The true picaresque novel needs a rogue, a character like Moll Flanders for example. On the surface, Michael Carr does not seem like a rogue. He is a working class man who grows up, falls in love, and then is sent off to fight Nazi Germany. This description hardly seems to make Carr a rogue; yet, in one important way, he is. Billany writes a lot about people who try to live outside the constraints of the British capitalist system. In *The Opera House Murders*, his narrator, Robbie Duncan, is a Socialist detective who spent time in jail for stealing money from a wealthy client. In *The Magic Door*, the group of children who are his protagonists rebel against the authority of their teacher and the oppressive school system to journey to the past with the help of the magic door in order to live out their desires for adventure. Michael Carr, too, is a rebel through his attack on the capitalist system. Carr becomes an outsider; he refuses to accept the rules and attitudes placed upon him by the capitalist system. Even at a time when his country is at war, he refuses to see the war as a struggle for democracy, for a better world, and sees it, as a later chapter will show, as a way for capitalism to maintain its supremacy.

In *The Trap*, Billany, through Carr, recognises the problems facing the modern writer; he writes

The great trouble, dear reader, is that all the genres have been tried. If one wants to write a war novel — Hemingway: if it's Nature, the result sounds like Powys, or Hudson, or certainly like Thoreau. If it's love, there's D.H. Lawrence, if it's the social problem there's Mass-Observation. It seems

to make it hard for a simple soul like me, who isn't too certain what his own voice sounds like anyway, simply to model his simple personal story in the material of words. (89)

Here Billany sets out his problem. How can a writer find some type of originality when so many writers have gone before. This problem is compounded by the fact that Billany (and Carr) is uncertain about his own voice. His two published novels, *The Opera House Murders* and *The Magic Door*, hardly helped in developing his own voice, being two different genres as they are. He has this problem even when he constantly has his purpose in sight:

I'm continually looking back on the last page but one and saying 'now is *that* what I meant, or have I slipped again'? Even a digression like this, I know it, probably owes more to Sterne or Thackeray than to my own determination. (89)

Billany is filled with doubt. His novel is an attempt to balance the difficulty he has in conveying the message he wants and the difficulty he has in maintaining originality in his writing. He wants to convey his ideas, but he does not want to mimic books that have gone before him.

Billany, like many others, was not affected by the Socialist realism strait jacket. Few British writers, with a few notable exceptions, did follow that theoretical idea. In her essay "An Intellectual Irrelevance? Marxist Literary Criticism in the 1930s", Hanna Behrend writes that "Marxist literary criticism in Britain has always looked like an alien activity, sometimes comical, sometimes sinister, always intrusive" (106). As early as 1929, A.L. Rowse attempted to explain why Marxism has only a limited influence on English writing. In "The Literature of Communism", Rowse argues that

There is in English minds a notable reluctance to systematize our reflections upon industry and politics; and when the

system takes the highly abstract and semi-philosophical form of Marx's theories, we are apt to consider the whole thing as unpractical and irrelevant. Further, we have a temperamental dislike for the realist and the analytical; especially if the realism and the analysis are applied to the assumptions of our political system. (423)

For Rowse, the English mind naturally rejected attempts to bring a systematic methodology to literature. Hanna Behrend, in "An Intellectual Irrelevance?", shows that those who did attempt to bring a theoretical perspective to literature had very eclectic influences; Behrend writes that "British Marxists blended liberal, Romantic, non-conformist and socialist utopian traditions with Marxist theory" (108). She continues to explain that these eclectic traditions "were simply the native traditions which best answered the desire to close the widening gap between the world as it was and the aspiration of artists and writers for a humane society" (108). English Marxists, including Billany, adapted Marxist theory to their own situation, following Gramsci's statement that "The only constant is Workers Unite!"<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, as Peter Marks writes in "Illusion and Reality: the Spectre of Socialist Realism in Thirties Literature", "the evidence from periodicals suggests that the impact of the approach [Socialist realism] was not as pronounced as its supporters expected, or as its opponents feared" (23). Marks concludes that "[t]hough much energy was channelled by writers into political struggles, most notably in Spain, hard links between political allegiance and literary method were

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981): p. 1.



not forged” (34). Billany would reject Socialist realism as the only form applicable to literature.

There were the English proponents of Socialist realism. As noted earlier, Ralph Fox (who died fighting in the Spanish Civil War) believed that Socialist realism would save the English artist. Christopher Caudwell (who also died in the Spanish Civil War) echoes both Lukács and Fox when he writes, in “A Study of the Bourgeois Artist”<sup>7</sup> that new art “is produced by [...] tension between changing social relations and outmoded consciousness” (17). He argues that this tension can take on two forms. The first is an evolutionary form which deals with the tensions by “producing in an even more pronounced form the contradiction which was the source of the dynamism” (18). Shakespeare was a positive example of this; however, in a passage that echoes Lukács, Caudwell argues that this form of art can lead to “the complete breakdown of art in surrealism, Dadaism and Steinerism” (18). The second form is the revolutionary form which aims to explode the existing forms of Bourgeois art in order to rebuild it. This “new art when it emerges will be art more conscious of itself as part of the whole social process” (Caudwell, 18). This art will, of course, will be Communist. This is the other aspect of Socialist realism. Art must be inherently linked to the social process; the form cannot be separated from its socio-political context, a belief that subsequent Marxists have taken as their guiding principle.

Similarly, not all English Marxists took Socialist realism as their guiding principle. In the author’s note to his novel *The Aerodrome* (1941), Rex Warner writes

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<sup>7</sup> Reprinted in *The Concept of Freedom*.

that “Authors often place at the beginning of their books a disclaimer to the effect that ‘all characters and scenes hereafter described are entirely fictitious’. In my case anyone who has read my other books will know that such a disclaimer is unnecessary. I do not even aim at realism” (n.p.). This disregard for realism is one of the first aspects of Warner’s work on which critics comment. Anthony Burgess, in an introduction to *The Aerodrome*, compares the novel to Orwell’s *1984*, stating that “It lacks the ‘popular’ elements of Orwell’s book – sex, overt brutality, explicit and recognizable ideology” (6). For Burgess, then, the lack of the elements (sex and brutality) that Orwell uses and the very lack of an insistent ideology presented in a recognisable form allow Warner’s work to be largely forgotten. Yet the doctrine of Socialist realism would force a writer to present a coherent Marxist ideology, a constraint that Warner rejects. Andrew Cramp, writing about Warner’s earlier novel *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937), points to a multitude of influences on Warner’s novel:

Chaplin, Lloyd, the Marx Brothers, Eisenstein and Fritz Lang are some of the identifiable cinematic influences. Literary genres pulled into the story include Boys Adventure, the Thriller, Popular Romance and open allusions to *The Waste Land* and H.G. Wells’ *Time Machine*. In addition there is a sprinkling of thirties motifs such as frontiers, youth, bicycles, a regard for fresh air, and the symbolic journey (vii).

Cramp sees, as Burgess did in *The Aerodrome*, a lack of overt Marxist theory. Cramp states that “*The Wild Goose Chase* is a unique and entertaining thirties’ novel because it is an attempt to find a form suitable both to convey the necessity of Marxism and revolution, and to appeal to as wide an audience as possible without depending on overt

intellectual, and hence possibly alienating, political debate” (ix). Warner, therefore, while not directly using fantasy, explores other forms to help him convey his Marxist message.

Certainly not all Marxists were distrustful of modernism and experimentation in literature. The Marxist historian Alex Callinicos, in a recent book review called “Greek Myths”, claims that “bad politics can be redeemed by good writing” (31). Callinicos obviously believes that good writing does not have to be Marxist (his definition of “good” politics). Perhaps more persuasive is Antonio Gramsci’s assertion that imaginative, experimental literature is vital in expanding and improving one’s mind. Gramsci was a committed and hardened Marxist who was still willing to recognise that even in the midst of class struggle literary experimentation still had a place in the intellectual life of a society. In a letter to his Russian wife Julia Schucht (1896-1941) dated 15 August 1932, he writes “several of the reviews I have been reading contain articles full of recriminations about the wide remove between art and life, about literature not reflecting the present-day life of the nation, and young men exhausting their talents in formalistic experiments with style, metre and vocabulary” (1996, 231). These recriminations, Gramsci believed, “may well have an intrinsic interest, but which reveal a certain barrenness in the intellectual and artistic landscape” (1996, 231). Manifestly, Gramsci feels that literary experimentation creates a varied and fertile intellectual landscape. In an earlier letter, dated 1 June 1931, Gramsci tells his wife that it is “my opinion that a modern man of intelligence should read the classics in general at a certain ‘remove’, prizing them for the aesthetic value only” (1996, 148), continuing to argue that aesthetic admiration “may be accompanied by a kind of ‘civil’ disdain, as in the case of Marx for

Goethe” (1996, 148). Marx had a deep love for Goethe and spent much time trying to reconcile that love with his political commitments. Gramsci saw no contradiction in a Marxist reading an author who exhibits, in Callinicos’s terminology, bad politics. Both letters were written from Turin prison where Gramsci was serving part of the twenty year prison sentence handed down by the Fascist government in 1926. Yet even in the midst of that struggle, Gramsci still recognised that non-Marxist literature still has something to offer the intellectual, telling his wife that “I’m glad that Delio [Gramsci’s son] likes imaginative literature, and does some imagining on his own account; I don’t think that will prevent him becoming a great engineer just the same and building skyscrapers and power stations. It’s more likely to do the reverse” (1996, 148). So not only did Gramsci argue for a varied approach to literature, but he clearly encouraged this variety in his son’s education.

Billany’s position seems to agree with Gramsci’s attitude that non-realist literature can have relevance to the life of a Communist. The most obvious way in which Billany dissents from Socialist realism is his decision to write *The Opera House Murders*, a detective story, and *The Magic Door*, a children’s fantasy. Billany uses both genres to comment upon and critique the capitalist system. Billany also comments upon art and its place in society within the novels himself.

Robbie Duncan, the Socialist detective from Billany’s novel *The Opera House Murders*, believes that art, in this case opera, is important; Duncan discusses this with Arnold Amery, a man who is opening a new opera house. Amery argues that “there’s an Art side to Opera as well as a box-office side” (80). Duncan does not argue with this

contention, but he does point out to Amery that “you *did* publicize these pot-boilers of yours with the aid of many a cheap crack at music which, with all its faults, was worth taking seriously” (80). Duncan accuses Amery of undermining the seriousness of music. Amery defends himself by agreeing with Duncan’s position on art, even though Duncan himself does not state his own position. Later in the novel, the hard and sometimes brutal Duncan is moved by the singing of Mary Kirby, an opera singer and character in the novel. Duncan describes her singing of Schubert’s “Spring Dreams”: “her voice danced like a flower; and then the incredible change, the tired bitterness, the loneliness of the next section” (132). Mary herself is astounded that he is touched by her singing, stating, “Dear me [...] the bachelor is touched to tears. He yearns for a home and infant prattle. The hard-bitten Robbie” (133). Duncan acknowledges the emotional aspect of art, saying that “I wasn’t touched to tears, but I was pretty spellbound by Mary’s singing” (133). Duncan’s knowledge of opera becomes a vital clue that one character, Kenneth Wainwright, is an impostor. Wainwright states that he saw the great opera singer Enrico Caruso (who was a favourite of Billany’s) sing in *Otello*. Mary voices Duncan’s thought, “Caruso never sang *Otello*, did he?” (135). Both Mary and Duncan know for sure that Caruso never sang that part, and Wainwright was exposed. Just as Gramsci argues that experimental literature is important to the life of a committed Marxist, Billany shows, through Duncan, that a knowledge of high art is helpful, even important, as Duncan never would have been able to solve the mystery without a knowledge of opera.

Billany’s discussion of art in a detective novel is reminiscent of the literary discussions in Nicholas Blake’s detective novel *There’s Trouble Brewing* (1937). The

detective Nigel Strangeways is invited to give a presentation to the Maiden Astbury Literary Society, a task he dreads, thinking, “Lower-middlebrow [...] was the prevailing tendency: he began to wonder whether a lecture on the post-war poets was quite their dish of tea” (18). After his lecture, he is presented with a variety of people all of whom attack modern poetry. Blake writes that

A gentleman with a with moustache and mottled complexion instantly rose and launched into a philippic against the alleged bolshevist tendencies of the younger poets. His speech ended on a note of interrogation; but as it had contained only rhetorical questions, Nigel had to content himself with replying that there was no doubt a great deal in what the last speaker had said. (19)

There is a note of self-irony on Blake’s part, for he is better known as C. Day Lewis, part of what Samuel Hynes calls the Auden generation. Blake, as Day Lewis, is one of those younger poets with the bolshevist tendencies. In fact, Samuel Hynes in *The Auden Generation* writes that “Day Lewis was the one who tried longest and hardest to reconcile political commitment with a sense of the integrity of art; he was an active member of the Communist Party longer than anyone in his circle except [Edward] Upward” (96). The reluctance to debate the elderly gentleman on the part of Strangeways does not stem from his agreement with the gentleman but from his (and Blake’s) knowledge that nothing he says will change the gentleman’s mind.

Strangeways does defend modern poetry against the attacks of others in the novel: “A rather pretty young woman got up, blushing, and said that there seemed to be no music in modern poetry. Nigel quoted a number of passages to refute this heresy” (19). Surrealism seems to be a flash point as well, as a young man asks Strangeways’s opinion

of the style. Blake writes that “Nigel translated his opinion of surrealism into comparatively uncensorable language. The young man then showed signs of making a fighting speech” (20). The young man is, however, interrupted by the local brewer, Bunnett, who turns out to be a vindictive capitalist and the perpetrator of the murder in the novel. Bunnett argues that

modern poets feel themselves bound to the truth, to the exploration of reality, however ugly or painful it — and often, I fear, the poetical results too — may be. Now this is my point. You may think me an old fogey, but I read my Tennyson, my Browning, my — er — Shakespeare, and I don’t want reality in my poetry. There is quite enough of it in ordinary life. (20)

Bunnett continues to say that “what I ask the poet for is Beauty: I ask him to make me forget the ugliness and difficulties of this world, to lead me into a fairy garden” (20-21). While Strangeways merely retorts with the comment “I am sure, sir, [...] that no modern poet would wish to lead you up the fairy garden path” (21). The rejoinder has the required affect on the audience:

There was an instant of anxious silence, as the audience sought to assess the exact significance of this remark. Then a colder silence set in like the Arctic night, broken only by a sound — which might have been a snore or a snort — from the local press. (21)

A didactic defence of modern poetry on the part of Strangeways would interrupt the flow of the narrative. Instead, Blake is far more subtle in discrediting Bunnett’s view on modern poetry. In the context of the narrative, Strangeways comment is enough to end the discussion and to insult Bunnett. In the larger context, however, Blake is able to discredit Bunnett’s out of date views by making him the killer. He is the villain in

literary, as well as legal, terms. The comments come from a morally corrupt member of capitalist society. Blake is making the comment on capitalism also. Bunnett, as the owner of a business, maintains the capitalist system. In fact, his motive for killing his brother is a bid to buy his company by a larger company. His very motivations are economic. In one character, Blake has managed to condemn a socio-economic and literary point of view by identifying those views with the criminal.

Neither Blake nor Billany see high culture as being separate from low culture. Billany himself enjoyed opera. Richard Hanlon and Mike Waite, in "Notes from the Left", show that a number of British composers of classical music, including Humphrey Searle, Edward Clark, Christian Darnton and Alan Bush, were members of the Communist Party (72). Hanlon and Waite state that there were attempts by composers to bring classical music to the masses:

Though predominantly middle-class, they [intellectuals and artists] had given much energy to encouraging 'workers' music', taking performances of 'the classics' into working-class areas and encouraging amateur choirs of working people. (68)

These attempts failed to continue in the post-war world because, Hanlon and Waite argue, "Classical music (as with other established 'art' forms) came fairly quickly to have again an elite or at least a 'middle-class' image, so that the public subsidies it continued to receive failed to be the motor by which it could be accessed and appreciated by the financially less well-off" (70). The cultural barriers (the "Two Solitudes" of British culture) which Billany spoke of in *The Trap* continually separate the classes. In his introduction to a collection of essays by Theodor Adorno, called *The Culture Industry*,



J.M. Bernstein writes that “[h]igh art is bought at the price of the exclusion of the lower classes” (6). Billany would argue that this should not be the case. In his view, the working class is just as capable of enjoying “high art” as the upper class. In his article “The Schema of Mass Culture”, Theodor Adorno argues that “[t]he difference between ‘serious’ and ‘light’ culture is either eroded or expressly organized and thus incorporated into the almighty totality” (58). Adorno’s concern is that by breaking down the barriers between “high” and “low” culture all art will become homogenised into the Marxist, as argued by Lukács, totality. Blake would argue against this idea. Just as he has Nigel Strangeways argue that the poetry of the Thirties still has beauty so too would he have argued that the destruction of cultural barriers would not necessarily eliminate variety.

Billany would argue the same thing. His emphasis on the individual and his appreciation of “high” culture allows Billany the freedom to explore forms and ideas that more conventional, orthodox Marxists fail to consider. All Billany’s fiction, as angry as it is at times, is concerned at its heart with others. All Billany’s characters struggle against society not just for their own advancement but also to help those disadvantaged and exploited by capitalism. His deep commitment to others fuels Billany’s fiction.

### Chapter Three: *The Opera House Murders*: Detection and the Politics of Crime

For the generation of the 1930s, the detective story held a certain fascination. In the essay “The Guilty Vicarage” (published in *The Dyer’s Hand*), W.H. Auden proclaims that for him “the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol” (146). Even committed Communists such as C. Day Lewis (under the pseudonym Nicholas Blake<sup>1</sup>) and Christopher Caudwell (under his real name Christopher St. John Sprigg) published a series of detective stories. Dan Billany was no different, and his first novel (*The Opera House Murders* published in 1940) was a murder mystery featuring the detective Robbie Duncan. Joan Brake (Billany’s sister), in a letter dated 22 November, 1998, writes that “My feeling is that it was a bit of a pot boiler for Dan.” In the same letter, she said that she does not remember Billany reading detective novels with the exception of Edgar Allan Poe. The influence of Poe is quite obvious, as in *The Opera House Murders* Duncan must decipher scratchings on a watch and then make calculations to find buried money. This is reminiscent of Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in which Auguste Dupin solves the murders, in part, by deducing from the finger impressions on one of the bodies that the murderer could not be human but “the large fulvous Ourang-Outang of the East Indian Islands” (162). Billany obviously intended *The Opera House Murders* to be part of a series, as his sister holds manuscripts of unpublished Duncan stories and a radio play. In the same letter, Joan Brake states that in

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<sup>1</sup> As is literary convention, I will refer to Lewis as “Nicholas Blake” throughout the discussion.

one of his letters to her Billany “said he had left another novel (Robbie Duncan) with his agent ready for publication.” What became of that novel is a mystery.

In “The Guilty Vicarage”, Auden attempts to analyse the fascination that the detective story has, arguing that the fantasy readers hold when reading a detective story “is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden” (158). This fantasy is possible, Auden argues earlier in his essay, because the society in which the crime takes place “must appear to be an innocent society in a state of grace, i.e., a society where there is no need of the law, no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universe, and where murder, therefore, is the unheard of act which precipitates a crisis” (150). The murder disrupts the perfect state, a pastoral paradise, which the detective must re-establish. For this reason, Auden states that “I find it very difficult [...] to read [a detective story] that is not set in rural England” (146). Auden objects to a writer like Raymond Chandler who attempts to bring a more urban setting to the detective story; Auden states that “I think Mr. Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu” (151). Part of Auden’s disassociation of Chandler from the detective novel is the different influences that act upon British and American detective novels. In his study of Chandler, simply titled *Raymond Chandler*, William H. Marling writes that, unlike the British detective novel which was influenced by the stylised work of Arthur Conan Doyle and G. K. Chesterton, “American detective fiction [...] was influenced by the popularity of dime novels, which drew heavily upon Western frontier locales and heroics that dated back to the Leatherstocking Tales of James Fenimore Cooper” (26). The stories of the wild west, transposed to the gritty Los

Angeles of Chandler, are a long way from pastoral England or even the London of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes can hide from the realities of life. In “A Scandal in Bohemia” (from *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*), Watson shows Holmes’s willing separation from the world:

My own complete happiness, and the home-centred interests which rise up around the man who first finds himself master of his own establishment, were sufficient to absorb all my attention; while Holmes, who loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul, remained in our lodgings in Baker Street, buried among his old books, and alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature. (161)

Holmes has the ability to hide in his room, picking and choosing his cases. Marlowe has no such option. The violence in Los Angeles is so prevalent that he cannot escape it. At the beginning to *Farewell, My Lovely*, violence (in the shape of Moose Malloy) literally grabs Marlowe by the shoulder:

I walked along to the double doors and stood in front of them. They were motionless now. It wasn’t any of my business. So I pushed them open and looked in. A hand I could have sworn came out of the dimness and took hold of my shoulder and squashed it to a pulp. Then the hand moved me through the doors and casually lifted me up a step. The large face looked at me. (8)

Marlowe, like Duncan, cannot separate himself from the society around him as easily as Holmes can. Marlowe knows he does not have to get involved, but he does. There is no escape from the reality of his society, just as there is no escape from the reality of Duncan’s society in *The Opera House Murders*.

Not all British writers adhere to Auden's rather strict definition, however. In his essay "C. Day Lewis: Moral Doubling in Nicholas Blake's Detective Fiction of the 1930s", James Gindin writes that "Auden's formula does not entirely fit Blake's fiction, for Blake's resolutions don't achieve innocence and [Blake] is more ambivalent about restoring a Garden of Eden" (152). Gindin continues that "the recognition of the sin or crime within a version of the self, or the sense that the social violation of community is a reflection of divisions within the nature of the creature herself, and in the operation of guilt, the feeling that the self should be more or better than it is" (152). As I will show later, Billany's novel does not conform to Auden's formula either. In *The Opera House Murders*, the society Billany portrays is hardly innocent and certainly not a Garden of Eden. His novel, set in the country, subverts the English pastoral ideal. His Garden of Eden has its serpents, not only in the shape of murderous criminals but a capitalist society that is just as criminal as the murderers.

What Billany does is to transpose the hard-boiled detective, Robbie Duncan, into a pastoral setting, wrestling the traditional English detective novel into the modern world. The country is no longer an escape from the reality of modern society. In this, Billany reflects the shift in British detective fiction that George Orwell writes about in his essay "Raffles and Miss Blandish". Orwell writes that he is "concerned with [...] is the immense difference in moral atmosphere" (63). Orwell argues that Raffles, created by E.W. Hornung, is "*a gentleman*" (64). As such, Raffles follows a strict code of conduct:

Raffles will not, for example, abuse hospitality. He will commit a burglary in a house where he is staying as a guest, but the victim must be a fellow-guest and not the host. He will not commit murder, and he avoids violence whenever possible and prefers to carry

out his robberies unarmed. He regards friendship as sacred, and is chivalrous though not moral in his relations with women. He will take extra risks in the name of 'sportsmanship', and sometimes even for aesthetic reasons. And above all, he is intensely patriotic. (66-67)

In other words, Raffles is enough of a rogue to give the reader a vicarious thrill but one that will not seriously offend polite sensibilities. No one has anything to fear from Raffles. James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* is something very different. Chase's novel is brutal, featuring the rape of Miss Blandish, the daughter of a millionaire who has been kidnapped. The violence and rape seems almost casual. Orwell writes that

Slim's [the kidnapper and rapist] mother, who is the real brains of the gang, sees in this [Slim's attraction to Miss Blandish] the chance of curing Slim's impotence, and decides to keep Miss Blandish in custody till Slim shall have succeeded in raping her. After many efforts and much persuasion, including the flogging of Miss Blandish with a length of rubber hosepipe, the rape is achieved. (69)

The brutal treatment of Miss Blandish is a long way from the gentleman burglar of Raffles. The violence of the real world (*Miss Blandish* was published in 1939) has been thrust into the closed world of the British detective novel. Billany continues that tradition. Duncan seems more a character from the streets of Los Angeles than the English countryside. Billany's argument is clear: the struggle against the forces of destruction takes place in the very heart of British society.

The Communist Party intellectual Alick West also attempts to analyse the detective story. West defines the detective story more broadly than Auden. In the first part of a two part discussion of the detective story in *Left Review*, West traces the origins

of the detective story to the rise of novels of suspense, to novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*; West argues that "if the novel is in the form of letters [as opposed to a first person narrative], [the reader] cannot know [if the hero comes through the adventures safely] and is always on tenterhooks" (707). He, then, follows the development of the detective story into the Romantic period. He argues that "it is necessary to remember the importance of suspense, mystery and crime in the best work of the period" (709), pointing to works by William Godwin, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron as examples and stating that

the author and readers identify themselves to a very considerable extent with the criminal and his crime, although morality and law are finally invoked against him. The early detective story shares in the confused revolutionary and reactionary feeling of the romantic movement. (710)

West, therefore, sees a more revolutionary attitude in the early detective story. In the second part (published in the following issue of *Left Review*), West posits that it was in the post-1840 period, under the influence of writers such as Poe and Wilkie Collins, that the revolutionary and romantic aspects move out of the detective story. West writes that

In these years the suspense connected with the crime and its detection has a different origin than in the romantic period. There is nothing revolutionary about it. The origin is rather in the suppressed fear of revolution. The suspense relieves, and the victory of the detective and the law reassures this fear. (795)

Here West agrees with Auden's assertion that the detective story returns stability to society. West then signals another change that manifests itself in the detective novels contemporary to him (the articles were published in 1938), writing that

The social function of the detective story now is not so much to relieve and reassure, as in the middle period, as to divert a confused desire for social change into safe channels. It keeps

it concerned with crime, and with a police force that has nothing to do but arrest murderers, never makes a baton charge, and always wins, because the very structure of society is its ally and the enemy of the criminal. (797)

In his conclusion, West further divorces revolutionary ideas from the detective, arguing that “Millions read the detective story, not because they are decaying with capitalism, but because they want to live and don’t know how. The detective story is also a sign of revolt against decaying capitalism, while endeavouring to make the revolt harmless” (798). West posits that detective fiction blunts revolutionary ardour, allowing readers to live vicariously through the detective, to give the illusion of revolt without actually threatening social stability. Billany, then, does not adhere even to a Communist critique of detective fiction, for, as I will show, Billany brings his revolutionary ideas into his detective novel.

Contemporary critics have extended from the argument that detective fiction softens revolutionary fervour and removed any idea of revolt from the detective story altogether. Stephen Knight in his book *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* writes that

major examples of crime fiction not only create an idea (or a hope, or a dream) about controlling crime, but both realise and validate a whole view of the world, one shared by the people who become the central audience to buy, read and find comfort in a particular variety of crime fiction. (2)

Knight continues to argue that “texts create and justify what has come to be called hegemony, the inseparable bundle of political, cultural and economic sanctions which maintain a particular social system to the advantage of certain members of the whole community” (4). For Knight, then, the detective story has a complex relationship with its



audience, both reflecting and shaping the values held by the readers. The genre validates the reader's world view but also instils that world view in the reader.

For Ernest Mandel in his essay "A Marxist Interpretation of the Crime Story"<sup>2</sup>, the detective story "is based upon the mechanical, formal division of the characters into two camps: the bad (the criminals) and the good (the detective and the more or less inefficient police)" (210-211). Mandel argues that the ideology of the crime novel is "Disorder being brought into order, order falling back into disorder; irrationality upsetting rationality, rationality restored after irrational upheavals" (212). Mandel sees a difference in the order restored in British novels from that in American novels. In British detective stories, Mandel maintains,

rising capitalism was integrated with a consolidated state, the product of a protracted historical development and combined, as concerns the social superstructure, with many remnants of semi-feudal superstructure. Hence the general atmosphere of class divisions accepted by consensus in the classical British detective story, an acceptance expressed even at the level of language. Violence, absent from the center of the social scene, is pushed to the periphery (the colonies, Ireland, working-class slums). (214)

Mandel argues that by the time the United States began to dominate global capitalism the international colonial system was in decline. He states that unlike British society "Corruption, violence, and crime were evident not only in the periphery of American society, but in its very centre" (214). This gives rise to those authors Auden points to

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<sup>2</sup> Originally titled "The Ideology of the Crime Story" and published in Mandel's

*Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984): 40-52.

with disapproval, writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Despite this, Mandel argues that “the common ideology of the original and classical detective story in Britain, the United States, and the countries of the European continent remains quintessentially bourgeois” (215). The crime story, Mandel states,

suggests to [the readers] that individual passions, drives and greed, and the social order itself — bourgeois society — have to be accepted as such regardless of shortcomings and injustices, and that those who catch criminals and deliver them to law-enforcement agencies, the courts, and the gallows and the electric chair are serving the interests of the immense majority of the citizenry. (215)

Mandel agrees with the majority of the critics who write about detective fiction then: the detective story both maintains and shapes the dominant, Mandel would say bourgeois, ideology. What, then, of writers like Blake and Billany?

None of the theories propounded so far fit either Blake or Billany. Blake does conform, to a degree, to the idea of community. All the critics agree that detective fiction deals with the idea of individuality threatening the communal. Indeed, Blake does use crime, especially murder, as a threat by an individual to the stability of a community, and his detective, Nigel Strangeways, does restore order and stability to that community. Blake’s community, however, is not the bourgeois community but a community that is hostile to bourgeois ideas and to capitalism in general. Billany, on the other hand, is not concerned with community in the same way that Blake is. In Blake, there is a sense of connection with British society in a larger sense that is absent from Billany’s novel. For Billany, society is the capitalist system that threatens to destroy the individual. The community, far more narrowly defined than in Blake, is the threat in the novel; the

detective Robbie Duncan must protect those he cares for and loves from the community that is “Britain”. Duncan is not interested in protecting the society from which he is an outcast, but instead he is interested only in protecting a young child who is his friend and the son of the woman for whom he eventually reveals his love. This is the community that Billany supports. For him, the outside world is the enemy, a hypocritical, unpleasant place, a place that neither protects nor cares about those forced to live within the capitalist society.

Blake reflects the same attitudes that George Orwell analyses in his 1941 essay “The Lion and the Unicorn”. Orwell writes that “Economically, England is certainly two nations, if not three or four. But at the same time the vast majority of the people *feel* themselves to be a single nation and are conscious of resembling one another more than they resemble foreigners” (64). Blake believes that there is a fundamental British community for which it is worth fighting. This is evident in a passage from Blake’s novel *The Smiler with the Knife* (1938). In the novel, Georgia Strangeways (Nigel’s wife) is enlisted by the police in order to prevent a fascist organisation, The English Banner, from overthrowing the democratically elected government in order to replace it with a dictatorship. Georgia reflects on how she loves her country, despite the obvious problems:

The ebb-tide, piling up broken waves against the wind, seemed to be pulling at Georgia too, drawing her heart away to distant places as it always did. But the old fascination soon gave way to thoughts nearer home when she turned aside from the river and began threading her way through East End streets. Here, on all sides, were unforgivable poverty, indomitable vivacity. The green-skirted hills of Devon and these dingy, boisterous thoroughfares were each of them part of the country she loved — loved now with the heightened awareness both of a traveller

who has seen many rival beauties and of one who, returning home,  
finds the beloved threatened by an insidious and mortal enemy. (60)

The love of country that Georgia displays is the very reason why the fascists must be stopped; any fascist overthrow would destroy the very qualities that make Britain a special country. Georgia agrees to fight the English Banner because of her patriotism, a patriotism that is absent in Billany's work in which love of individual people not of country motivates Robbie Duncan.

In some ways, Blake's vision is far darker than Billany's. Billany's attitude seems to be that the existing system will maintain itself indefinitely, neither getting better nor getting worse. Blake, on the other hand, sees a darker possible future, that of the threat of fascism that looms on the horizon. For Blake, the threat is so great that he devotes an entire novel, *The Smiler with the Knife*, to Georgia Strangeway's attempt to prevent a fascist overthrow of the democratically elected government by the English Banner. Nigel's uncle, Sir John Strangeways, describes the English Banner as

a queer sort of semi-mystical society, which flourishes mainly in country districts. They believe in the natural aristocracy of the landowning class, and of course they let in a few selected hangers-on — game-keepers and the like — to give the thing a more catholic appearance. (49)

The group is also distinctly *English* in attitude. After all, they adopt the name The *English* Banner rather than the *British* banner (or some such name). There is no place for the Scottish, Irish, or Welsh in the new country the fascists will organise. Blake's fear of a fascist take-over is similar to J.B. Priestley's fears in his wartime novel *Blackout in Gretley* (1942).

In *Blackout in Gretley*, Priestley, through Humphrey Neyland, muses on the nature of the Second World War and the aristocracy's attitude toward it. Neyland, in Gretley searching for Nazi spies, tells Hamp, the local police superintendent, that when they catch the person they are searching for "he may be singing *Rule Britannia* at the top of his voice and be smothered in Union Jacks" (82). Perhaps ironically, Neyland is searching for someone who believes him or herself to be a British patriot, in the same way as those in the English Banner believe themselves to be patriots. Both Priestley and Blake see fascist characteristics in the English upper class. At one point in *Blackout in Gretley*, Neyland attends a public meeting and comments that "Goebbels could have put it straight on the air. If the war effort could survive meetings like that all over the country, it ought to be able to defeat Hitler" (123). The enemy within is stronger than Germany; defeating Hitler is easier than defeating the speakers at this meeting, especially "Sir Something Somebody". This unknown person stated that

Our problem was, he said, that we employed a lot of Germans to talk over the air to Germany, promising the German people this and that, whereas what we ought to do was to sack all these German broadcasters, and all their friends the Left pink intellectuals, and tell the German people we proposed to kill as many of them as we could, thus showing them that we didn't propose "to stand any nonsense" (124).

The anti-left sentiment and the desire for the use of force are characteristic of the German Nazi movement. Priestley wants the reader to make this connection between the upper class in Britain and the Nazis in Germany and see the similarity between the two. Neyland ends his observations on this man by saying, "At the end of this extraordinary little speech, which might have been written for him by Goebbels, I asked myself why I

spent my time trying to nose out Nazi agents, when somebody like this Sir Something was worth a dozen agents to Hitler” (124).

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that one of the conspirators turns out to be Colonel Tarlington, the community’s Tory aristocrat, who wants to maintain the privilege that belongs to his class. All this is revealed in another one of those long didactic speeches that mar Priestley’s wartime novel. Neyland has been shot by Rodel, who is working with Tarlington, and yet still takes the time to gloat and berate Tarlington, only ending his speech when he passes out due to blood loss. While stylistically the speech brings the narrative to a sudden halt, the speech is interesting because it reveals Priestley’s attitude toward the upper class: “You see yourself as a rightly privileged person, quite different from the common crowd, and you’re ready to pay a big price to keep your privileges. You hate democracy, and all it means” (207). This is a sentiment with which both Billany and Blake would agree. The upper class sees itself as being fundamentally different from the lower classes. Neyland explains that Tarlington realised that “to keep all you wanted to keep, it meant that the people mustn’t win and that Fascism mustn’t lose” (208). The war then is clearly a war between the people and the privileged who would prefer to return to the country to a more traditional, feudal way of life. Just as Blake does, Priestley sees an inherent “Britishness” that must be protected, a Britishness that would be lost under the auspices of people like Tarlington.

While there are only a few passages in *The Opera House Murders* that present overt political statements, there still is a clear attack on capitalism and the government that helps to support the capitalist system:

I thought of Stevenson, Houdini, all sorts of people, some of

them doing the strangest and most difficult things, conjurors who make you believe they are sawing a woman in two, Prime Ministers who make you believe they are not sawing a country in two — marvels of specialization; thinking about Prime Ministers naturally led me to consider Mr. Wainwright from this viewpoint [as a specialist]. (216)

What Billany does in this passage is quite clever. He begins by talking about conjurors (Houdini) and moves to Prime Ministers, natural symbols of the government, arguing that Prime Ministers are nothing more than conjurors. The difference is that, whereas stage magicians convince the audience that they have successfully cut a woman in half, Prime Ministers do the opposite. They convince the public that they are *not* sawing a country in half, in other words allowing the gap between the rich and poor to grow. Stage magicians convince people they have done something, whereas Prime Ministers convince people they have not done something. Billany makes one more shift, from Prime Ministers to Mr. Wainwright, a murderer and one of the criminals in the story. Duncan claims that his thoughts naturally led from politicians to criminals. The insinuation is clear: Prime Ministers are nothing more than common criminals, stealing what they can from the helpless. Billany would continue to implicate the government and business in wrongdoing in a far more incisive and damning attack in his wartime novel *The Trap*.

The dislike and suspicion of politicians that Duncan exhibits is one of the tools that the English Banner uses to help their efforts to bring a dictatorship to Britain. In *The Smiler with the Knife*, Nigel Strangeways recognises the difficulty that the English Banner faces in its attempt to bring a fascist dictatorship to Britain:

if there's one thing the British people wouldn't stand for, it's dictatorship by any of the ordinary politicians. No doubt the conspirators mean to work up a state of crisis, lawlessness, bloodshed and the rest, which will justify the

Strong Hand at the Helm. Temporarily. We'd not submit  
to it once the trouble had been cleared up, *unless* the Strong  
Hand was someone of national popularity — not as a politician,  
but as, well, as a chap. (54)

Nigel concludes that if “the conspirators are as clever as we believe them to be, they’ll have chosen someone who can appeal to the ordinary Englishman’s romanticism and hero-worship” (55). In the novel, Chilton Canteloe is the man with that ability. Blake’s comments on the British nation are interesting, especially considering the attitude that the country took toward Winston Churchill. Paul Addison, quoting Lord Beaverbrook in his book *The Road to 1945*, identifies Churchill’s supporters for the office of Prime Minister during the war: “Who wanted Churchill? Not the King or the politicians, Beaverbrook replied, but the people” (100). As a result, Churchill came to power in 1940 after the fall of the Chamberlain government instead of Lord Halifax, Chamberlain’s Foreign Minister. Even those on the left supported Churchill. Addison points out that Churchill was not seen as a Radical but, instead, presented himself “solely as the chief warrior” (196). Once the war was over and the people had no use for the warrior Churchill, they elected Clement Atlee and a Labour government to guide the reconstruction of the country and to lead Britain into a glorious future. This confirms Clifford Dymont’s comment in his study *C. Day Lewis* that Lewis is “able to speak of the common man and woman’s dilemmas with inside knowledge” (8). Blake certainly appears to be able to tap into the British consciousness just as well as Billany can.

Even novels not particularly concerned with fascism show Blake’s concern at the threat. In *The Beast Must Die*, Lena, who falls in love with Frank Cairnes, states that “of course all these Jews are in league. I must say we could do with a bit of Hitler here



though I do rather bar rubber truncheons and sterilisation” (52). These are the passive fascist views that people must guard against; it is people like Lena who would have allowed Chilton Canteloe to come to power in *The Smiler with the Knife*. Gindin points out that a common theme in Blake is “the vulnerability to Nazism of the overtly or freely sexual woman” (153). In Blake, these women, Gindin argues, “admire the Nazi’s force, certainty, and lack of guilt” (153). This is certainly true, but Blake’s use of Lena’s character indicates a far more ambivalent attitude toward women, as it is a woman, Georgia Strangeways, who prevents the fascist take-over in *The Smiler with the Knife*. Blake’s attitude is clear: the threat is not a foreign threat it is a threat from within the country.

Through Duncan, Billany also associates business people with criminals. Duncan relates how professionally he is kidnapped by the professional criminals:

they did not act till they felt the chances were such as to make it a business proposition; and if my luck had been in, and a number of people had been strolling past Mainprize and Wood’s [an architectural firm in the novel] at the time when I came out, I would bet they would have left me unmolested and tagged philosophically on behind me again, rather than risk a bad gamble. They were good business men — regarding the matter amorally; I doubt if any business man could be good in any other sense. (217)

Business people are amoral. For both Billany and Duncan, business men are amoral because they make decisions that alter the course of people’s lives purely in the interest of business (or, as Billany will say later in *The Trap*, “a steady five percent”); they have no consideration for those Billany and Duncan see as the victims: the working class. In the same way, the criminals in the novels steal, kidnap, and kill with no thought for the victims of their crime. Billany will sharpen his attack on capitalism in *The Trap*, in

which business and government conspire to drag the working class into the Second World War, thus destroying their lives forever.

Billany follows Nicholas Blake as one of the few authors to interject Socialist sympathies into detective fiction. Despite Julian Symons's statement in *Bloody Murder* that "[o]ne should not exaggerate [Blake's] political concern or the literary character of his work, for these things are apparent chiefly in contrast to the attitudes of his detectival colleagues" (131), Blake's left-wing sympathies are more obvious than Symons is willing to admit. Certainly Symons, again in *Bloody Murder*, is right to point out that "most of the new writers [during the Golden Age of detective fiction], like the old ones had at least implicitly right-wing sympathies. Their policemen were all good, their Radicals bad or silly, they took the existing social order for granted" (130). Neither Blake nor Billany take the existing social order for granted; both are, in fact, trying to show the inequality and brutality inherent in the existing system. Gindin, again in his article on Blake, writes that "Blake frequently dramatizes conflicts of class from the point of view of one who sees its inequities, shallowness, and contradictions clearly" (148). In the novel *There's Trouble Brewing* (1937), Blake's detective, Nigel Strangeways, observes police Inspector Tyler's attitude toward a brewery cleaner: "The inspector turned brusquely to the cleaner, and addressed him in the loud, hectoring voice that he apparently reserved for members of the working-class" (40). The Inspector clearly treats the working-class differently, assuming the role of master.

Nicholas Blake also attacks capitalism in his detective novels. This is clear in the novel *There's Trouble Brewing* (1937) in which capitalism becomes the evil that must be

fought. As James Gindin writes about the novel, “[t]he apparent victim, the mercenary capitalistic evil brother, is finally the killer who has disposed of his lazy, amiable, humane brother” (150). Gindin states that “the novel’s emphasis is on the economic and social, the rich capitalist destroying communal unity and simple humanity” (150). Even other characters in the novel recognise the nastiness in Bunnett, the capitalist. Herbert Cammison, with whom Nigel Strangeways is staying, remarks of Bunnett “[y]ou may or may not realise it now, but Bunnett is a thoroughly vindictive man [...] Like other unloved persons who happen to possess almost unlimited power, he has a marked persecution mania” (27). Strangeways instinctively dislikes Bunnett from the beginning but dismisses the instinct: “Nigel had gone to bed convinced that the brewer was one of the nastiest characters and quite the most dangerous that he had ever met. Now he attributed this rather hysterical judgement to the unsettling influence of the Maiden Astbury Literary Society” (26). Herbert Cammison says that Bunnett “was the worst kind of anti-social pest, and decent society would clap him straight in jail — well, his type simply wouldn’t be able to exist in a properly-run community” (56). Bunnett’s natural nastiness (a characteristic Billany would say was necessary to get ahead in the capitalist society) allows him to kill and threaten the stability of the community.

For Blake, unlike Billany, trouble begins when the personal overpowers the public. In Blake’s novel *The Beast Must Die* (1938), Frank Cairnes’s personal guilt over the loss of his son clouds his ability to see the lower classes as anything other than stereotypes. When comparing his view of death with his perceived idea of villagers views, he writes in his diary,

They’re grand chaps — neither smug nor cynical nor sentimental

about death; they've got the proper realist attitude towards it. Their own children have to sink or swim — they can't afford nurses and vita-glass and fancy foods for them, so it would never occur to them to blame me for letting Martie live the independent, natural life their own children live. (24)

Cairnes believes that economic conditions have removed any feelings of grief or responsibility from the villagers, even though they do exhibit some of the same feelings as he does. One of the villagers, Ted Barnet, tells Cairnes

Us'd give the fingers off our right hands to find the b—— who done it. Us seen a car or two come through village after the accident, but us had no call to notice 'em, special, see, not knowing anything'd happened. (24)

There definitely a note of responsibility in Barnet's words. He says that if they had known about the accident earlier they could have watched out for the car that killed Cairnes's son, Martie, thus helping to capture the killer. Barnet knows that it is now up to the police, and Barnet has little faith in the authorities, and he tells Cairnes what Cairnes describes as "slandorous speculations about the spare-time activities, mainly erotic, it would appear, of our worthy sergeant" (24-25). Cairnes's personal grief causes him to recognise the strength he might find in the community. Cairnes decides to find the killer himself after the authorities fail to find the driver. Yet the personal grief of Cairnes forces him to see the others as fundamentally different. The personal isolates Cairnes from the public.

Blake and Billany, while both Communists, interpret what Communism means to them in very different ways. Blake, in a more orthodox Communist argument, states that the community is more important than the individual, that the individual's concerns must not supersede the concerns of the community. Billany, with an individualistic streak,

argues that the individual must struggle against the community. Unlike Blake, who believes that there is an essential British community that it worth fighting for, Billany sees the greater community as a threat, an obstacle, to the individual, frustrating the wishes, hopes, and dreams of those within the community. This idea will take a more sinister turn in *The Trap*, in which the capitalist system will drag the working class into a world war. In *The Opera House Murders*, however, Billany's attack on the system is far less intense, and the threat not as great. For Billany, an individual must constantly struggle against the capitalist society, cheating it and taking whatever someone can get whenever possible. While Billany believes that an individual needs to protect his or her self-interest, he does still believe in a limited sense of community. In *The Trap*, Billany will argue that the only important idea in life is the connection between people, that without commitment to those people we love everything, including Communism, becomes hollow and pointless. This commitment to others, although more understated than in *The Trap*, is clearly a part of *The Opera House Murders*, in Duncan's commitment to Mary Kirby and her family.

The bare plot of *The Opera House Murders* is of little importance when it comes to Billany's politics. A young boy, Jack Kirby, witnesses the murder of Bernard Innes Lawson. Lawson knows the burial place of one hundred thousand pounds, the result, never recovered, of a bank robbery for which Lawson spent time in prison. His murders, by torturing Lawson, discover a map to the location on the back of a watch, which Robbie Duncan, Jack's tutor and a former detective, finds at the crime scene. The murderers realise that they have left the watch behind and return in order to retrieve it. They also

discover that Jack had witnessed the murder. Duncan begins to investigate the murder, helping police inspector Ted Fraser, in an attempt to protect Jack and, perhaps, to help re-establish himself. Duncan has been given the job as Jack's tutor by Jack's mother and Duncan's friend Mary Kirby, a famous opera singer, after his release from prison for stealing ten thousand pounds. In the course of the investigation, Duncan realises that there are, in fact, two groups searching for the watch. The novel is a bloody one, as a number of people including Jack's older brother Horace are killed. The money is eventually discovered in the basement of a new opera house. The criminals are either killed or captured, and Duncan manages to keep the money and marry Mary Kirby.

The novel and the attitudes contained within it are shaped by Robbie Duncan, and any discussion of the novel must start with the detective. Most critics, however, feel that the character of the detective is unimportant. Jacques Barzun, in his essay "Detection and Literary Art"<sup>3</sup>, states that "the great novels of the realistic school portray character even more painstakingly than things, whereas detection rightly keeps character subordinate" (149). In the essay "The Detective Story — Why?", even Nicholas Blake argues that the detective hero should be "as undistinguished as a piece of blotting paper, absorbing the reactions of his subjects; a shallow mirror, in which we see reflected every feature of the crime; a pure camera eye" (404). Blake argues that the detective must absorb what he or she sees around him and not allow his or her personality to dominate the novels. Marty

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<sup>3</sup> Originally published in Barzun's *The Delights of Detection*. (New York: Criterion, 1961): 9-23.

Roth, in *Foul and Fair Play*, depersonalises the detective even more, writing of the detective as a thinking machine:

The image of the machine connotes logic and thus reinforces the definition of the genre as a puzzle, and it connotes science, which adds a dimension of contemporary relevance to the genre. It also excuses the indifference of the heroes to the misery of their fellow characters. Finally, the image of the machine is self-reflexive: it codifies what we already know about the hero from the outside: that he is a fixed, undeveloping character type whose performance is an attractive redundancy.  
(43)

Both Blake and Roth maintain that the detective is a redundancy, a bit of blotting paper, a non-entity. This is certainly a strange position to take as most people who read detective fiction seems to be attracted to the detectives themselves: Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, and even Blake's own Nigel Strangeways. Character is important, certainly, in *The Opera House Murders*. Socialist analysis and concerns only come through Robbie Duncan; Duncan refers to his Socialism as his "unfortunate sociological bias" (17). Socialism defines how Duncan views himself and the world around him, even using his Socialism to justify his own theft of ten thousand pounds from the wealthy Sir Joseph Farmer. Duncan states that "Christ said it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. I planned to put Sir Joseph right with Heaven, to the extent of ten thousand pounds, at any rate" (18). Duncan reflects, humorously, his belief that wealth should be shared. He subtly shows the hypocrisy of the capitalist system. Duncan steals from Sir Joseph and gets sent to prison. Capitalists steal from the poor and get knighted.

Robbie Duncan is a precursor of Billany's narrator in his wartime novel *The Trap*.

In *The Trap*, Michael Carr is an omniscient narrator. Duncan, as narrator, is omniscient as well, often relating the movements of the criminals even though he is not present. He is not even present for the murder itself which begins the novel, for, as Jack witnesses the murder from his position in a tree, Duncan is in the house listening to Mary Kirby on the radio. Also like Carr, Duncan is quite aware of his flaws and limitations and constantly directs irony at himself, disproving Jacques Barzun's statement that in a detective story a "muffled irony is perhaps as much as our later sensibility will stand" (153). Both Duncan and Carr have very realistic views of themselves. Duncan, like Carr, disassociates himself from any ideas of heroism or romance:

I admit this is the sort of book which is very likely to be read by romantic and charming young things, who, being a little frustrated on the material plane, were perhaps hoping to project their amorous fantasies round me, the principal character; slick, svelte, and twenty-two; young enough to be mothered, but old enough to be hot on a spot. (14)

Readers may be hoping to see Duncan in this highly romantic way, but those readers will be disappointed. Duncan knows that, in a genre in which the detectives become idealised romantic heroes (or anti-heroes in some cases), he is different from other detectives.

Duncan does not believe that he will be liked by the reading public in the way detectives like Sherlock Holmes are. The anonymous reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* certainly sees Duncan this way. In the review "Whetting Your Curiosity", the unnamed reviewer writes that the "morals of his [Billany's] hero alone are worth the money. Was there ever a more unblushingly crooked detective?" (440). The answer depends on how a reader defines the word "crooked". In his own mind, Duncan is not crooked; he is merely



trying to get ahead in a brutal, uncaring world. When he tells the reader of his time in prison, he is quite honest about the effect it had on him:

I'm not pretending that this little affair was not a knock. To me personally it didn't matter a damn, but it made it very hard to get a living. Not being quite so weak-kneed as Disney's grasshopper, I persisted that the world owed me a living, but found it hard to collect the debt. (18)

Disney's grasshopper, of course, was industrious, toiling and saving what he could.

Duncan is always quite willing to admit that he is out for himself, that everything he does is intended to enhance himself. Does this make him crooked, or is he merely someone who understands the nature of the capitalist system and lets it work to his own advantage?

Duncan is so open about his self-interest that when Detective-Inspector Ted Fraser begins to investigate the murder he first asks Duncan, "I say Robbie, before we begin, have you a finger in the pie? I mean, apart from a bona fide interest in the case, are you doing any plucking for yourself?" (56) After assuring Fraser that his interest in the case is purely legitimate, he does admit to Fraser that "if I see my chance to corner big money *without* spoiling your case — well, I'm human" (60). In the end, he does keep the money, and Fraser has his suspicions:

"And the hundred thousand which Lawson buried?" asked Fraser. "Your people say they have evidence showing that the money had already been stolen, apparently by someone who knew just where to look." "So it would seem that Amery and Wainwright and the whole lot of them have killed and died for a treasure that wasn't there." "So it would seem." Fraser gave me a long, rather hard look. (322)

Fraser has good reason to be suspicious: the reader knows that Duncan did, in fact, dig up and keep the hidden money. In this way, he is able to marry Mary Kirby. Fraser does not

attempt to satisfy his suspicions. Fraser suspects the truth but realises that Duncan will be able to reform with the one hundred thousand pounds. Later in *The Trap*, Michael Carr will explain how self-interest is vital to get ahead in the capitalist society. For this reason, John Pascoe can never get ahead in *The Trap*, as he does not possess self-interest. Robbie Duncan suffers from no such problem. At a time, when men were seen as providers in society, Duncan is quite willing to live off the kindness and charity of his friend and a female friend at that; he tells the reader that Mary Kirby “provided the money on which we all lived” (15). As a Socialist, he is not only willing to help others but also willing to accept the help and friendship of another, in this case Mary Kirby, when he needs it.

In some ways, Duncan is like Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe. In his study of Raymond Chandler, William H. Marling writes that Marlowe “takes pride in his ability to survive in the rough-and-tumble marketplace” (139). Duncan takes pride in not only surviving in the modern society but undermining it at the same time. Marlowe, like Duncan, is interested in his own needs first. In *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), when a police officer, Nulty, asks Marlowe to investigate a woman named Velma, Marlowe asks, “What’s in it for me?” (21). In the end, however, Marlowe always does take the case (there would be no story otherwise). Marlowe even shows concern for those he feels deserve it. At the end of *The High Window* (1943), for example, Marlowe goes out of his way to help Merle Davis, telling Leslie Murdock, “I don’t like her [Leslie’s mother], I don’t like you. I don’t like this house. I don’t particularly like your wife. But I like Merle. She’s kind of silly and morbid, but she’s kind of sweet, too” (213). William

Marling writes that Marlowe sees himself as a knight figure, stating that “[t]o be insubordinate or ironic is to join an elite, to be a risk-taker” (82). Duncan is like this as well. Just as Marlowe faces the evil in society to protect the innocent (Merle Davis for example), so too does Duncan confront his society, killing when necessary, in order to protect the innocent (Jack). In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe ironically tells Vivian Sternwood,

All I have the itch for is money. I am so money greedy that for twenty-five bucks a day and expenses, mostly gasoline and whisky, I do my thinking myself, what there is of it; I risk my whole future, the hatred of the cops and of Eddie Mars [a criminal in the novel] and his pals, I dodge bullets and eat saps, and say thank you very much, if you have any more trouble, I hope you’ll think of me, I’ll just leave my cards in case anything comes up. I do all this for twenty-five bucks a day — and maybe just a little to protect what little pride a broken and sick old man [Vivian Sternwood’s father] has left in his blood. (217-218)

Both Duncan and Marlowe see themselves as knights protecting the innocent. An ironic quip and the desire to help the helpless are all either of them think they need.

Duncan is also not afraid of turning killer himself. In his attempt to escape from his kidnappers (who by now have realised that Duncan had the watch), Duncan willingly kills Frank, one of the kidnappers: “For the first time in years I really exerted myself, and crushed his throat right down to the vertebrae. I dared not spare him at all; the least sound, the least slip on my part now meant my death. My dealings with Frank had to be quite final” (226). In defence of his own life, Duncan does not shy away from doing what is necessary. For Duncan, killing is necessary at times. He even regrets not killing one of the other kidnappers: “It [Will’s return to consciousness] meant that Will was coming back into the picture. I had a moment’s bitter regret that I had not killed him”

(232). Duncan knows that Will will, in all probability, try to kill Duncan. In the rough and brutal criminal world, Duncan is not afraid to fight to the end. Like Carr, Duncan is also not afraid to show the horror of death. Duncan graphically describes Horace's dead body after he has been bludgeoned to death with a golf club: "The blade of the club had penetrated very deeply into the brain, reducing the tissues to a bloody pulp. Pieces of the skull had been driven inside the cranium by the blows, the first of which probably caused death" (182). Even Frank's dead body is described in gory detail: "Frank was a sickening sight; his head was connected to his body by a bunch of bloody sinews" (227). Duncan's point is quite clear — he may have to kill in order to protect himself, but he does not enjoy it. In the novel, death is a horrible thing no matter who does the killing. Duncan does, however, enjoy the idea of revenge; he does allow his feelings to guide his actions. In an attempt (that ultimately fails) to catch the killers when they come to kill Jack, Duncan tells the reader

Half of me, no doubt, began to dread the visitor I expected, but the other half only feared that Fraser would come up in his car and frighten the watcher away. I had very pleasant anticipations — without being particularly vindictive — of how my rubber tubing would feel as I smacked the prowler on the head with it. I have had to put people to sleep before, but never relished the thought so highly. (100)

Duncan's anticipation comes from his desire to protect Jack. Any sense of guilt Duncan feels comes from his inability to protect others, especially Jack.

This urge to protect the innocent recurs in *The Trap*, in which Michael Carr attempts, and ultimately fails, to protect those he loves. Just as Duncan connects with the Kirby family so too does Carr connect with the Pascoe family. Carr, like Duncan, is an

outsider, a stranger in the family (although he does eventually marry Elizabeth Pascoe). Still, he clearly has a strong affection for the Pascoes; in *The Trap*, Carr writes that it “is my fate to worship such people [Elizabeth and David Pascoe], on whom civilization has failed to impose more than a minor compromise” (76). Duncan worships Mary Kirby in a similar fashion; she has succeeded in raising her two children and having a operatic career even despite the death of her husband. In *The Trap*, Carr’s final conclusion is that only the connection between people is important. Both Carr and Duncan’s attitude reflect Auden’s statement in “September 1, 1939”: “We must love one another or die” (l. 88). Although Samuel Hynes reports that Auden eventually removed that stanza, and therefore that sentiment, from the poem (383), Carr and Duncan would argue that commitment to others is the only thing that gives life purpose, and they would call Auden’s rejection of that sentiment as bad faith on his part, as proof that Auden was not fully committed to protecting those who suffer under the capitalist system. For Carr, the creation of *The Trap* is his attack on class division:

All that part of our society which I have labelled Park Lane is  
to me a vulgar tower of insincerities, an unreal world which,  
the higher the ideals it professes, the more it reveals that its one  
overwhelming law is that of self-preservation — an ivory tower  
which I shall help to pull down, I hope. (30)

In *The Trap*, Carr realises what Auden seems to forget: “The good, the true, the generous, and the just, are easily trodden under. To be tender is to be vulnerable” (61). Both Carr and Duncan take it upon themselves, to the best of their abilities, to defend and protect those who are vulnerable,

*The Opera House Murders* also looks forward to *The Cage*. In both novels, Billany describes middle class Liberals. In *The Cage*, Henry represents the Liberal position. In *The Opera House Murders*, William Bailey represents the Liberal. Duncan describes Bailey, in *The Opera House Murders*, as “age forty-three, bald, pompous, describing him as a ‘Liberal of the old school’. I think he would also describe himself as tolerant, a middle-way man. Easy-going orthodoxy was his line” (15). Later in *The Cage*, Billany will describe in far more detail what he thinks of Liberals “of the old school”. In fact, Henry describes himself with the same phrase in the later novel. While in *The Cage* Billany sees Henry’s views as detrimental to the struggle for equality, in *The Opera House Murders*, Bailey is a far more foolish, comic character. Bailey had been married to the now deceased sister of Mary Kirby’s dead husband. Duncan comments, “I couldn’t myself see what claim this gave him to the hospitality of Peter’s widow” (15). Duncan suspects other motives: “Perhaps I had better say straight away that I didn’t like him much. I suspected him of pursuing Mary with matrimonial intentions” (16). Bailey, therefore, becomes more than merely a political rival; he becomes a personal rival as well. Duncan envisions Bailey chaining Mary to a “civilised” yet dull life.

There are two reasons for Duncan’s dislike of Bailey. The first is Bailey’s disapproval of Duncan. Bailey feels that the young boy Jack needs his guiding hand; Duncan states that Bailey “took it to be his duty to instruct Jack in the way he should go, and the many ways he should not go, when he happened to be at Granby [Mary Kirby’s house] — and apparently assumed that in the intervals of his absences the boy lived in high barbarism” (19). Duncan, in Bailey’s view, is an unsuitable tutor for the young

Jack. Duncan is, after all, an ex-convict and a disgraced detective. Bailey shows his disapproval when Jack (who has just witnessed the murder) is discovered missing from the house:

It was half-past nine. Jack, who was eleven, usually went to bed at half-past eight. Bailey began to make clucking noises to indicate his disapproval of this, and to imply that he himself, though *not* a paid tutor, would have seen that the lad was in bed had I not been there. (20)

Duncan makes this clear, however, that this disapproval does not come from any concern for Jack, but it stems from Bailey's desire to make himself look superior to Duncan.

Bailey does not even help search for Jack:

Bailey settled back in his arm-chair and clucked again, evidently to convey that he at any rate wasn't going to be disturbed going out to look for the boy when there was someone in the house paid to look after him, and that this should never have happened anyway. (21)

Bailey is portrayed as being smug and self-satisfied, caring only for himself. Only immediately after the murder does Bailey begin to show some respect for Duncan:

“What do you make of it, Mr. Duncan?” asked Bailey. There was a new respect in his voice. The situation had brought him back to him my reputation, and he felt with awe that he was seeing the great Robbie Duncan at work. (27)

Duncan is obviously enjoying the chance to feel superior to Bailey, especially after

Bailey's disapproval earlier in the novel. Bailey insists on making it clear that he is in a superior position to Duncan:

Mary had not been back three days before Bailey returned, and to my indignation told Mary that he had left before because of my rudeness and intolerance. This was his little way of emphasizing that he was a guest there, and I was a servant. Guests complain of servants. (129)

Bailey quite clearly sees the class division within society. Duncan is on one side, Bailey is on the other. Duncan, as a Socialist, is angered ideologically and personally.

Bailey quite clearly sees himself as the voice of civilisation. At one point, Bailey discovers Duncan, who has been covered in mud and slime from a ditch, naked, so as not to dirty the house. Bailey's concern seems at first to be for the feelings of Horace Kirby's wife, Edna, but what he actually invokes is the name of civilisation and decency:

“Civilization, my God,” said Bailey; “reverence, reticence, common decency; my God.” He turned and faced the abominable, though still with an averted eye. “If shame could not check this exhibitionism, one could hardly expect consideration for the feelings of a young girl, even though she is married.” (52-53)

Duncan, naturally, ridicules Bailey's comments by adding “A comic sentence” at the end of the tirade. Edna herself says, “Oh, please don't be concerned for me, Mr. Bailey [...] I like it” (53). Bailey is a comic character for everyone in the novel. Edna knows that Bailey's concern stems from the mutual antagonism that exists between Bailey and Duncan, rather than a real concern for her feelings.

The second reason for Duncan's dislike for Bailey becomes clear only near the end of the novel with the revelation that Duncan wants to marry Mary Kirby. Bailey himself has the same intention. Mary's primary concern, however, is her son, Jack; she tells yet another suitor, Arnold Amery, that “I have one thing to live for; that's Jack” (211). Speaking to Amery after Horace's death, she says

Horace has been killed now. Well, I can accept it. My life is just narrowing down, that's all. I shan't have wide interests any more; I'm on the down grade. I don't want to be mulish about it. I'm so centred on Jack that if I thought you would make him a good father, I would probably marry you. (211)



Mary tells Duncan that “Bill has asked me to be his wife” (151). Mary turns him down, and she and Duncan have a long discussion about it. Duncan, whose jaw has been broken and must write what he wants to say, writes, “You should have laughed in his face and told him to go to hell” (152). Duncan’s animosity and jealousy motivate his response. Mary is far more sensitive to Bailey, telling Duncan, “Oh no, I couldn’t have laughed in his face. After all, he’d taken an important plunge in asking me that” (152). This is not to say that the reader begins to have more sympathy for Bailey, seeing Bailey as the disappointed suitor:

And what I did say he didn’t take in good part. He asked questions, you know, the kind of questions one never should ask in such a case. ‘Why not?’ ‘What was there I had against him?’ ‘Why wasn’t I thinking of marrying just now?’ ‘Why not him?’ There’s something so damned unperceptive about him, he almost forces one into telling him answers that would hurt his feelings. ‘Why not him?’ indeed. He sort of edged me in a corner where I nearly had to say ‘Why him?’ for that matter. (152)

Not only does the reader question Bailey’s persistent question asking but the reader also questions Bailey’s timing. It seems to be a poor time to press Mary with questions about marriage. Bailey asks her at a time when her mind is on Jack who is close to death and who is in danger from criminals whose identity is still unknown.

Bailey’s forwardness is especially presumptuous when the reader remembers that it was he who put Jack in danger in the first place. Bailey spoke to the papers about the murder and revealed that Jack witnessed the murder. Duncan states that “this should have been kept out of the papers [...] I thought that was understood. Now there’ll be another murder if I don’t look sharp” (86). The situation is an odd one. Certainly the

reader, as a result of this incident, is intended to see Bailey in a poor light, as a foolish man who needlessly endangered a young boy. Yet, as Edna tells Duncan, “You should have told him to keep quiet before he had a chance to do this” (92). The reader has to agree. Bailey does not have the same expertise as Duncan and, therefore, is not aware of the possible danger.

Billany’s point in this situation is also made through Edna, as she tells Duncan, “You are more responsible than he is — you should have foreseen this and prevented it” (92). The idea of responsibility is the key. Both men have made a mistake: Bailey for exposing Jack to danger and Duncan for not warning Bailey about the possible danger. Duncan, however, accepts his mistake and his responsibility in the matter: “Yes. Maybe I was to blame” (92). Duncan proceeds to help protect Jack from that danger; Bailey, on the other hand, leaves. Edna tells Duncan that Bailey is “having his luggage sent on, so I suppose he’s away for a week or two” (92). Duncan, for all his dissolute past, faces his responsibilities, while the “respectable” William Bailey abandons his. This, then, is Billany’s complaint with liberals of the “old school”. They abandon all responsibility for those around them. This is an idea that Billany will examine in a more considered and less hysterical way in *The Cage*, with the character of Henry who, like Bailey, describes himself with the same phrase. Because they abandon their responsibility (which is, in Billany’s view, expected of everyone), they sustain the inequalities inherent in the system.

Duncan is particularly hostile to those in positions of authority, in particular Dr Martin (the physician treating the injured Jack). Duncan objects to Martin's manner, stating that

Whilst he was quite a good-hearted man, he was one of those doctors who can't disguise the fact that they are professional men. I am weak enough to prefer a doctor who pretends to have a personal feeling for his patient. When he told us about Jack, his attitude was clearly academic. Whilst, of course, he would do his best, the case was just a physiological problem which might work out and might not. (28)

This clinical, academic attitude is made clear when Martin discusses Jack's condition to Jack's mother (who is, understandably distraught and worried):

The wrist, *as a wrist*, is comparatively nothing, Mrs. Kirby. It is the wrist considered as a complication of the long exposure to which the child has been subjected; and it is the exposure and the fractured considered as complications of his recent illness, from which he was barely convalescent; these are the factors which make the case a difficult one. Since you wish me to be frank, I will say that in such a case, where we have so many tendencies inimical to the child's health occurring in combination with dangerously lowered vitality, there is a definite element of danger. (28-29)

This speech has the tone of a doctor speaking to a colleague or a medical student rather than a distraught mother. With his use of "the child" rather than Jack's name and his statement that "we have so many inimical tendencies to the child's health", the reader may forget, as Martin seems to, that he is telling a distraught mother that her son may die.

This hostility to professionalism is a reflection of the class division. Just as Carr will rail against the literary upper class in *The Trap*, so too does Duncan attack the professional class. Because of their education, the literary and professional class should be leading the attack on the capitalist society; however, they fail to challenge the system

effectively. The new generation of writers (the Auden Circle) pretend to be committed to radical change; in *The Trap*, Carr mocks the writers of the thirties, writing “So the Intelligence, Good Taste, and Social Conscience of the Upper Classes formed itself into groups for the study of the Communist Manifesto (‘unexpurgated, my dear: *so* devastating)’” (28). The upper class is too interested in appearance; for them, reading the act of defiance is reading unexpurgated edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. There is never any real intention of taking the arguments of Marx farther, no real commitment to social revolution. In *The Opera House Murders*, this lack of commitment is reflected in Dr Martin’s clinical and professional distance from his patient.

In *The Opera House Murders*, the readers see the themes that Billany will continue to develop in his later novels. Taking the stance of the committed radical, Duncan attacks, in the novel, those who would stand in the way of individual freedom: those who would maintain the status quo while hiding behind the guise of Liberalism, criminals, and capitalism. Billany defends the belief in individual worth and refuses to allow a character like Ted Fraser to become merely the stereotypical slow-witted police officer who is merely an extension of state oppression. The overriding message of *The Opera House Murders* is that commitment to others is the only human responsibility. These ideas will reappear in his three remaining novels.

#### Chapter Four: Fantasy, Subversion, and *The Magic Door*

Just as he did in *The Opera House Murders*, Billany, in his next novel *The Magic Door*, manipulates a popular literary form in order to criticise the British socio-political system. In this case, Billany uses two forms: the fantasy and the boy's adolescent adventure story. The novel, published in 1943 when Billany was a prisoner of war, is, on the surface, nothing more than an adventure story for and about boys. Yet, when examined through a Marxist perspective, the novel emerges as an examination and condemnation of British society both before and during the war. The story in the novel becomes a metaphor for British society of the 1930s and 1940s.

The various influences on *The Magic Door* are obvious. The winged boy has a similar role as Puck in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, in which Puck takes the two children in that novel, Dan and Una, back into time to discover their past. The motif of a door through the wall is reminiscent of H.G. Wells's "The Door in the Wall" or Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. What Billany does is to take these archetypes, of the door through the wall and travel to other lands and times, and fuses them with a political purpose. A natural comparison is with Rex Warner<sup>1</sup>, who, in *The Wild Goose Chase*, uses fantasy to present a political and Communist position. Both Warner and Billany argue for the same thing: freedom. Billany argues for the freedom to learn and to develop without the interference of someone in authority. In *The Wild Goose Chase*,

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Brake, Billany's sister, has confirmed that Billany knew Warner and spent some time with him (letter to Cloutier November 1997).

George, one of the main characters, echoes similar ideas in a speech to a mass demonstration:

What our old leaders most respected we chiefly despise — the frantic assertion of an ego, do-nothings, the over-cleanly, deliberate love making, literary critics, moral philosophers, ballroom dancing, pictures of sunsets, money, the police; and to what they used to despise we attach great value — to comradeship, and to profane love, to hard work, honesty, the sight of the sun, reverence for those who have helped us, animals, flesh and blood. (440).

The ideas that George points to in this passage are ideas that Billany examines throughout his fiction. George rails against “do-nothings” in the same way as Billany attacks Rocket in *The Magic Door* and against “moral philosophers” in the same way as Billany attacks William Bailey, earlier, in *The Opera House Murders* and Henry, later, in *The Cage*. George praises the same qualities that Billany does. Billany explores George’s ideas of comradeship and love in all of his novels. In *The Trap*, Billany shows the ultimate triumph of love over adversity, as Michael Carr, in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, dedicates himself to protecting those he loves; by the end of the novel, Carr has realised that the connections between people are more important than ideology and political motivations.

The difference between Warner and Billany is the way in which they reflect the method of social change. John Coomes, in “The Novels of Rex Warner”, writes that in *The Wild Goose Chase* “the building of the revolution has been occluded in terms which, like those of much social realism, seem both aesthetically conservative (concern for the “proper” subject matter of a novel) and politically élitist (representation through a few leaders)” (224). Warner adopts the orthodox Communist view that the revolution needs

to be led by a vanguard party. In *The Wild Goose Chase*, Warner writes that the leaders

went on to speak of the revolutionary organization then existing in the country, its weaknesses, and their plans for making it into an instrument capable of overturning their enemies; nor is it either necessary or possible here to describe the results of this discussion or of subsequent discussions. It will be enough to say that before many months had passed the organization had been transformed. (285)

For Warner, then, the revolutionaries become organised professionals. The revolution comes about through a dedicated group of revolutionaries leading the way. In *The Magic Door*, however, any revolution comes not from the organisation of a party but through the development of the consciousness of the boys. There are no leaders in the group; the boys work as a collective to achieve their goals of equality and safety. Billany's vision of social revolution is a grassroots development; the revolution comes from the mass rather than from a group of professional revolutionaries.

Modern fantasy has largely been dismissed as escapist. Those who *have* argued that modern fantasy is more than mere escapism have seen it largely in psychological terms, as the expression of unconscious or hidden desires. Rosemary Jackson writes that the fantastic "traces the unsaid and the unseen culture: that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made 'absent'" (4). Basing her account on Freud's notion of the uncanny, Jackson argues that fantasy explores and expresses the psychological undercurrents in society, stating that "a literary fantasy is produced within, and determined by, its social context" (3). She continues to write that recognition "of these forces involves placing authors in relation to historical, social, economic, political and sexual determinants" (3). Jackson seeks to avoid reductionist theories of fantasy, arguing

that “it would be naive to equate fantasy with either anarchic or revolutionary politics” (14). Jackson’s insistence on examining psychological motivations for fantasy does not mean that fantasy is never motivated by revolutionary politics. There is no naiveté *necessarily* in linking fantasy as a form with revolutionary politics. While it would be equally foolish to dismiss Freudian, psychological undercurrents, fantasy can, in fact, be used to explore political aspects of society. After all, if, as Jackson rightly suggests, a literary fantasy cannot be separated from its social context, then the political context, as a part of society, must be considered. For example, psychological arguments alone cannot fully explain what Jonathan Swift does in *Gulliver’s Travels* or what George Orwell does in *Animal Farm*. Both Swift and Orwell use elements of the fantastic to attack political targets, and neither can be removed from their political contexts. Billany would certainly see the potential to use fantasy to his own political ends; he, as shown earlier, rejects the restrictive limitations of realism, Socialist or otherwise.

Masking political intentions through fantasy is certainly not a new literary technique. In the eighteenth century, Swift used fantasy in order to satirise his political enemies in *Gulliver’s Travels*. F.P. Lock states that “Swift’s political commentaries in *Gulliver’s Travels* are expressed through fables and paradigms rather than specific allegories and allusions to particular events and politicians” (89). J.A. Downie goes even further by arguing that Swift “had to entrap the reader to persuade him to suspend his disbelief. Only then could he begin to manipulate him to achieve his satiric end” (267). Clearly, fantasy is integral (even necessary in Downie’s view) to Swift’s political intentions. Fantasy is used for political and social reasons (this includes “moral”



purposes as well), even as far back as the Classical world, in Aesop's fables or, as Robert Graves suggests, in the Greek myths. Graves writes that "A large part of the Greek myths is politico-religious history" (17). Later, he gives an example when he states "Zeus swallowed Metis; i.e. the Achaeans suppressed her cult and arrogated all wisdom to Zeus as their patriarchal god" (20). For Graves then, the myth of Zeus and Metis conveys the political shift from a matriarchal society to a patriarchal society.

*The Magic Door* follows in that tradition and is a fantastic political allegory much in the same way as Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Both authors were forced to forego social realism in order to explore their ideas. At the time of its publication in 1943, Billany could not attack British society directly because of wartime censorship. Although the publisher Stanley Unwin claims in his autobiography, *The Truth About a Publisher*, that there was "no Gestapo lurking round any corner or behind any door. There was no official telling us book publishers what we might or might not print" (261), there is evidence that the government did interfere with publishers. Bernard Bergonzi, in *Wartime and Aftermath*, shows that later in the war George Orwell had trouble publishing *Animal Farm* "since its anti-Soviet theme was seen as hostile to the wartime alliance" (97). Robert Hewison writes that Orwell "traced his difficulty...to the Ministry" (78). This was the Ministry of Information which was created to "propagandize and promote news of Britain's success [and] to censor any information that might be of use to the enemy or damaging to the war effort" (Hewison, 16). Hewison also reports that the ministry "kept a discreet eye on the content of books" (78), and that the Ministry withdrew its subsidy to magazine wholesalers who exported *Picture Post* when it became

critical of the Desert Army's weaponry (78). Noreen Branson, in *The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941*, writes that when, in September 1940, the Communist Party issued leaflets and posters demanding for better bomb-proof shelters "the police raided various offices and bookshops and seized such of the leaflets and posters as they could find" (303). Clearly, then, freedom of expression had its limits during the war.

These incidents may seem like isolated attempts by the Ministry of Information to meddle in the publishing world, but this does not mean that censorship was not a force in wartime British society. The Ministry rarely intervened in the publishing industry largely because the publishers, for the most part, acted as censors themselves. Unwin, himself, reveals this when, just before the passage quoted above, he writes "we were still free to read just what we wanted and – apart from the printing of anything which would give information to the enemy – a thing no reputable publisher would want to do – there was no censorship" (260). Unwin clearly believes that publishers should support the war effort (and his autobiography clearly shows that Unwin did). Orwell's *Animal Farm* also shows how publishers acted as self-regulating censors, as T.S. Eliot at Faber and Faber refused to publish the novel because he felt that it was not "the right point of view from which to criticize the political situation at the present time" (Eliot to Orwell, 13 July 1944, quoted in *The Times* 6 January 1969). Even publishers who were willing to publish a work that did damage the war effort would soon find themselves out of business, as they depended on the wartime government for everything from subsidies to paper. The rationing of paper was perhaps the biggest problem facing publishers. Hewison writes

that at first “the ration was 60% of pre-war consumption, but by December 1941 this had been reduced to 37 1/2%” (77). Clearly, publishers, willingly or unwillingly, acted as a self-regulating censors. This would, in turn, force authors to hide or mask any subversive themes or ideas in their work.

If publishers refused to publish a novel by a writer with the reputation of Orwell that criticised a *foreign* country (even if an ally) in wartime Britain, publishers would certainly not publish a novel that attacked *Britain* by a little-known writer like Billany. The publishers would undoubtedly object to Billany’s stance on the war. Billany never supported the war, a position he will argue more forcibly in *The Trap*. As Unwin stated, no respectable publisher would publish anything damaging to the war effort. This meant that Billany was forced to hide behind fantasy and allegory. Yet the question remains: why could Billany get his fantasy published when Orwell was forced to wait until after the war? The answer to this lies in the issue of authorship. Orwell was known as a militant outspoken critic whereas Billany barely had a reputation at all. Although it was kindly reviewed, Billany had only published, what on the face of it, seemed to be nothing more threatening than an engaging and amusing murder mystery, *The Opera House Murders*. Orwell, on the other hand, had stirred up controversy with books such as *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Publishers would, therefore, be more cautious with a book by Orwell, a known troublemaker, than with a book by Billany.

Certainly those Socialist writers who supported the war effort could publish realistic novels. J.B. Priestley published two novels *Black-out at Gretley* (1942) and *Daylight on Saturday* (1943) in a realistic mode. Priestley had no fear from the censors,

as he supported the war effort entirely. This meant that he did not feel that it was necessary to hide his Socialist messages behind fantasy because, unlike Billany, he was not critical of the war effort. He did make attacks on British society. Priestley's suggestion, in *Black-out at Gretley*, that a British citizen (the aristocrat Tarlington) would willingly aid the enemy would certainly not please the government. Even the spycatcher Humphrey Neyland's own involvement in the war is an entirely personal rather than patriotic one: "Paul Rosental, who was a German Jew, worked with me [...] both in Peru and Chile, and he and his pretty little Viennese wife, Mitzi, were my best friends. The Nazis down there murdered them" (1). In a radio talk on 26 January, 1941, Priestley went so far as to blame society at large for the war rather than Germany or the Nazis: "What he [Hitler] really is, is a wicked dwarf perched on top of a gigantic toadstool of mess and misery, thrown up because the world, after the plain warning of the last war, refused to reform itself." Siân Nicholas, in a book on the BBC and propaganda (*The Echo of War*), writes that "by 1941 Priestley was attracting unwelcome controversy, he was representing one side of what was still a highly partisan debate" (245). Yet these suggestions that not all of Britain was fighting for the same cause were tolerated as ultimately Priestley is urging the British people to put aside their ideological differences in order to win the war, a position adopted by the bulk of the British Labour Movement and (after 1941) the Communist Party of Great Britain. The authorities were afraid of the bad publicity that would result from any action against the very popular Priestley. Nicholas reports that "audiences for his talks averaged 30 per cent of the adult population for his first series [in 1940], peaking at 40.4 per cent in the second [in 1941] –

unprecedented figures for a speaker who held no office or position” (244). Luckily for the BBC, Priestley’s contract expired, allowing them quietly to forget Priestley. Nicholas states that this “was more indifferent than censorial” (245). In the end, the government knew that Priestley was a reformist and not a revolutionary Socialist and posed no immediate threat to the conduct of the war.

Despite these attacks on society, Priestley’s main concern was the defeat of fascism. Anthony Burgess writes that

one is always aware of a genuine indignation underneath the lively colloquial narrative, the controlled anger of a liberal who feels that civilization has been betrayed but that it is not too late to do something about it (1963: 16).

Fascism betrays civilisation and, in Priestley’s view, is an attack on ordinary people by the upper class. In *Black-out in Gretley*, this attack on ordinary people is Neyland’s indictment against Tarlington: “You see yourself as a rightly privileged person, quite different from the common crowd, and you’re ready to pay a big price to keep your privileges. You hate democracy, and all it means” (207). Through these ideas, Priestley aimed to rally the mass of people behind the war effort. People were not fighting against some abstract idea; they were fighting for their freedom.

Only near the end of the war, when he was certain the Allies had won, did Priestley shift his focus away from the war effort and focus on discussions of British society and the shape that post-war Britain would take. Only in the novels *Three Men in New Suits* (1945) and *Bright Day* (1946) does he begin to urge strenuously for social change. In these novels, Priestley became as didactic in arguing for a better future as he was early in the war when he was arguing in support of the war effort.

Billany's use of the children's story in *The Magic Door* also follows a long tradition. Stories for children and fairy tales have often been used for political purposes. Through the use of fairy tales and children's stories, society indoctrinates children into the values and mores of society. Jack Zipes writes that folk tales (and eventually fairy tales, which are merely written versions of the folk tale) "are reflections of the social order in a given historical epoch, and, as such, they symbolize the aspirations, needs, dreams and wishes of the people, either affirming the dominant social values and norms or revealing the necessity to change them" (1979, 5). Fairy tales have been manipulated to protect children from what the dominant culture perceives as unwelcome influences; Zipes writes that in the nineteenth century "Folk tales were rewritten and made into didactic fairy tales for children so that they would not be harmed by the violence, crudity and fantastic exaggeration of the originals" (1979, 15). This practice has continued into the twentieth century through various means, including Disney movies. The dominant culture not only sanitises the world for children but also instils their own beliefs in the young through the use of fairy tales. Zipes shows that after their rise to power the Nazis used fairy tales to spread their ideology to the young (1991, 135). According to Zipes, the Nazis actively used fairy tales to further their Aryan ideology:

The folk tales were considered to be holy or sacred Aryan relics. Therefore, the classical fairy tales of the Grimms, Andersen, and Bechstein were promoted as ideal on recommended reading lists for children [...] whereas the romantic fairy tales [...] were to be avoided. What was now stressed and came to be part of a policy in regard to fairy tales was a cleansing policy to recover the pure Aryan tradition of the folk tale (1991, 139).

The Nazis realised that continued and long term social control could only be achieved if

they inducted children into the Nazi philosophy. Fairy tales were prime opportunities to distil their racist totalitarian views. Fairy tales are particularly well-suited to this purpose. Not only are children inundated with fairy tales, but fairy tales are rarely seen as being political. Through fairy tales, therefore, ideology can be transmitted in a more passive form. Children learn that certain ideological concepts are valid and natural.

It can also be argued that stories designed for adolescent boys can be used to promote the views of the dominant culture. George Orwell argues this point in his essay “Boys’ Weeklies”, published in 1940. In these magazines, aimed at boys younger than fourteen, Orwell states, “there was a deliberate attempt to get away from the guilty sex-ridden atmosphere that pervaded so much of the earlier literature for boys” (180). Orwell writes that boys are taught the way to behave: “The ‘good’ boys are ‘good’ in the clean-living Englishman tradition – they keep hard in training, wash behind their ears, never hit below the belt etc., etc.” (180). The stories are interested in maintaining traditional English values and attitudes, showing a definite class division within the magazines. The schools presented in these magazines, in Orwell’s words, have “a title boy or two whose titles are constantly thrust in the reader’s face; other boys have the names of well-known aristocratic families, Talbot, Manners, Lowther” (182). The working class, naturally, is largely absent. Working class characters appear “either as comics (jokes about tramps, convicts, etc.), or as prize-fighters, acrobats, cowboys, professional footballers and Foreign Legionaries – in other words, as adventurers” (198). While there is no attempt to show the real world of the working class, Orwell argues that nearly all the readers (he states nine times out of ten) will be boys who are “going to spend [their lives] working in

a shop, in a factory or in some subordinate job in an office” (198). The weeklies propagate their values to boys who would normally agitate for change and who could become revolutionaries. The papers, then, dissuade any form of activism even before the boys are aware of its potential, by teaching them to accept the values of the ruling class. This is an idea Billany with explore in more depth later in *The Trap*.

Just as Zipes reveals that fairy tales have been used to support conservative ideas, Orwell believes that the Boys’s weeklies do the same thing. Orwell mitigates this by stating that “the politics of the *Gem* and *Magnet* are Conservative, but in a completely pre-1914 style, with no Fascist twinge” (187). *Gem* and *Magnet* are the two Boys weeklies that Orwell uses as his examples. Their political assumptions are that “nothing ever changes, and foreigners are funny” (Orwell, 1960, 187). They support the status quo, maintaining existing views of society. Fascism represents as much of a threat to the existing system as Communism.

These magazines also perpetuate stereotypical views of foreigners, for example: “*Frenchman*: Excitable. Wears beards, gesticulates wildly”, “*Chinese*: Sinister, treacherous”, and “*Negro*: Comic, very faithful” (188). These papers were patriotic as well. Their brand of patriotism, however, had nothing to do “with power-politics or ‘ideological’ warfare” (189). Orwell argues that the patriotism is more like loyalty to a family; Orwell also believes that understanding the nature of British patriotism “gives one a valuable clue to the attitude of ordinary people, especially the huge untouched block of the middle class and the better-off working class” (189). Orwell argues that these people hold the attitude that “what happens in foreign countries is not any of their



business” (189). They will defend England in times of trouble, but they have no interest in world matters at any other time. Orwell believes that the left’s failure to recognise this is “one of the reasons why Left Wing political parties are seldom able to produce an acceptable foreign policy” (189). Billany will disagree with this position in his later work. At this point, it is sufficient to note the conservative and nationalistic nature of these magazines.

Does this mean that this form, adolescent fiction, necessarily needs to be politically conservative? Orwell does not think so. He states that these stories “are merely adventure stories with a conservative bias. It is fairly easy to imagine the process being reversed” (1960, 202). This is precisely what Billany does in *The Magic Door*. He takes an adventure story and gives it a Communist bias. The attitudes in it do not reflect the traditional conservative values but, instead, reflect Billany’s revolutionary Communist views.

Looking more closely at *The Magic Door* itself, Billany clearly sets up a binary symbolism, in which characters symbolise the conflict between the two extremes in British society (i.e. the dominant capitalist ruling class versus the disadvantaged working class). The novel follows the adventures of a group of boys who discover a magic door that will take them into the past. Their teacher, Mr. Rocket, attempts to prevent their trips into history in order to give them their lessons proscribed by the school system. The boys represent at the same time the working class and the next generation of the ruling class. The dominant capitalist ruling class is represented by characters like the boys’s teacher, Mr Rocket, and the school inspector both of whom try to impose societal attitudes and

discipline on the boys, stifling their creativity and imagination. Those in positions of power attempt to limit the futures of the boys, much as the capitalist system limits the future of the working class (an idea that Billany will explore in more detail in *The Trap*). At the same time, they try to teach the boys how to behave properly in the modern British class system, in order to perpetuate the capitalist system.

The novel clearly conforms to Gyorgy Lukács's pre-Marxist but still important theory that, in the words of Lucien Goldmann, the novel "is the story of a *degraded*... search, a search for authentic values in a world itself degraded" (1). In a world degraded by capitalism, Billany searches for authentic values within the characters of the boys: values of discovery, bravery, and concern for others. Simultaneously, Billany directs irony at the boys, himself, and his profession (teaching), following Lukács's belief that "the novelist's irony is directed not only on to the character...but also on the abstract... character of his own consciousness" (Goldmann, 1975, 5). Through this, Billany defines and analyses the problems that plague Britain's capitalist system, as Orwell suggested, viewed through the eyes of a Communist. The novel's plot is deceptively simple: a group of boys find a magic door knocker, and when used a magic door appears, opened by a Winged Boy who is Chronos's (Time) son and who maintains a watch on the door. The door can transport the boys back into any time as long as it is a time when humans existed.

At first the figures of authority, especially their teacher Rocket, are ridiculous figures. Rocket is responsible for the boys and for making sure they get their lessons, yet he is more interested in impressing his superiors and maintaining his position within the

school system than with actually teaching the boys anything of importance. George Orwell would not describe Rocket in nearly the same way as he describes Victor Stone, the schoolmaster in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, who Orwell describes as a man who “had no very marketable talents except a slight gift for music and a much more pronounced gift for dealing with children” (59). Rocket has no gift for anything, especially in dealing with children. Rocket makes certain that everything looks perfect; on the blackboard “Mr. Rocket had written out ‘The Merry Haymakers’ in his best blackboard handwriting for the inspectors to see” (11). Billany is having an ironic joke at his own profession, his fellow school teachers, and himself. Following Lukács’s view of self-irony, the irony is that Billany, as a schoolteacher, is part of the very system which he holds up to ridicule. Billany constantly directs ironic remarks at his profession, including the poor pay teachers are given: “Even Mr. Rocket –who, like all school teachers, was immensely rich – was surprised to see so many precious stones” (12). The joke is ominous for people like Rocket will teach children the attitudes and knowledge that shape the future of society. They can either preserve the existing structure or bring about reforms. Capitalism, as demonstrated, through Rocket, encourages them to maintain the oppressive capitalist society. Billany, then, argues against Orwell’s comment in “The Lion and the Unicorn” that “[p]ublic education in England has been meanly starved of money, but it has nevertheless improved, largely owing to the devoted efforts of the teachers” (76). Rocket is not devoted to making education better; he is more concerned with protecting his own position in society.

Billany does not try to romanticise the adventures in the novel. The Winged Boy

gives them a warning before they go on their first adventure:

There may be danger on the other side of the door. There may even be death. Some of you may go through the Magic Door and never come back. You may suffer hardships, you may perish far from your own century. You may die a thousand years before you were born (19).

The dangers in these adventures are very real. The Winged Boy may control magic, but, as he tells them later, he cannot protect them from everything: “I can’t save you from any danger you run into on either side. I can play tricks with Time, because he’s my father, but I can’t play tricks with Death” (90). He repeatedly stresses this fact. In order to illustrate his point, he relates an incident about a boy who “was thrown into a dungeon under a great castle in the Middle Ages, and he never got out again” (89). He even goes so far as to tell them, “if you take my advice, you won’t go through the door any more” (90). After all, he points out, the boys themselves have had some frightening experiences: “You’ve been attacked by wolves, Romans, Picts and Scots, Angles, and all sorts of things” (89). The boys, in their youthful exuberance, ignore him. This, for all its humour (and there is a considerable amount), is a serious novel. *The Magic Door* is no mere escapist fantasy for young boys; there is a serious political message behind the fantasy. Billany shows that the boys are not just playing a game; there are fighting for their own survival, their own identities.

The boys ignore the Winged Boy’s warning because they have yet to fall victim to the influence of modern capitalist society and, therefore, still possess their natural instincts for excitement and adventure which these trips into the past offer. Rocket, fully integrated into society, has lost those instincts. So that when the boys in his class express

a wish to go through the door into history, Rocket responds, “What would I say if an inspector came in and found the classroom empty?” (15). Rocket has been indoctrinated by the ruling class for so long that he has lost touch with the adventurous instincts of the boys and can no longer understand why the boys want to venture into the past: “I can’t see anything specially attractive about history. What’s the use of the good kind Education Committee giving you such enthralling sum books to work at, and such exquisitely comfortable desks, and such glorious classrooms, carefully designed to delight the hearts of children?” (19-20). The reality is that sum books are hardly enthralling to the boys and fail to capture their imaginations like the magic door does. Rocket does, however, remember these instincts when he tells the school inspector that the blackboard is “just a board; black and dull -- very black and very dull. It has nothing to do with life, excitement, fun, peril, or joy” (67). Rocket is what the boys will become: a dull, unimaginative man who is too scared to do anything more than merely acquiesce to his superiors.

For the boys, the adventures are a search for not only fun and excitement but identity as well. In one of their early adventures in Roman Britain, they insist on their identity as descendants of the Angles when mistaken for Britons by the Romans (27). They get exasperated with the Romans who constantly fail to understand the difference: “I told you we aren’t Britons. We’re English – Angles” (28). The boys are trying to find their place within history and society which has so far been defined by others: by Romans as Britons, by Rocket (and modern society) as commodities. Finally they seem to begin to connect themselves with history when they meet the Angles: “‘ANGLES!’ said Jack

Morris with joy, and throwing himself at the feet of the captain, he said: ‘You are my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather – at least, you might be’ (75-76). Terry Eagleton, in *Marxism and Literary Theory*, writes that Lukács believed that the novel arose when the “harmonious integration of man and his world is shattered; the hero of fiction is now in search of a totality, estranged from a world either too large or too narrow to give shape to his desires” (27). While Lukács wrote this in his pre-Marxist book *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) and later rejected this view, it still has validity in the context of *The Magic Door*. The boys’s integration (or in this case their indoctrination) is shattered by the discovery of the magic door. A whole world of possibilities has opened up for them. The magic door becomes a metaphor for their imagination. They discover that the society they are being prepared for is too narrow to contain their desire to experience the new possibilities revealed by the magic door. They now see a world of imagination, filled with wonder, adventure, danger, and excitement. Their journey in the novel (and life) has just begun, but society has already determined where they will finish, as dull school teachers whose worth is defined by their value as commodities.

The boys survive some very dangerous adventures only because they work together, trust each other, and take care of each other. They refuse to act purely in their own interests. Unlike Rocket, they refuse to leave another boy in danger. Billany wants the reader to contrast the boys with Rocket in this respect. On their final trip, the boys travel to the land of the dinosaurs after getting Chronos’s permission to do so. The Winged Boy can only take them to times in history when humans existed; Chronos has

no such limitation. They are pursued by a dinosaur, and Alan Hope trips and falls:

The other boys heard him and turned; they could not save him -- that they knew well -- but they could die with him. In that terrible moment not one of the boys would have deserted the gallant ginger-haired lad who lay prone before the stegosaur (171).

The boys would rather die than desert a friend in a time of danger. Mr Rocket, on the other hand, has no such instincts: "Only Mr. Rocket, supported by his nerves of steel, fled on, but looking once too often behind him, ran headlong into a tree, and dropped unconscious" (171). While there is humour in Rocket's collision with the tree, his response is far more serious. He is responsible for the welfare of the boys, and yet he is quite willing to save his own life and abandon his responsibility for the boys. Here Billany expands Rocket as a symbol to include the government. The government is responsible for the welfare of the working class through governmental programs such as the dole, an experience Billany had in his own life. Billany is clever to use Rocket to symbolise the government, as it symbolically links the government with the capitalist ruling class. As Billany will show in later detail in *The Trap*, the government fails to protect the working class because the government is too closely tied to the ruling class. The government protects the oppressor rather than the oppressed.

The boys have implicit faith in each other. During one adventure to the Roman period, one boy, Gordon Merrit, goes missing. Billany writes "they knew the danger, but they could not think of returning to their own world without Merrit" (50). There is no concern for their own safety. Merrit himself has complete faith in the others: "Though he knew of the fate which was in store for him, Gordon Merrit was by no means downhearted, for his eyes, sharper than those of his captors, picked out the shadowy

figures of the other boys stealing through the woods” (51). The captive has no doubt that the others will save him. They are so selfless that they will even save Rocket in a trip to the age of dinosaurs (155), even after he has attempted to sell them as slaves in an earlier Roman adventure (which will be discussed later). Even the names that Billany chooses for his characters, for example Hope and Merrit. The boys are the “hope” for the future. They can either be forced to conform and maintain the existing system, or they can be allowed to follow their own imaginations and create a society free from the oppressive dictates of capitalist greed. They also have “merit”. Harking back to what A.S. Neill wrote in *That Dreadful School* (that children are naturally good), Billany shows that the boys have inherent worth as human beings. They naturally care for and protect each other.

Their ability to work together eventually saves their country when a dinosaur accidentally goes through the magic door and begins a rampage in 1940s Britain. The dinosaur becomes a metaphor for fascism which was a real threat when Billany was writing the novel. In *The Myth of the Blitz*, Angus Calder writes that even as “recently as July 1939, 20,000 had flocked to a British Union of Fascists rally in London” (112). After the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Spain, Billany was quite aware of the danger that faced Britain. Not only from Germany but also from the fascists within its own borders. All the efforts of the boys in the novel has led to this moment, to the struggle against fascism. In the earlier episode with the Angles, the boys get a chance to practice giving orders:

“Port your helm,” cried Baker.  
 “Hard a-starboard,” said White.  
 “Take a turn round your winches,” said Martin.



“Put a reef in your top-gallants,” said Black.  
 “Furl your deadlights,” said Leslie Rodd.  
 “Shiver your timbers,” said Leonard Jackson.  
 “Strike your colours,” said Merrit.  
 “Fasten your bootlaces,” said Lowther.  
 “Pull your socks up,” said Norman (74).

Although the passage ends with humour (the boys are obviously enjoying themselves), it serves them well when, in an effort to kill the dinosaur, they must commandeer a tank. They first attempt to persuade an Army officer to use a tank to attack the dinosaur, but the officer refuses because the tank “is only to be used when the general gives orders” (184). The officer’s adherence to authority endangers the country. This is Billany’s point: that Britain has become enslaved by authority and rules to the extent that it paralyses the country, especially in times of utmost danger when flexibility is essential to deal with problems that arise. The boys then commandeer the tank (184) and eventually a submarine (188) in order to destroy the dinosaur. The fact that they can operate these machines without training may seem implausible at first, but the novel is a fantasy novel in which realism is not always expected. Like Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels*, Billany needs the reader to suspend disbelief in order to convey his message. That message is that it is only through the imagination, bravery, and teamwork of the boys is the country saved. Ironically, the capitalist system is paralysed in times of trouble by its own adherence to authority; it cannot act quickly enough to protect itself.

The one person who has the most influence on the children in the novel is Rocket. He is the one who instils the values of the capitalist system in them. Yet he is treated like a commodity, and a very dispensable one at that, by the very system he upholds. He knows that he could be easily replaced by someone with a greater ability to fulfil the

wishes of the school system. In a Roman adventure, he pleads with the boys to stay with him because “if I go back through the Magic Door without you, I shall certainly get the sack for losing you, and then I shall end on the dole” (102). He is in constant danger of losing his job, being in the lowest position in the capitalist system. Without a job, and therefore money, he would lose the little prestige he has by going on the dole and become trapped into the brutal struggle to survive.

Rocket is not only a figure of fun but also one of incompetence. Even Rocket’s lessons to which he so resolutely adheres do not teach the boys anything of real value, teaching them only the value of money: “Mr. Rocket was giving them an enthralling lesson on the pence table” (58). When they first find the magic doorknocker with an inscription on it, he tells them that it is a Chinese teapot stand because he does not know what it or the inscription are (13). He would rather invent an answer than admit to the boys that he does not know; Rocket feels safe doing this, for Billany, with much irony, writes that “all the boys knew perfectly well that everything Mr. Rocket said was Gospel Truth” (39). The irony is that he knows very little; the Winged Boy appears and tells them that it is not a Chinese teapot stand but a doorknocker and that the inscription on it is Latin not Chinese. Rocket reveals his poor Latin when challenged to speak the language: “Bellum bellum bell’m, belli bello b’llo, b’lla b’la bla, blorum blis blis” (14). Billany makes it clear, even to someone with little or no knowledge of Latin, that Rocket does not know Latin at all. When the boys laugh at his obvious incompetence, he resorts to the school register to try to retain his authority: “You’re not on the register; how dare you come barging into a classroom as if you owned it? I’ve a good mind to write to the

Director of Education” (15). In the novel, the boys are well versed in history, but the sense one gets is that they learned what they do know on their own. Billany clearly wants to show that left to their own devices, as A.S. Neill argues in *That Dreadful School*, that they will learn. They do not need Rocket to learn about history. He is, in fact, more of a hindrance than a help.

Rocket does seem to exhibit some positive characteristics. In one adventure in which Rocket joins the boys, he prevents an Angle raiding party from launching a surprise attack on a Briton village: “If you think I am going to stand by and see you slaughter innocent people [...] you can guess again” (81). This seems at first to be a positive aspect of Rocket’s character: not allowing innocent people to be killed. This is, however, a false view. He does allow the attack to take place, and all he does is to prevent the Angles from having the advantage of surprise, calling out, “LOOK OUT, BRITONS! ANGLES COMING!” (81). Instead of preventing the slaughter, he merely attempts to establish an element of fair play. The outcome is the same, and the Britons are massacred. Rocket’s concern for the Britons is at best ineffectual, much like the capitalist society’s concern for other countries. They are quite willing to meddle in the affairs of other countries without changing anything. The British government pretends to care but allows the same slaughters to continue. Any history about the treatment of the Natives in Canada and the aborigines in Australia shows this colonial attitude. This attitude is even seen in capitalism’s treatment of the poor in Britain. Billany has in mind Britain’s response (or lack of) to the Spanish Civil War. The British government stood by its policy of non-intervention while Germany and Italy aided the fascists. Paul

Preston, in *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, writes that “[t]he Spanish Republicans [...] found it hard to believe that this [Britain’s unwillingness to let the war spread into a general European war] could outweigh an awareness of the need to avoid strengthening the position of Nazi Germany” (100). Still the British government refused to go to war and attempted to appease Hitler instead. Capitalism claims the moral high ground, but Billany shows this to be a hypocritical lie. The British government, which (as Billany will argue later in *The Trap*) is merely an extension of capitalism, is unwilling to face the danger that is fascism.

Gradually, however, Rocket becomes a far more dangerous figure. Rocket’s character shows the three fundamental problems with British society: too much of a concern for morality (and one thinks back to William Bailey in *The Opera House Murders*), greed, and hypocrisy. Rocket gets a chance to explore his love of authority on a trip back to Roman Britain, when he masquerades as a Roman officer. The boys rarely listen to Rocket; Roman soldiers, however, are trained to obey orders instinctively: “His men leapt forward, ready to do battle even with an evil spirit at the command of their officer” (100). The soldiers, believing the officer who Rocket stole his uniform from is an evil spirit, ignore their superstitions to follow the orders of Rocket who they believe to be their officer. The change in Rocket is total, even Pope Gregory comments that “Never have I seen so evil a face” (108). Rocket, no longer under the threat of the school inspector and finally in a position of power, indulges in his new-found authority. As a person who is so thoroughly tutored in the dictatorial methods of twentieth century capitalism, which ultimately allowed Hitler who had the support of the German middle

class to come to power, Rocket easily slips into the role of military officer. After all, his role as a teacher fulfils the same role as the military officer, that of forcing the boys to conform to the standards and beliefs of the ruling class. The only difference is that the soldiers are fully integrated into the hierarchy of their society and obey Rocket's orders, while the boys are still not fully indoctrinated and see Rocket for what he is: incompetent.

His authority encourages his greed, and he sells the boys as slaves, arguing with the slave dealer and trying to get the best deal he can:

I know the game. You'd pick all the good-looking ones, and leave me to sell off the others at half price. No, they're twenty sesterces each if you buy the lot, and twenty-five each if you take them separately" (104).

Authority has changed Rocket into a greedy man who sells the boys under his care as slaves. Billany shows what happens to someone like Rocket who finally gets into a position of power. Under someone else's power for so long, Rocket loses himself in his role as a Roman officer, even going so far as to enter the reprehensible practice of slavery. Billany's point is clear: the brutal capitalist system left to its own devices would willingly reduce the working class to slavery. The boys become treated as commodities good for nothing but the amount of money Rocket can get for them. Rocket's greed is ugly. Rocket flees from the anger of Pope Gregory and is about to be attacked and robbed when the boys open the magic door to save him. Even though his life is in danger, Rocket refuses to give up the money: "Mr. Rocket clutched the money-bag tightly in his fist" (109). He is unwilling to release his hold on the bag of money even to save his life.

His greed reveals his hypocrisy as he complains that he was swindled by the slave

dealer (110), and yet he swindles the boys by cheating them out of their share of the money they made when he sold the boys as slaves. He is outraged when they do not trust him and ask how much he kept for himself. He lectures them on money:

You've got your one-and-threepence, and it was only my honesty that made me give you that. I don't spend all my time pinching and scraping after gold. What is gold, anyway? Dirt. That's what I say. Why, if I were you lads, arguing and quarrelling over a handful of money, I'd be ashamed of myself" (111).

This high-handed lecture is exposed as hypocrisy as he finally reveals that he, in fact, kept ten thousand pounds (112). His socially taught desire for material possessions causes him to cheat the boys.

Rocket's whole attitude during the adventure is one of dictatorial selfishness. The boys are willing to defer their own gratification for the sake of the others. At one point, they decide to eat and keep a watch:

Glover and Rodd were detailed to keep watch while the others were cooking and eating, and, to do them justice, they did not grumble at having to wait for their food, though they were very hungry; and the others saved the best pieces of the meat for them (158-159).

Rocket once again is seen to be useless and despotic:

Mr. Rocket was very useful in this work. Sitting on a pile of branches in the middle of the clearing, he told everybody just what to do, what branches to bring and where to stack them -- in fact, he directed everything. It was only jealousy when Alan Hope said he ought to do a bit of work himself (159).

In another passage filled with irony directed at the teacher, Rocket is shown to be far more willing to benefit from the work of the boys than to work himself. Billany parodies the managerial capitalist types who tell others (in other words those who actually do the

work) how to be more efficient without actually participating in the work. When Alan Hope complains, Rocket, in a seemingly odd statement, accuses him of being jealous. Rocket evades the boy's complaint by turning the blame back onto the accuser. There have been countless examples of the working class taking the blame for the failures of the capitalists. In times of recession or depression, the working class, the one class least able to survive financial trouble, bears the brunt of economically hard times through job losses and lack of support from government agencies.

The main problem with the school system, and society in general, is that those in charge, teachers and school inspectors, force conformity onto the boys. When Rocket points out the Winged Boy to the school inspector, who has made a surprise visit to find the classroom empty, the Winged Boy recognises this desire for conformity and says, "Now if I'm not careful they'll try to cut my wings off and make me go to school" (68). This is the modern British society, limiting options for the future and destroying creativity and imagination in order to impose conformity. The winged boy symbolises the opposite: the magic and wonder of the imagination. The wonder and magic of the door is completely lost not just on Rocket but also on the school inspector who refuses to believe in the existence of the door: "Nonsense; rubbish; pooh; bah; absurd; ridiculous; silly [...] Door in blackboard – never heard such a tale in my life" (67). When he does see the door his only comment is: "I shall have to report this to the Education Committee. I think we'd better have that door bricked up (69-70). Clearly, Billany wants to show that Rocket's lack of imagination is not abnormal; the attitude is engrained in the entire school system.

The irony at the boys's expense is that they are learning the lessons the ruling class teaches them, although they do not understand it and take their lessons of "Britishness" literally. When the boys are captured by the Romans and the magic doorknocker (which they need in order to return) is taken from them, they begin to imitate their elders to overcome their fear. One boy says, "Keep a stiff upper lip, my father says" (34). The boys, however, do not recognise that this idea of the British "stiff upper lip" is metaphorical and try to stiffen their upper lips literally with rather humorous results: "Merrit wedged his with a piece of wood underneath, while Bobby McManus held his lip in place with a string passed through his front teeth and over his nose" (34). The organising idea of the school register is so ingrained in them that when they have to decide who would drink first when provided with drink by their Roman captors, they resort to the school register to give them the drinking order. It even supersedes the alphabet as an organising principle: "There was some argument about Jack Crossley, who, having come into Standard Three later than the others, was at the end of the register instead of being in the C's" (35). While it starts out humorous, the passage ends with an ominous note; the boys have begun their journey to the dull incompetence represented by Rocket.

For Billany, greed and ambition are the two characteristics that are the most dangerous to the country because of their divisiveness. On one trip, they arrive in the time of King Arthur. Arthur has not yet been crowned king, and the nobles of the country are quarrelling over who will take the throne. Merlin reveals the danger in this greedy quarrelling:

Ah, folly and greed, ambition and vain jealousy...Is this a fit



thing for the lords of Britain, when the enemy is within our land, and we are banished into this mountainous corner? Is this the end of the great names of Britain? Are we still Britons, or are we no more than quarrelling dogs, that we slay each other for envy?" (113).

The danger inherent in quarrelling among each other is that the divisiveness reduces the British ability to fight the enemy. Divisiveness is the reason for the defeat of the left-wing groups in the Spanish Civil War, and it echoes a passage in Billany's later novel *The Trap*. At one point, after a run-in with his Adjutant, Carr, the narrator of *The Trap*, bitterly comments, "Was it an army, or had I strayed by mistake into a third-rate girls'-school? ...This was how we squabbled, 'peached' on each other, backbit, while the Nazis roared through Europe like a flame" (115). Carr complains that the Army is too busy fighting amongst itself to fight the real threat, the Nazis. By arguing amongst themselves, the British (both ancient and modern) risk the possibility of losing to their enemies because they need to be united to fight effectively, to prevent England from suffering the same fate as Spain (i.e. losing to the Fascists). Merlin then becomes a proponent of a unified Popular Front. Billany, it seems, is arguing a similar position as Priestley: that society must set aside its personal grievances in order to defeat the enemy. In Arthur's time, Merlin is the leader around which the Popular Front gathers (until Arthur is crowned); in the modern world, however, there is no leader to unify the disparate voices in Britain (an idea Billany will explore further in *The Trap*).

Comments on war permeate the narrative. After the slaughter of the Britons, Billany's attitude is clear: "Of the village which had been so happy and peaceful that morning, to-morrow there would be nothing but ashes; every man, woman, and child was

dead. The flames roared higher as the conquerors came out” (84). War is not the romantic stuff of legends but a brutal and unmerciful action. Neither are the warriors themselves viewed romantically: “He was a merciless warrior, the captain. He boasted that he never took prisoners; if his enemies fell into his hands, he killed them immediately” (82). As does later in *The Trap*, Billany is not afraid of showing the true brutality of war. Describing a battle between the Romans and the Britons, he writes,

Amidst the savage cries came more horrible sounds: the sounds of hammers breaking through bone, the screams of dying horses, and the jolting of the chariot wheels over men. Like ploughs the British chariots tore through the ranks of their enemies, leaving a furrow bounded on either side of a line of dead and wounded. (47).

These wars are fought purely for imperialistic reasons. This is an idea that Billany returns to later in the novel when the boys visit the England of King Alfred. Alfred created the Navy in order to protect the country from the Danes who turned to marauding when their population growth outpaced their ability to grow food. Alfred explains that

the Danes had to find other ways of getting food – so they turned fishermen; and that taught them to be good sailors. But still they remembered that they really were farmers, and when their ships took them right over the waters to my country of England, they looked at the fine fertile soil of the country, and the flowing rivers, and they decided they would like to have the country for themselves (129).

The Danes have forced an otherwise peaceful king to fight, for as Alfred says, “the only thing I could do, to beat off the Danes, was to meet them *before* they got to England” (129). To achieve that end, Alfred created the navy. Imperialism begets imperialism, and the British responded to a threat by mimicking the Danish actions. England, once the victims, reversed the role and became the greatest Imperialistic power since the Roman

Empire, ravaging other countries just as it was once ravaged. The great irony of it all is that Alfred built the foundation of the British Empire, the navy, and yet he is known, in the words of one of the boys, as “the dullest king in history” (126). Even their school reflects this war-like nature and has an “empty hand-grenade which usually stands on the cupboard in Mr. Rocket’s classroom” (85).

Writing and publishing the novel during the war, Billany is quite aware of the danger that faces the boys: violent death in combat. In *The Trap*, Billany will use the character of Frank Shaw to show how the war destroys boys before they have the chance to become men. War, in *The Magic Door* and *The Trap*, is merely an extension of the capitalism system. Society only recognises the boys as commodities; the irony is that these boys are the ones who fight to protect the country. These are the boys who join the Army and the Navy in order to fight to protect a society (symbolised by Rocket) that cares so little for them that it will willingly sell them into slavery. Even after they save England, Rocket sells their composition books to American millionaires for fifty thousand pounds a book after the boys become famous (191), turning their heroic deeds into commodities once again. At the end of the novel, everything returns to the way it was at the beginning. Society no longer has use for the boys and duly sends them back to school.

In spite of the fantastic elements, Billany can only achieve his purpose (an attack on British society) if the reader connects the ideas in the novel to the external world. If this connection is not made, the novel may be dismissed as mere escapism, blunting Billany’s attack. In order to force the reader to make this connection, Billany bases the

characters of the boys on the boys he taught. In his author's note at the beginning of the novel, Billany writes: "The boys in this book are real, but all their names except Jack Crossley's are fictitious. All other characters are fictitious, or historical, or both" (vi). Jack Crossley was a boy Billany taught. The use of real boys forces the reader to consider the novel in relation to Billany's contemporary society. The novel cannot be separated from 1940s Britain and seen as a self-contained and detached fantasy world. The text itself also allows the reader to make these connections. Billany's use of recognisable character types (Rocket, the winged boy, etc.), characters readers would recognise, in order to convey his political message. Billany takes almost stereotypical fantastical characters and drops them into the context of twentieth century Britain.

## Chapter Five: *The Cage*: Incarceration and Collaboration

*The Cage*, co-written with fellow prisoner David Dowie, was the first of Billany's novels to be published posthumously. The actual date of composition of the novel is difficult to tell. Internal evidence suggests that it was begun sometime around June 1943: "This book is intended to take you into the strange world where we have now been living for a year" (2). The authors themselves date their capture in Africa as "June '42, when Tobruk fell" (3). *The Cage* and Billany's other wartime novel *The Trap*, both written in the prisoner-of-war camp, are interesting to compare, as (while both are very different novels) both of them explore similar ideas. As I will show in the next two chapters, *The Trap* is a more emotional examination of British society and the effects that capitalism has on the working class than *The Cage*. *The Cage*, on the other hand, is a more intellectual, sociological, examination of British society. The prisoner of war camp acts as a microcosm of British society and is the perfect setting, as the authors recognise, "for a good deal of sociological research" (149). The setting allows for this kind of study because the men who make up the camp, coming, as they do, from different backgrounds and different classes, have a wide range of experiences and are held in a closed controlled environment. The anonymous reviewer (in a review entitled "Ordinary Prisoners") in *The Times Literary Supplement* wrote that "[t]here are no heroics in the book; it is simply the statement of the ordinary prisoner, and much of its appeal lies in that very universality" (461). The novel shows that the life of a prisoner-of-war is rather mundane. Life at the camp always begins with a tedious roll-call:

The procedure was generally the same. The *Capitano* counted us.

Magione counted us. Then a huddle formed up in the centre composed of the *Capitano*, the senior British officer, Magione, the Italian Orderly Officer, the senior British officer's adjutant, the sleek-haired little Italian who dished out the coffee and the *sergente* in charge of the messing. There was gesticulation and unintelligible cries from the Italian side, patient boredom from the English. Then they would count us again — another huddle — further panic, and a final decision that they couldn't go wrong if they called the names anyway (8).

Boredom is the chief enemy they have to fight. The authors write that they wrote the novel in the "hour we can best spare (from doing nothing, Man's noblest endeavour) [which] is the morning hour between breakfast — one biscuit — and mid-morning cocoa" (3). Prisoners became more concerned with the necessities of life. Those things that were first merely monotonous become increasingly annoying:

So roll-call was always a bore, but in later days when we began to get more Red Cross parcels, it became a damn' nuisance. Porridge, for instance, takes a long time to cook, so you had to start before roll-call (sometimes it meant getting up as early as 8 a.m.), and there was every possibility of it being burned or spoilt during roll-call. (8-9)

Life in the prisoner of war camp becomes a learning process, of finding ways of coping with these delays. The porridge problem was eventually solved, for example: "The way to get over this difficulty we discovered later was for the cook to appear for the briefest necessary time, the count, and then mingle with the parting throng as the names were called, leaving a pal to answer for him. It always worked" (9). Just as *The Trap* examines the experiences of the ordinary person, *The Cage* also shows the effects on the war on the individual. The difference between *The Cage* and *The Trap* is that *The Trap* deals with the effects on one character, Michael Carr, and those immediately surrounding him whereas *The Cage* is an attempt to give a sense of the wider effects of the war.

While the camp is only for officers, Billany and Dowie do manage, even if only briefly, to include enlisted men and foreign officers as well.

The authors themselves appear as characters in the novel. In a letter dated 18 July 1946, Major G. Matheson (who identifies himself as the “Henry” character) writes that the “‘Dan’ of the story seems to me to correspond to the real Dan: I am not so sure that the David who rebuffs the wretched Alan is so true to life, but ‘Alan’ must have been very tiresome. Apart from that David corresponds.” The character “Alan” also appears to have characteristics of the authors, especially Dan. Matheson, in the same letter, writes that much “of what Alan says is Dan’s opinions. I can’t imagine Dan and David talking like ‘Alan’ and ‘David’ either before or after the reconciliation.” In fact, most people who write on *The Cage* believe that “Alan” reflects, to a degree, the personalities of the authors, especially Billany. The reviewer in “Ordinary Prisoners” writes that Alan “is, at least partially, a self-portrait” (461). This, I think, leads the critic down the wrong path. To identify Alan as merely an extension of the authors severely limits the reading of the character. Certainly Alan and Dan do share similar views; after all, they are both Communists, and a critic would be remiss not to mention it. The advantage of creating a character like Alan, however, is that the authors can explore larger themes by contrasting the character of Alan with the characters of both Dan and David.

The novel itself is a truly collaborative effort as the manuscript (held at the Imperial War Museum in London) is written in the handwriting of both men. The effect that this dual authorship is that one consciousness does not dominate the novel. Whereas *The Trap* is dominated by the voice of Michael Carr, *The Cage* has no single

consciousness; instead, it has a variety of points of view. Because of the disintegrated form, the authors are able to enter the minds of other prisoners which allows various characters to represent a variety of political and social opinions in a way Billany could not do in *The Trap*, which is so rooted in working class experience. Through character analysis, internal monologue, and mock dramas and stories, the authors explore different views (right-wing, left-wing, and moderate) of British society. The irony is that Billany and Dowie achieve a detachment in a novel in which they feature, whereas there is no such detachment in *The Trap* in which Billany uses the literary device of a narrator. Having said that, it is important to remember that the narrative is always seen from a Marxist perspective. The authorial voice, however subtle and detached, still undermines the characters in the novel. *The Cage* is clearly intended to reflect the attitudes of the authors, as they refer to the book as “this manifesto” (8). Just as Marx and Engels write their manifesto about society so too do Billany and Dowie.

The authors achieve a distance between themselves as authors and themselves as characters in order to give them the freedom to explore other issues not related to themselves and thus are able to give those issues a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Presenting themselves as characters allows them to explore their own individual experiences, but, at the same time, they can also explore experiences that they themselves have not necessarily experienced. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth, in his discussion of *Tom Jones*, argues that

If we read straight through all of the seemingly gratuitous appearances by the narrator, leaving out the story of Tom, we discover a running account of growing intimacy between the narrator and the reader, an account with a kind of plot



of its own and a separate denouement. (216)

Like Fielding, Billany and Dowie give the reader a sense of intimacy with the reader; they want the reader to share in their personal experience of prison life. At the same time, however, just as Fielding the narrator gives the reader the story of Tom Jones, Billany and Dowie tell the stories of their fellow soldiers. In the novel, they are trying to give the reader a glimpse into the variety of experiences of being a prisoner of war. After all, each prisoner, because of his individual background and personality, has a different experience of prison life. The character of Dan becomes the political voice within the novel, while the character of David becomes the reflection of the psychological, individual experience of the prisoner. The creation of Alan allows the authors even more freedom to examine a variety of viewpoints not necessarily their own. One of those ideas (which I will explore more fully later) is homosexuality. These soldiers are suddenly thrust into a world where there are no women. Sexuality suddenly becomes even more of an issue. Eric Newby (who was in the Fontanellato prison camp at the same time as Billany and Dowie) in his book *Love and War in the Apennines* shows how difficult it was for love between the prisoners to be expressed: "Whatever loves there were between prisoners could only be expressed by looks and words or perhaps a surreptitious pressure of the hand, otherwise they had to remain locked away within the hearts and minds of the lovers" (46-47). The dual voices in the novel allows Billany and Dowie to explore several issues at the same time by comparing and contrasting different characters, different personalities, and different political perspectives. The different voices within the novel are distilled, not

through one consciousness, like *The Trap*, but through two, allowing for a less uniform but more representative view of society and the prison camp.

Wayne C. Booth writes that “An author who intrudes must somehow be interesting; he must live as a character” (219). This is certainly true of the authors/characters in *The Cage*. The individual voices of both authors can be discerned. Billany is the hardened political veteran. He is the one who David goes to for advice about Alan; David writes that “Dan [is] full of the milk of human kindness. It’s easy to talk” (105). Dan acts the school teacher with David: “Dan lectured on *Wuthering Heights* this morning. Had long argument with him afterwards about Heathcliff — I just can’t believe the character. Dan says perfectly reasonable” (103). Dan becomes the person who helps David’s emotional and intellectual development. This is not to say that David puts Dan on a pedestal. He does implicitly criticise Dan’s insistence on teaching David: “Dan talked all the way back about Etymology — Saxon words, Norman words, Viking words — very interesting, but he never stopped” (92). He also allows himself to mock Dan: “Either Beethoven is a humbug or he’s above my head. Dan liked it; paralysed look on his face during the ‘Funeral March’” (92). The second narrative voice allows the authors to mock each other, as in this case where David mocks Dan’s reaction to Beethoven. Dan is also the cynic who refuses at times to participate in the games of the other prisoners:

A cry ran down the tables — “Bint!” All heads turned to the lane behind the barbed wire, where three Italian girls were cycling past. “A pleasant sight enough,” said Henry [...] “Eyebrows, terrible black Italian eyebrows,” said Dan. “The bar of Michaelangelo. Contorted in a permanent frown, bulging ominously over the eyes like a portcullis ready to drop over the face. Faces like cliffs of coal. Terrifying. Cannibal

women. Like female spiders; they'll probably eat the male when the job's over." "I didn't notice," said David. (48)

Dan, playing the role of the cynical intellectual, is not spouting sexist rhetoric; instead, he is refusing to participate in the girl-watching with the other prisoners.

Dan oscillates between the cynic and the fool. A case in point is the section titled "Dan joins the Hawk family" when Dan shaves his head:

Mohawk had been the first to shave his head; he had done a lot of propaganda about the healthful effect of ultra-violet light on the scalp, and the convenience, in prison, of having no hair to comb or wash. In the end Bob gave way and had all his hair off, and was known henceforth as Kittyhawk, since it seemed logical to group all the shaven heads together. Dan now became one of the Hawks, but unfortunately his tribal name is unprintable. —hawk is the best we can do. This title was dropped very soon in favour of Pond Life (because he looked like a biological specimen). (31)

Dan plays the roles of the wise man or the fool depending on what tone the narrative takes. Dan's shifting role in the narrative also allows the reader to experience the various moods of the prisoners. Through Dan, the authors show that there are times when the prisoners do not want to participate in the little fun and humour that pervades the prison camp, times when they want to brood cynically, but there are also times when they allow themselves to play the fool and become the target of the jokes of the other prisoners.

David plays the role of the innocent. He is the one who must develop intellectually and emotionally. This is the reason why, as I will discuss later in the chapter, David is the one who develops a relationship with Alan (even if at first David is reluctant). David is the one who is easily impressed and wants to join in events:

Just finished reading *Health of the Future*, Penguin, by Dr. Aleck Bourne. Made a big impression on me. Passed it on to Dan. It's the sort of book he likes too, though he can

be very cynical in a sour way of his own. Discussion last night in ante-room on "Reconstruction in Post-war Europe." Asked Dan why he didn't bring his mighty brain to the debate. Apparently he's not interested — described these activities as "intellectual masturbation." Queer attitude. (95)

David is the gregarious one who is interested in all the camp activities. He does not understand Dan's cynicism because it is the opposite to his attitude. David is still full of life, seeing the wonders of the world around him, and still discovering the ways of life.

Turning to the prison camp as a whole, to conduct their sociological research, the authors use Marxist ideas to examine the social relations between their fellow prisoners. Forced into imprisonment together, the soldiers eventually realise that they must depend on each other and develop into syndicates that share the work. This communal attitude, however, must develop into maturity. Early in their time at the camp, there was no co-operative sharing:

Generally alone. That was in the early days. We were not a community. People neither knew nor trusted each other, most of us were psychologically bruised by capture. Each man shrunk into himself, and conversation was a method of holding others at a distance rather than communicating with them. There was a fear of contact. (11)

The violence and dejection of capture force the soldiers to turn in on themselves, resisting connection with the external world. This mistrust is further exacerbated by the lack of food in the camp. The Red Cross parcels they received imposed a grouping on the prisoners but did nothing to establish trust:

The fact that Red Cross parcels were divided amongst groups of five imposed an artificial grouping on us, and within the "syndicates" of five resentment at this mutual interdependence expressed itself in subdued quarrelling and distrust. We quarrelled quietly but rather bitterly over each other's manners and mannerisms, and over the division of food: and our

suppressed sense of shame mortified us afterwards. (12)

The lack of fundamental needs (in this case food) causes fractures to appear. Since the reader is intended to view the prisoner-of-war camp as a microcosm of British society, this fragmentation occurs in much the same way in British society; the capitalist class tries to destroy hegemony (to use Antonio Gramsci's terminology) in an attempt to prevent the working class from attaining class consciousness. Only when consciousness is raised do workers attempt to challenge the ruling class. In the prison camp, the scarcity of the necessities of life does not encourage the development of consciousness; it encourages the prisoners to become possessive. Marx, himself, wrote that life "is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (1977, 25). Marx argues that a person is not born with an inherent set of beliefs; the consciousness of a person is determined by his or her own personal experience. Through the way in which the prisoners are forced into separate syndicates, the authors show how the ruling class keeps the working class from developing a consciousness and, therefore, from becoming more radical. Prisoners (and by implication the working class) are so concerned with providing the essentials of life for themselves that they cannot work together to attempt an escape from the camp or fight against the authorities (or, in the case of the working class, against capitalism). In fact, there is never any real attempt at a mass escape, and the few escapes attempted are only half-hearted, and the prisoners are quickly recaptured.

This grouping into syndicates of five engrains a permanent division between syndicates. The different syndicates become factions, constantly trying to hoard food and information. The authors write that they were "like families of five, hostile to every other

family, sitting in jealous circles round their bits of food, and wrangling with themselves [...] if a syndicate found some way to bribe an Italian (with soap or coffee) to smuggle them an extra loaf, they guarded the secret like misers” (12). As the authors comment, there “could not be much genuine co-operation in such an atmosphere” (12). In the same way that social and economic groups vie for control in the capitalist society, the prisoners vie for the edge in prison life. This causes the prisoners to become further alienated from each other. Alex Callinicos writes that Marx believed that when workers “become alienated from [their] own human nature” (1996, 82) they are “also alienated from other human beings” (82). The ruling class can then dominate and control the working class. In the prisoner-or-war camp, alienation occurs because the prisoners must struggle to procure food. For Billany, as he will show in more depth in *The Trap*, Communism breaks down alienation between people by strengthening the bonds between people. Capitalism wants to increase alienation in order to control the working class in the same way as the food distribution system increases alienation among the prisoners. Moving to a new camp makes food distribution worse as they discover that “the syndicate system was to be abandoned, and all food centralized: we would not be able to divide the crumbs and lick out the tins” (89). Instead of a collective spirit, the situation in the camp forces the prisoners apart. First the prisoners are grouped by the arbitrary way in which the Red Cross packages are distributed, and then, they are separated into groups based on with whom they share a hut (93).

The quarrelling and distrust caused by the imposed society are not always subdued. Because of the lack of food and possessions, a black market develops, causing

even further tensions. At one point David recounts that the racketeer has been arrested:

“He was drunk and foul-mouthed. He had to be put out. God, he’s shocking. Everybody dislikes him, although they often make use of his black market activities” (133). David says that the reason they dislike him is that “you can always see his real opinion — contempt just masked by respect” (133). Through the racketeer, the novel shows the deep divisions between the officers and the other ranks:

So-called leaders of men who came out of their desert holes with their hands up as soon as they saw a Jerry...D’you think I was born and brought up by my mother and father for the sole purpose of wet-nursing a lot of white-livered snots who never did a useful day’s work in their lives?...Then when they want something they haven’t the intelligence to get for themselves, it’s ‘Can you spare a minute?’ (133)

The private’s comment that the officers surrendered with no fight is reminiscent of the way in which Michael Carr is captured in *The Trap*. Whereas Carr’s capture in *The Trap* serves to remove any sense of heroism from the novel, the private’s reference in *The Cage* to a similar incident underlines his bitterness and resentment at the officer class. This resentment stems from the fact that, on one hand, he is valued by the officer when, as the private soldier says, “they want something they haven’t the intelligence to get for themselves” (133), yet, on the other hand, when they no longer have any use for him, again in his words, it’s ‘Get hold of that brush and sweep this courtyard’” (133). The racketeer exposes the hypocrisy of British society (represented by the attitude of the officers toward him as a private soldier and as someone who can acquire items they need). Just as the ruling class values the working class only when the working class can

provide something useful, so too do the officers value the private soldier only when he can provide something for them.

This sense of alienation, however, does not mean that the prisoners do not develop relationships outside their syndicates. The authors say that these divisions within the prison population were “how we began. We finished differently, as you will see” (12). The prisoners recognise that “a genuine social spirit began to stir at a time when we had even less food than at first” (12). Recognising that they would get no help from the outside world, the prisoners found that they could only depend on each other. They do begin to develop a collective consciousness. This development becomes obvious when the syndicates begin to build efficient stoves. When they first arrived at the camp, the prisoners lived in primitive conditions:

In the early days cooking was very primitive and incalculable. It was just a matter of setting fire to a few twigs, and boiling the water for tea in a mess-tin or an old can. Most of the Red Cross food was eaten cold, from the tins, or perhaps you took the meat into the dining-hut and put it in the watery Italian soup we got for lunch and dinner. (14)

Eventually they learned to build stoves, improving them as they went along:

Our final stove was one of the most efficient; it had a high chimney of tin, an oven large enough to take a mess-tin, a circular recess for the brew-can (tea, cocoa, porridge) and space for two mess-tins for frying or other cooking. (14)

They are forced to evolve from the primitive stage to the advanced, almost industrial, stage. Friedrich Engels, echoing Marx, writes, the Introduction to *Dialectics of Nature* (quoted in the third volume of Marx and Engels’s *Selected Works*), that only “man” has “succeeded in impressing his stamp on nature, not only by shifting plants and animals



from one place to another, but also by so altering the aspect and climate of his dwelling place, and even the plants and animals themselves, that the consequences of his activity can disappear only with the general extinction of the terrestrial globe” (52). While the advances the prisoners have made will not last past the war, the technological improvements the prisoners make to their environment certainly shows Engels’s point. This also follows Marx’s theories on the forces and relations of production. In *The Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx*, Alex Callinicos explains Marxist theory:

Their [men and women] production has two aspects, material and social. Firstly it is the activity through which men and women seek to meet their needs by acting on and transforming nature. This implies a certain organisation of production, the possession of the appropriate tools, and so on. [These are the forces of production] Secondly, production is a social process, in which people cooperate to produce the things they need. It always involves social relations between those taking part, relations which, crucially, concern the control of the process of production and the distribution of its products. [This is the relations of production] (98)

This is part of the sociological research in which the authors engage. Thrown into a primitive state, the prisoners are forced to control the forces of production (always limited of course by the reliance on the Italians and the Red Cross for food). The authors use implicit Marxist theory to examine the way in which the prisoners adapt to their surroundings. The prisoners slowly begin to break down their alienation. They begin to rely on each other to work with whatever particular talent they had. As a result, tensions eased. Billany and Dowie write that “[d]ecisions within syndicates became easier, we learned to be properly ashamed of childishness. We wrangled less, grew up again, and acted like men” (41). The creation of the prison society means that the prisoners develop

their social skills again. In this way, they are much like children. They learn to break from their egotistical way of looking at life into the camp and grew to maturity, realising that all they had was each other. Just as Marx argues that class development is a result of industrialisation, the authors argue that without an alternative (in other words Communist alternative) the prisoners create their own basic class structure.

At first glance, it may seem that this attempt to marry Marxist thought to *The Cage* is far fetched; yet, there are enough references to Marx to conclude that the authors expect the reader to make these connections. Clearly, they are using Marxism to comment upon prison (and by extension British) society. The authors write that the “first social developments at Capua were the result of a realisation of the discomforts caused by a lack of social sense” (25). The prisoners are used to living in a society based on class structure and being in an army separated by rank. Suddenly, they are thrown into a world where those divisions are no longer so easily defined. Since the prison camp is for officers only, the prisoners find themselves in a situation where, even briefly, they are equals; the lack of other ranks eliminates the ordered structure of the military. There is true equality, a true lack of a class structure. Soon, however, a form of organisation is developed: “First came simple regulations by the S.B.O. [Senior British Officer] and his committee regarding such matters as leaving wash-basins clean, flushing latrines, and anti-fly measures” (25). Authority immediately begins to impose itself. Trained by society to expect social distinctions, they impose a structure where none exists. Shortly after, the syndicate system came into effect, creating the organisation which the prisoners felt they needed.

The representative of the capitalist system in the prison camp is Magione, the Italian interpreter, who is the prisoners' link to the black market. He is the typical petite bourgeois. The authors write that "so far as we were concerned — this Italian N.C.O. was the true commander of the camp. He had more ability, adaptability and energy than all his superiors" (35). He is like the upwardly mobile middle class. Magione is necessary for the smooth running of the camp:

When he went on leave we missed him badly. Roll-calls took twice as long, meals were not properly organized, parcels and mail were late, baths were forgotten. All the tiny things on which we were entirely depended went wrong. (35)

To his superiors, Magione is indispensable in ensuring the smooth running of the camp; he, like the middle class in a capitalist society, supports those people who are higher in the hierarchy, for he is the one who maintains the day to day running of the camp. To the prisoners, he is indispensable because he procures, for a price, the luxuries that make their life bearable. Soon, Magione develops his own little entrepreneurial business, not one on the scale of Milo Minderbinder in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, but one that is still impressive given the limited resources available to him:

The business grew till it was too big for him to handle alone. He took an Italian sergeant into partnership. Some days they filled two or three mule carts with stuff we had ordered. You couldn't expect him to do it all for nothing. We realized that the prices he quoted were a polite fiction — at the same time he did not fleece us. (36)

The prisoners become dependent upon Magione in the same way as the residents of Hunky Park are dependent upon Mr Price, the pawnbroker, in Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*. The working class through its relationship with the middle class become

trapped within the capitalist society, and through their relationship with Magione and the black market, the prisoners become trapped within their microcosmic capitalist society. The prisoners are so indoctrinated into the system that they even convince themselves that it is natural for Magione to profit from their hardship.

The structure of the novel reflects the intentions of the authors. In *English Fiction of the Second World War*, Alan Munton writes that *The Cage* “is an example of one of the oldest literary forms, the Roman *satira* or satire in which the author is free to bring in all kinds of writing — prose or verse — in pleasurable confusion” (55). The authors use letters, diary entries, and even, at times, dramatic dialogue. The stylistic variety of the novel, in part, is a result of the way it was written. Alan Munton writes that the novel “was evidently begun without any sense of what its ending might be” (55). The authors clearly had no immediate narrative plan; at the beginning of *The Cage*, they write that they “are not so much in earnest. An hour a day, or less, is sufficient time to put in a book which may never get out of Italy” (3). There is no real attempt at bringing a sense of unity to the novel. This lack of unity may be, in part, a result of the fact that the book may never get out of Italy. Yet, this reason does not fully explain the fragmentary nature of the novel. After all, Billany also wrote *The Trap*, in which he does not use a fragmented narrative structure, while a prisoner. Clearly, then, in *The Trap*, Billany is consciously creating a unified vision of British society, but in *The Cage*, Billany and Dowie attempt to represent all the disparate voices that make up British society.

The disjointed, disintegrated structure of the novel reflects life in the prisoner-of-war camp, which are equally disjointed, disintegrated. The prisoners’ entire wartime

service has forced them to move from one alien environment to another. The frantic pace of the war never gives them the time to adjust to their surroundings. First, as combatants, they were thrust into the alien desert environment. As a result, the landscape becomes a potent symbol for the alienation from the world felt by the prisoners. Even in *The Trap*, before Carr's capture, Billany examines the oddness of the landscape:

The only thing I recall of our journey, next day, to the front line, is a halt at an immense track-junction in the desert, and reading on a signboard the startling name KNIGHTSBRIDGE. Later I found that the Libyan desert had its Piccadilly, its Oxford Circus, its Leicester Square and its Hyde Park Corner — most of them lonely, cairn-marked cross-roads where no traffic ever roared except the occasional dusty desert truck. Their silence and their immense loneliness gave tragedy to the dear homely names they bore. (246)

The landscape reflects the disjointed nature of the lives of the soldiers. On one level, there are the English names on a very un-English landscape. The soldiers in their attempt to remind themselves of their homes may call a place Piccadilly or Oxford Circus, but, clearly, the North African desert is neither of those places. So the very place names, which are intended to remind them of home, merely alienates the soldiers. On another level, there is the added danger that the names convey, especially that of Knightsbridge. Knightsbridge is one of the battles in which Rommel defeated the British in May 1942. Carlo D'Este, in "The Army and the Challenge of War 1939-1945", writes that the Germans destroyed "the Gazala Line [the British main defensive line] at a defensive position called Knightsbridge" (276). The battle at Knightsbridge was key to the German victory that ended with the fall of Tobruk. There is a sense of irony, therefore, that one of the signs comes to represent the attack in which Michael Carr (and Billany) is captured.

This sense of landscape representing the disjointed effect surfaces again in a passage from *The Cage*:

Benghazi and the yellow coast of Africa sloped away under the black wing [of the aircraft that brought them to Italy]. The Mediterranean from our altitude was no more interesting than an infinitely flat blue skin. At last we were over the heel of Italy. David thought that the fields, the roads, the clustered villages and churches and the grey-white towns of Italy, seen from so high were the most beautiful of sights. I did not think so, I can think of more beautiful things. (3)

Just as suddenly they are whisked away from the desert landscape and thrust into the new more lush landscape of Italy. The landscape becomes a very important symbol in *The Cage*. In the passage just quoted, the character Dan reflects on the changes in the landscape. Dan's reflection is not that the landscape is not beautiful but that Italy now represents the upcoming imprisonment. When he says that he can think of more beautiful things than the view outside the window, the implication is that he is thinking of freedom. This disintegration becomes more pronounced as the novel progresses.

Alan Munton writes that "Capua [the first POW camp they are sent to] had been primarily the physical experience of adjustment to prison, whilst Rezzanello [the camp they are sent to in the second half of the novel] was to demand a psychological and emotional adjustment" (56). Munton takes his starting point from the authors themselves when they write that "Capua represented the period of physical readjustment to prison. The section which now follows [concerning their time at Rezzanello] must deal principally with emotional and psychological reassessments: that, at any rate, is our summary of prison life over a long period" (87). Munton seems to misinterpret the authors's point slightly. Munton feels that there was no psychological adjustment. Yet,

it seems to me, that Munton's distinction between the two camps is too simplistic and that, despite what he says, both camps require physical and psychological adjustment.

Consider the thoughts of the prisoners as they arrive at Capua, their first prisoner camp:

When we went in through the big gate of the camp, into the ring of barbed wire, we wondered for how long. How long before the gates opened on us again. We seemed simply to be marching out of the world, marching into storage till the war was over. (5)

This passage indicates more than a mere physical adjustment to life in the camp. The prisoners are entering into their own world. The external world beyond the barbed wire now continues without them, and they must try to adapt to that knowledge. The sentence "We seemed simply to be marching out of the world, marching into storage till the war was over" shows the beginning of the psychological adjustment, the realisation that the world will pass them by, that they will no longer be a part of the world. This is a psychological and emotional adjustment to the first camp. Similarly, the adjustment to the second camp requires a physical reorientation as well. The difference is, as the authors write, the second camp requires psychological *reassessment*. When they enter the first camp, the prisoners are unsure how long they will be there. By the time they get to the second camp, the realisation sets in that they may never get home. The force of the realisation is greater because of their new surroundings:

I looked for a long time at the Alps from the ante-room window. I turned to go away and came back to look again. The morning sun was shining on the cold peaks. Magnificent old barren peaks. "You'll never get out", said the voice inside me. (95)

The Alps become a symbol for freedom. This is similar to what J.R. Watson identifies in the Romantic writers, stating that the Romantics associate nature with "health, both

physical and spiritual” (51). This stems from, in Watson’s words, “a love of fresh air, movement, cleanness, and freedom” (51). Byron points to those very ideas in “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”:

I live not in myself, but I become  
 Portion of that around me; and to me  
 High mountains are a feeling, but the hum  
 Of human cities torture: I can see  
 Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be  
 A link reluctant in a fleshly chain.  
 Class’d among creatures, when the soul can flee,  
 And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain  
 Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain. (III. st 72)

Here Byron equates nature with feeling, the city with torture. Nature is true freedom.

Byron’s only regret is that he is trapped within his fleshly body and can only truly become one with nature when he dies and his soul is released. The prisoners in the camp do not even have the chance to engage with the beauty of nature. While only his flesh separates the poet from nature, the prisoners have the added separation of barbed wire.

Whereas early in *The Cage* the beauty of Italy is used comically to show the ignorance of those back in England. At the end of the novel the splendid landscape is a reminder of the contrast between the freedom the Alps represent and the soldiers’s imprisonment.

The prisoners are so close to the beautiful mountains, yet they are not allowed the freedom to enjoy them. The contrast between their situation and the freedom represented by the mountains suddenly makes the prisoners realise that they may never enjoy freedom again. This realisation has an added poignancy when one remembers that neither Billany nor Dowie returned to England, their ultimate fate still unknown. By the time they reach Rezzanello, hope is beginning to wane among the prisoners. Suddenly they must adapt to



the possibility of an extended period of time in prison in a way they never had to at Capua which they had been told was merely a transit camp and “we should be there a month” (5). Rezzanello, however, is not a transit camp. At Capua, they can still convince themselves that they are in the camp only temporarily. The prisoners have no such illusion at Rezzanello, and they are finally forced to confront their imprisonment.

The tone is, in some ways, less serious than *The Trap*. The novel, in Munton’s words, “begins playfully, having nowhere to go” (55). Certainly it does begin with a comic letter to David from his Aunt. As Munton points out the comedy comes from David’s Aunt’s complete “inability to understand what imprisonment means” (55). After expressing relief that he is alive, his Aunt tells him that his Uncle’s advice is to “See all those beautiful Cathedrals and Roman Ruins...beautiful...Regard it as a Heaven-sent opportunity rather than a...” (1). Yet as playful as it begins, the authors undercut that playfulness more than Munton seems to indicate. Immediately after the letter, the authors interject their own voices: “*David*. Well, I see nothing to laugh at. *Dan*. I was not laughing” (2). Naturally Dan would not laugh because, while on the surface the letter is funny, the underlying truth is not so funny. Those at home do not realise the truth of captivity, a truth Dan knows all too well. The authors tell the reader the truth:

we — teachers, bank-clerks, managing-directors, architects, commercial travellers, regular soldiers and all — go down into the yard to be counted. Sentries stand outside the wire edge of the world. Numbers checked, we are almost free again to move almost a hundred yards in almost any direction (2).

The key words in that passage are “almost free”. While Italy may certainly be a beautiful country, the prisoners are not in a position to enjoy the pleasures the country has to offer. Their world is a world surrounded by barbed wire and armed sentries.

In an ironically humorous section of the novel, the authors pose some questions on elementary geography. Through this, they show the reader what constitutes their world : seventy yards square surrounded by barbed wire. They completely have to redefine their world: “If, like Columbus, you went to the west, without turning to one side or the other, what would you come to? Barbed wire” (11). Their world shrinks. The population of this new world is one hundred and fifty and only one sex. They are now physically in a world of their own. For them, the world has narrowed so considerably that they are effectively shut off from the larger world.

Their isolation is so complete that even those from the external world have no real influence on the world of the prison, even if they are supposed to help the prisoners. As an example of this, the authors describe a visit from a Swiss representative of the Red Cross. The character Dan observes, “Deaf in one ear [...] Might have a symbolic significance” (39). The visit becomes a contest for the attention of the representative between those running the camp and the prisoners. The prisoners do their best to look miserable: “Buck [one of the prisoners], clad only in a pair of shorts, ripped one leg of these and padded about in bare feet and a ragged black beard. He was a heartrending sight as he trotted in the wake of the party. We persevered with our miserable expressions” (39). The prisoners, of course, have no power to convince the official that the prison needs improvements. The Italians, with access to more resources can show the

representative what he wants to see: “They went to the cookhouse and he [the representative] tasted the lunch. He nodded approval, he thought it good for a prison camp. It was good, the best lunch we ever had at Capua” (40). The Swiss representative, implicitly in collusion with the Italians by not attempting a deeper investigation of camp conditions, has no significant role in the new world of the prison. The external world has no direct influence on their world of the prison camp.

This sense of isolation is reinforced by the fact that the Italians seem to have no interest in the war. Magione, the camp interpreter and the prisoners’ link to the black market, believes that the war “was not his war, it was just a state of *difficulty* for which nobody was to be blamed, and from which nobody was likely to benefit” (37). In many ways, Magione’s attitude is the same attitude that Billany expresses in *The Trap*. Neither see the war as benefiting either side of the conflict. The difference is that Magione is far more blasé about assigning blame. Billany, as I will show later in the discussion of *The Trap*, is far more strident in arguing that capitalism is to blame for the war and the effect it has on those exempt from social power, especially the working class. Magione is not the only Italian to have this attitude. The authors write that Charlie, who served behind the counter at the canteen, “wasn’t much interested in the war; it was far too confusing” (49). The lack of interest on the part of the Italians adds to the prisoners’ sense of separation from the external world, as their only link to the external world (the Italians) is unwilling to act as any kind of liaison between the prisoners and the world beyond the camp. In the absence of physical connection with the outside world, news and information of the world beyond the barbed wire must substitute for actual experience

and the prisoners must rely on the Italians for news from the outside. Yet the Italians are unwilling to discuss the war as, in some ways, they are prisoners just as the British soldiers are. Charlie, for example, “sulked because he had been promised a discharge from the Army, and as is the way in most armies, it was a long time in coming” (49). Even Magione gives the prisoners very little news when he returns from leave: “No, Magione had not enjoyed his leave. He came back rather depressed. Traffic in Italy was badly disorganized, he had spent four of his six days travelling” (36). The Italians are more concerned with the impact of the war on their own lives than with providing the prisoners with information. This reluctance to talk adds to the sense that the camp is a world of its own, as both the prisoners and the guards, either willingly or not, have no information from the outside world.

While there is a separation from the external world, the prisons are still aware that a world outside the barbed wire does exist. Even if they are not a part of that world, they are still connected, still affected, by that world, even if only indirectly. After all, the length of their imprisonment is determined by what happens in the external world (in other words, in the war). There is constant reference to the war. The awareness of the war become increasingly intense as the Allied forces get closer. In David’s diary (which makes up part of the second half of the novel), he writes, in the entry for 3 January 1943, “Strong bombing raid last night. Turin? Windows and doors rattled continuously. Queer feeling to know that countrymen sixty miles away last night had breakfast this morning in England” (103). The difference between the airmen who bomb Italy and the prisoners is striking. The airmen have a freedom that the prisoners do not, the freedom to enjoy a

connection with England. The prisoners cannot even feel a sense of connection with the British airmen. David feels this difference even more in the entry dated 5 January, when he receives a letter from his girlfriend Jill: “First since October 22nd. Reminded me of my promise not to be away for more than two years. Time up May 28th. Never can tell” (103-104). At the end of *The Trap*, the character Michael Carr receives a letter from his wartime bride, Elizabeth. This gives Carr, also in a prisoner-of-war camp, the feeling that he is connected to the world beyond the barbed wire; for Carr, the receipt of the letter is a moment of profound joy. Here in *The Cage*, however, the receipt of a letter serves the opposite purpose. The letter from Jill underlines David’s separation from her and the world in which she lives, reinforcing his sense of isolation. The letter reminds David of promises made in the past and the rupture the war has caused in his relationships.

Still, the outside world can give them hope. Dan conveys the excitement felt among the prisoners when Mussolini loses power in Italy:

we went out for our walk. The villagers looked at us with restrained curiosity and an air of inward excited gaiety. Or did we read that into their looks? — it’s hard to say. I’m sure everybody, they and us, felt queer — a bubbling-champagne sense of excitement. John could not stop giggling with excitement as we passed through the villagers — some of the village girls were infected by his uncontrollable grinning, and they laughed too. The end of Fascism. That impossible mask had fallen off at last from the warm, laughing face of Italy. (170)

Alan Munton writes that one reason for the references to the fall of Mussolini and the advancement of the Allied forces “are all kept in view, so that life is shown as being lived within politics” (59). Dan has a double reason for being excited. As a Communist, he revels at the fall of a Fascist state, and, as a prisoner, he can finally look forward to the

possibility of release. Later in the novel, Henry adds to that hope by relating the Allied success in battle and the appearance of British bombers:

Portents in the sky! Last week Sicily fell to the British. This morning, between cocoa and lunch-time, we saw a hundred British bombers. The first British aircraft we have seen for sixteen months. The emotional effect, after the steady accumulation of Allied advances from Alamein to Sicily, was remarkable. (180)

Hope, the one thing the prisoners learned to live without, is returning. For the first time since their capture, they could let themselves believe that the end was near. The truth is that the end is not near, as after the Italians surrendered many prisoners escaped only to be recaptured by Germans or, perhaps like Billany and Dowie, killed trying to evade recapture. This irony is not felt by the characters in the novel; only the reader knows that, for some, this sense of hope is false, as many of them (like Billany and Dowie) will never return to England even after Italy's surrender. Even Dan recognises that many of the prisoners will not be truly free: "Soon now we shall go out from here — back into the world. How many of us will be truly freed — none, I suppose. But some must have gained a certain freedom from prison; the prison walls and wire must have helped them out of the prison of distrust" (157).

Just as Billany does in *The Trap*, Billany and Dowie undermine the belief that the war unified British society. The idea that this is a people's war against fascism is false. Billany and Dowie show that extreme right wing thought does exist in Britain, a point of view represented by the character of Ted. Ted Braithwaite, a thirty-five year old Captain in the Tank Corps who is an ex-commercial traveller, represents the fringe elements in

British society. His views are somewhat odd. The issue of how others refer to him reflect his strange attitudes:

“Excuse me, old boy,” said Ted, “I happen to resent being addressed by my surname. You may call me Ted, or you may call me Captain Braithwaite. I’m quite impartial, but I would prefer you not to address me in future by my surname alone.” (23-24)

This seems to be a strange area of contention. There seems to be no real reason why Ted does not like to be called by his surname alone. It is not a case of military respect, as he is quite happy to be addressed as “Ted”. Instead, it seems to be merely a personal eccentricity. This personal eccentricity represents something more sinister. The authors raise this personal eccentricity from an amusing trait to a more dangerous attitude. The authors enter Ted’s consciousness. He comments,

No wonder things are what they are. Bad to worse. It’s this easygoing business. *Laissez-faire*, um? And the riff-raff get control. What’s the world coming to? What’s England coming to? Subversive elements in positions of trust. An avowed Communist, a man who admits -- nay, glories in it. Boasts of it -- a *schoolteacher*! God above, it makes you *boil*. A man like that. No reverence, no respect, no loyalty, no patriotism; to have the care of our children. *My children*. (71)

While he is no Nazi, Ted does believe in at least part of the fascist ideology, that of strong discipline; he is not arguing for the status quo. In some ways, Ted’s argument resembles the Communist argument, especially in the insistence on discipline. Many right-wing and left-wing commentators deal with the same issues, pointing to the same problems within society. For example, in *The Trap*, Billany examines many of the same ideas that the conservative Evelyn Waugh examines in his fiction. Ted shows that discontent does not necessarily lead to Communism but can lead to fascism. The authors reject Ted’s view of

society because of Ted's intolerance of other people. For Billany especially, true Communism is concerned with strengthening the bonds between people; in *The Cage*, the character Dan states that "human beings should cherish the human life in each other, and love all things human" (156). The bond between people is an idea that Billany will develop in more depth in *The Trap*. Unlike, perhaps, other Communists, Billany's dislike of people like Ted come not necessarily from dogmatic ideological differences between the left and the right in society but from Ted's negative attitude toward others.

Not only is Ted disgusted with Dan and Alan's Communist beliefs, but he is also disgusted with English society in its present condition, which allows "the riff-raff [to] get control". Ted is arguing for a British dictatorship and says "It's all well and good blaming Hitler, but we could do with a bit of dictatorship in England. The mailed fist, that's the only thing they understand. Force" (71). The authors show that England has the same fascist attitudes that Germany does, that England must not be fooled and be vigilant against the attitudes that Ted holds. Ted's biggest concern is, of course, that Alan and Dan are schoolteachers, as he recognises that they, like Rocket in *The Magic Door*, can affect the attitudes of the children who are the next generation and can alter British society. Ted stresses a point that Billany does in his work: the importance of education. Both believe that political and moral direction come through education; the classroom becomes an ideological battleground. In *The Magic Door*, Billany argues that capitalism maintains its hold on society through the indoctrination of children. In Ted's view, Dan and Alan use the schoolroom to perpetuate their own personal grudges against society:

The Empire puts itself at the mercy of International Communism.



Out for what they can get, every one of them. But in the *schools*!  
 The clever-clever, atheistic, left-wing, arty sort; a grudge against  
 the world. Corrupting the children we pay them to teach. A  
 sacred trust. No loyalty. Agitators, corner-boys, wall-proppers,  
 dole-signers, unemployed and unemployable scum. (71)

Ted's position is undermined by his seeming loss of control, ending what can only be called as a rant by shifting his argument from schoolteachers to a general attack on the poor. The words "No loyalty" are where the shift occurs. Ted lashes out at teachers, Communists, and the poor for what he sees as a betrayal of all things British.

Ted is totally self-absorbed. He takes no interest in the world around him. When the group of men discuss the best way to eat the little food that they get (whether they should save some, eat it all at once), Ted (who eats his food immediately) shows his total indifference to others:

I come to eat my own food, not to watch other people.  
 I don't feel the *least shadow* of envy when you people  
 are eating and I'm not. I've *had* mine, and that's enough  
 for me. I don't grudge any man his food. I don't even  
 notice whether you others are eating or not. I'm perfectly  
 content with my mug of tea and my cigarette. (24)

While this seems like a reasonable attitude at first, it soon becomes clear that Ted's attitude is not based on reason but his total disconnection with the world around him. His disconnection is so extreme that he fails to acknowledge his situation:

So far as I'm concerned, old boy, since I must, I'm just  
 as content to spend the summer here as a hole in the desert.  
 As I look at it, this is not imprisonment. It's a rest cure.  
 It's only a prison to those who make it so. (40)

On the surface Ted's attitude seems one of acceptance, coming to terms with his imprisonment ("I'm just as content to spend the summer here as a hole in the desert"),

but, in reality, it is a denial of his situation. While it may be better to be relatively safe in a prisoner-of-war camp, to refer to it as a “rest cure” is a pure rejection of his circumstances.

Henry, a lieutenant, is a different and more moderate person; he is thirty-two and is an ex-manager of a confectionery works. Billany and Dowie describe him as “Middle-class liberal, tolerant, reasonably religious, believing in free trade and the small manufacturer” (18). Whereas Ted represents the more radical right-wing disgruntled with the status quo, Henry represents the status quo, one of the shopkeepers at war as Orwell might have called him. Henry has his own personal oddities. Whereas Ted’s eccentricity involves how he is addressed, Henry’s concerns tea. In the tea-brewing process, the authors say that Henry is “a precisian, a stickler” (15). They continue to say that his belief was that to “brew tea boiling water was necessary. When we pointed to the bubbles he said that was merely a little oxygen being expelled from the water, and did not constitute ebullition. It was not even (he said) in a state of turbulence” (15). Henry is completely inflexible.

Henry is much like William Bailey who put Jack Kirby in danger in *The Opera House Murders*. Henry is “completely, absolutely, benevolently, devoutly middle-class” (23). Henry’s attitude is also an attitude that people must be guarded against because they are content with the way English society is, the society that Billany rages against in *The Trap*. Henry’s biggest problem is his insistence that people hide their problems, or as he says not expose their souls (144). Echoing the description of Bailey, Henry says that “I am a true liberal, ‘of the old school’ as they say: but if people show too much of what

need not be there, I am not bound to applaud. There are no human problems which cannot be solved by the intellect: or if there are, people should keep them to themselves” (145). Henry would rather ignore the larger problems of society than confront those problems in the hope of solving them. His attitude is, as he says, “Live and let live, of course” (145). Henry’s attitude is more dangerous than Ted’s attitude because, in Billany and Dowie’s view, Henry’s attitude is far more common. Ted has fewer passages devoted to him; he hovers around the narrative (this is quite literal in the tea-making scene) but rarely influences it. Ted, in this way, is much like the extreme right of British society: always there but largely on the fringe. Henry’s main problem is that he does not seem to concern himself with the problems of others. As the writer of the review “Ordinary Prisoners” points out, Henry is “the only character who survives, perhaps as a foil, into Part 2” (461). Henry survives because, as a middle class liberal, he represents the general attitude of the British people more than Ted does. For the authors, it is far more important to argue against Henry’s attitude than it is to fight Ted’s attitude. Ted, after all, represents a small minority, while Henry represents mainstream attitudes. True change comes from convincing people like Henry that society is flawed and needs to be changed. So Henry does act as a foil to the political attitudes of the authors.

Henry’s problem, in Billany and Dowie’s view, is that he lacks emotion and disapproves of anyone else revealing emotion. To make this explicit, the authors show his attitude toward music and poetry. Henry is quite willing to recognise the design of music, but he comments “why people should read a lot of profundity into music I do not know. Never content to take what’s there; they have to put something extra into it,

apparently for the absurd pleasure of getting it out again” (145). Like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Henry misses the essential ingredient in music: passion and feeling. Henry argues that he can intellectually recognise structure in music, but “one doesn’t go pale with emotion; Beethoven should not be an excuse for hysteria” (145). Through the deliberate use of Beethoven, a composer renowned for the passion and emotion in his music, as an example, the authors show that Henry really does not understand music (certainly not Beethoven’s music) and, by extension, life. Although Beethoven was not some kind of proto-Communist, he still held what for his time were revolutionary ideas. In her book *Beethoven and the Age of Revolution*, Frida Knight writes that what Beethoven “read and heard about the French Revolution inspired visions of justice and freedom, of equality and decent conditions for the under-privileged, and offered guiding lines for behaviour from which he would never swerve” (19). Beethoven, himself, in a letter (dated 22 May, 1793) to A. Vocke, wrote, “Precepts. To do good whenever one can, to love liberty above all else, never deny the truth, even though it be before the throne” (1985, 6). He dedicated his Third Symphony to Napoleon in the belief that Napoleon would remain faithful to the ideals of the French Republic. Antony Hopkins, in *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven*, writes that “Napoleon’s hold on Beethoven’s imagination seems [...] to have been not so much as a man (certainly not as a conqueror) but as a symbol of Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood” (60). Beethoven later removed the dedication when Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. In the mind of the authors (and Billany, according to his sister, was a great music lover), Henry’s insistence in draining any emotion from music shows his basic misunderstanding of humanity. Henry

comments that the “heart cannot receive messages. It is an instrument for pumping blood” (145). Henry is, of course, far too literal; he is unable to see beyond the physical construction of music. To remove passion and feeling from music is to remove the humanity from music.

This is the case for poetry as well. Henry says that “I have now had a year in which to listen to Dan explaining what poetry is, and the impression I come away with is that poetry is an arrangement of words in a pattern more or less corresponding to simple melody” (145-146). On one level, this is precisely what poetry is. After all, on a basic level, poetry is an arrangement of words set to a metre (or melody, as Henry puts it). On another level, however, poetry is a concentrated way of expressed intense emotion. Significantly, Henry uses two of the Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Keats, to prove his point. About Wordsworth, Henry states that “I have honestly tried to see what there was in the *Intimations of Immortality*: I’ve listened whilst it has been read; I’ve read it, and I’ve listened to an analysis of it. I’m bound to say that at the end of all I see nothing there at all. Not a thing” (146). Turning to Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, he comments that “So far as I can see, the only thing Keats has done is to take simple statements and contort them to fit a prearranged metrical frame” (146). Keats, according to Henry, is “merely selecting words with romantic association: ‘My heart aches,’ etc., produces a beautiful coloured, stagy effect, but no truth or usefulness in it at all” (146). Henry’s attitude is that if he cannot see the beauty, the emotion, in art, then it is not there. Poetry and music are used in *The Cage* in the same way that Shakespeare uses Shylock’s order for Jessica to lock his casements “when you hear the drum/and the vile squealing of the

wry-necked fife" (II.5.29-30). Henry's view of music and poetry becomes an arid desert of mathematical design. Henry rejects the strong feelings associated with art because, he argues, "[s]trong feelings are a menace, because you never know into what abyss of the ridiculous or the obscene they will bring you" (144-145). This certainly appears to be Billany's comment on Henry. Billany, never an adherent to Socialist realism, recognises the basic worth of expressing emotion in art.

There is a contradiction in Henry, which he half-recognises. Henry remarks that "Dan adopts precisely the same attitude towards religion, and because I can't show him the Omnipotent he concludes that I am seeing something that does not exist" (146). Henry maintains his belief in God, even though, as Dan points out, God cannot be seen. Henry only half-recognises this by saying, "Sauce for the Goose, I suppose" (146). Henry allows this contradiction within himself because he does not think about himself or the attitudes he holds. He is unable to consider someone else's position, if that position contradicts his own. He says, "I dislike hearts and souls, they are embarrassing" (147). Henry actively resents it when people attempt to put into objects things he cannot see, when others, as he puts it, "read their own feelings into music, verse and Nature itself" (147). He says that others "even put a Man in the Moon — or worse, a Woman" (147). Anything that has a feeling attached to it is repulsed by Henry.

This attitude even determines his relations with his fellow prisoners, as this is the criteria with which he judges them. Dan is the one character whom Henry particularly objects to: "Dan has a most objectionable habit, now and then, of saying things which are creepily intimate" (147). While he dislikes Communism, Dan's Communist attitudes are

not the reason's for Henry's objection to Dan. Henry, after all, believes in tolerance. Instead, Dan's predilection for revealing the emotional truth behind things that Henry dislikes. Dan's attitude is, in his own words, that someone "should be able to drop *all* screens and defences. That people should not be afraid of each other" (156). This attitude is repellent to the repressed Henry. For Henry, people should not reveal their innermost thoughts. Henry comments that "It's bad enough to blush, but to be told why you blushed is intolerable" (147). For Henry, emotions are to be kept under control, and if, for some reason, a person should accidentally show emotion, those around that person should ignore the momentary lapse. Dan, going against standard Communist thought that individual thoughts and emotions should be suppressed for the good of the state, believes that the expression of individualism is what truly frees humans, what makes living truly worthwhile.

Here Billany shows his break with Communist ideology. At a time when Communists were expelled from the party for deviating from Communist party line (a fate that befell Edward Upward and his wife Hilda Percival), Billany is arguing against a single-minded devotion to the Party. Billany is quite willing to allow individual personal expression in art. Just as Gramsci felt that literature of all kinds expanded one's mind, so too does Billany recognise the inherent value in the writings of authors such as Wordsworth and Keats. In *The Opera House Murders*, Robbie Duncan, a man who tries to follow the Communist ideals at almost any cost, expresses his love of Keats (16). The irony is that Billany whose political beliefs are defined by theoretical dogma is far more

open-minded and accepting of the varieties of human expression than Henry whose political beliefs lack a similarly organised theoretical position.

Henry has fewer disagreements with David and Alan. Henry believes that David does not have “that morbid, experimental interest in himself” (147). He calls David a “Clean-limbed English type” (147). He commends David for having “no reservations in him” (147). The irony is that Henry himself is very reserved, and he condemns Dan for the very thing that he praises David: a lack of reservation. The difference, of course, is that Henry believes that David, unlike Dan, has no emotional side to his personality. Henry says that David has “a childlike naïveté which is not embarrassing because he has nothing embarrassing to express” (147). Alan is, in Henry’s words, “absolutely free from emotions, and this makes him very satisfactory to talk to” (147). On one level, this is the authors having a joke at their own expense, by making derogatory comments about themselves. On another level, however, it shows Henry’s complete misunderstanding of his fellow prisoners. Alan’s increasing attachment to David shows that Alan is far from being the unemotional person Henry suspects him to be. This reinforces Henry’s repressed nature. He is able to talk to David because Henry mistakenly believes that David lacks emotion. His misunderstanding of David’s nature, granted less strident than Dan’s, represents his misunderstanding of society (that society is better when it represses emotion).

*The Cage*, for all its sociological research and Marxist theory, is more than just a political examination of society. The novel also explores the complex personal relationships between the prisoners. As a result, a large part of the second half of the



novel is concerned with the growing relationship, apparently homosexual, between David and Alan. Munton writes that homosexuality “among male prisoners has been an impossible subject for war fiction, which is either resolutely heterosexual or silent on such matters” (56). Munton reads more into the relationship than just an exploration of homosexuality among male prisoners. He states that it is “possible to read the relationship between Alan and David as political rather than ‘moral’” (59). Munton believes this for two reasons. First the relationship is set within a political context: the fall of Mussolini and the approach of the Allied forces from the south. Second, when analysing his feelings toward David, Alan says “Philosophers interpret the world, but it is also necessary to change it” (181) which is a reference to the eleventh of Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it” (1977: 15). Munton concludes that Billany and Dowie attempt to “apply Marx’s materialist philosophy of the dialectic to personal relations” (59). What Munton does not explain is how the dialectic is applied and what the authors hope to accomplish with the use of Marx’s material philosophy within the personal relationship between Alan and David. It appears, however, that Munton intends to show that Billany and Dowie argue that Marx’s philosophy is applicable not only to economic relations but to personal relations as well. Through this, they can show that Marx’s philosophy is an universal philosophy that can apply to all spheres of society. This is, I think, overstating the issue. The novel, and certainly Billany’s view of Communism, is inherently concerned with the personal connections between people and not just political ideology.

Alan's continued infatuation with David has more to do with psychological development than with political development. Munton is incorrect merely to attempt to apply Marxist ideology to the relationship. Certainly Billany, as stated previously, and presumably Dowie would reject this simplistic view of human relationships. Billany is not some mouthpiece for Communist dogma and neither is Dowie. With the character of Alan, the authors can dramatically show how prison life changes a person. Dan himself recognises a change within him: "Prison has changed me pretty deeply. I feel as if a human heart had been born inside me, where before there was only an instrument for circulating blood. And sometimes I feel tender enough to weep — the still, sad music of humanity and so on" (157). For Dan, prison camp has increased his ability to feel for his fellow humans. For Alan, prison life, and his infatuation for David, allow him to understand himself. Alan realises through his relationship with David that "I've been misunderstanding myself. Sex be damned" (182). Alan realises that his view of his infatuation has been wrong: "A woman substitute? A mother-substitute, I reckon. Yes, by God, *that's* the source of my longing to sleep in his arms. By God, of course it is. What a bloody fool I was not to see it" (182). Alan realises that his attachment comes not from sexual desire but from a desire to feel a mother's love, a desire he has transferred to David. This is not a political change, as Munton would argue, but a personal one.

Billany and Dowie use Alan and David to explore the relations between men. In the end, both men realise that it is possible for two men to have an intense non-sexual relationship. Billany argues a similar position in *The Trap* when Carr discusses his childhood attractions which includes a boy named Joey: "I next fell in love when I was

thirteen, with the boy who shared my desk at school. His name was Joey (I must not give his surname, and don't care to invent a name for him)" (19). Just as the young Micheal Carr can fall in "love" with a male schoolmate, so to can Alan "love" David. Neither, however, are sexual relationships. Carr recognises that relationships lose meaning over the years and writes, "I remember plenty about my love for Joey, but it would not seem much in the writing, and anyway I have an inward reluctance to drag out details which probably wouldn't be understood, and wouldn't seem significant even to me if I put them in black and white" (19). One reason for Carr's reluctance to name Joey is that neither he nor the reader will understand the relationship properly. His reluctance stems from the possibility that an adult, even he himself, would interpret the relationship in sexual terms, when, fact, it is merely one of those youthful attachments. Carr, after all, makes no distinction between the love for Joey and the love for the "little brown-haired girl in a blue dress, who lived in the next street but one" (18). His love for Joey becomes one of those past loves which has lost its significance over the years. Billany uses Carr to show that society's view of human relationships is far too narrow. Both author and narrator argue that people should be allowed to express their feelings, whether homosexual or not.

These intense relationships are often mistaken for sexual attractions. Even Alan and David themselves interpret Alan's affections as sexual. Both eventually change their views. Alan is forced to reevaluate the relationship when David rejection of him. David's rejection is based on three factors. First, David has always been heterosexual; he dreams about women while in the prison camp (135). Second, he is trying to break Alan's dependence on him because, as he complains to Dan, "I get my leg pulled on his

account enough already” (105-106). Thirdly, David is put off by Alan’s dependence on him: “Well, I’ve got a dog. It’s name is Alan. I think it’s a lost dog. It follows me everywhere and won’t leave me” (106). David’s actions are defined by his personal response to those around him: a heterosexual society that teases David because of Alan’s perceived homosexual attentions. When Alan repeats Marx’s comment that philosophers need to change the world rather than merely interpret it, he utters it with a new sense of personal identity. He realises that issues, both personal and social, must be confronted and seen for what they truly are. Through Alan’s personal epiphany, the novel reaffirms the view of the authors that the ignorant view of Henry and those other “true liberals” like him are fundamentally wrong and that people must do more than ignore human problems in the hope that they will go away. People must try to change the world and solve those problems.

David, also, learns to accept Alan’s attentions for what they are. David recognises that “we had never been in communication — we had been speaking different languages” (188). This recognition that the fundamental problem between the two men was a difference of definition. David says that

was what hurt — that I had been so callous, that I must be, that he had forced me to be callous, that I had rejected all, because he could not stop himself dramatizing his deep truthful affection for me — because he deceived himself and called it, in his inexperience, “love” — “love”, the word which held such different associations for us two — no, we had not been talking the same language — “love”, which he made me say “unhealthy”, which had made me say, “he is using you as a substitute for the women he’s never had”, which scared me away to hide silent and unresponsive behind my defences. (188-189)

David acknowledges that he was wrong to sexualise Alan's feelings for him. For David, "love" meant "sexual love" when, in fact, Alan's feeling had no sexual basis. The novel ends with a new understanding and devotion between the two men:

I *would* take his hand. I *would* lead him back to the world of life. I would never desert him now till I had set him back on the road he had strayed from. We should not be fighting each other any more. For us the war was over. (190)

David finally accepts that an intense relationship between two men is not "unhealthy" and that it can be more rewarding than he first realises. The novel returns to the idea that dominates all of Billany's fiction: that only the connections between people make life worthwhile.

## Chapter Six: Working Class Struggle in *The Trap*

Writers do not live in a vacuum. While some writers attempt to keep the socio-political elements of life out of their work, Billany clearly did not. Even his novels *The Magic Door* and *The Opera House Murders*, as unlikely as it may seem, comment on the British capitalist system. With *The Trap*, written when he was in the prisoner-of-war camp, Billany turns to realism in order to blatantly reveal his intense hatred of those in control of British society. Published in 1950, *The Trap* was the last of Billany's novels to see print and, like *The Cage*, was well received, so well received in fact that in the publisher's trade magazine Faber and Faber announced that publication had been delayed in order to fill the demand for the novel. Not only was *The Trap* commercially successful, but it was acclaimed critically. The anonymous reviewer in "Soldierly Eloquence" from *The Times Literary Supplement* writes that the "book which has reached us reveals a remarkable talent" (577). Holger Klein calls the novel "penetrating" (32), and Ken Worpole writes, in *Dockers and Detectives*, that the "achievement of *The Trap* is that it manages to combine many usually separate genres and modes of writing while remaining an integrated whole" (70). Much of the writing in the first part of the novel echoes George Orwell's early novels. Both authors use extreme realism to show the devastating effects of capitalism on the lower classes of society. They both show the struggle for survival. Where *The Opera House Murders* and *The Magic Door* indirectly comment on British society, *The Trap* confronts it openly. Billany no longer hides behind murder mystery or fantastic allegory. *The Trap* is a realistic account of British

society and the troubles that plague it. There is no coincidence that Billany adopts a more realistic style after he became a Prisoner of War. He is in an environment where, ironically, he is free to express his opinions. His very incarceration in the Prisoner of War camp gives him the freedom to express his opinions because he is no longer a part of the restrictive society that he is condemning. Sebastion Knowles, in the preface to his study *A Purgatorial Flame*, writes that, due to censorship, “[t]o write anything at all was subversive” (xx). Billany would never have been able to publish a critique of British society at a time when censorship was rife. Billany is not the only writer to find freedom in incarceration. Edmund White reports that the French writer Jean Genet “once said he felt he had been led toward prison because he suspected it was the most favourable place for homosexuality” (291). Genet finds the freedom to express his homosexuality in prison just as Billany finds the freedom to express his anger at the capitalist system.

Billany expresses himself with a clear understanding of not only the socio-political traditions of Britain but also of the British literary traditions. *The Trap* is a very literary novel and includes references to and echoes of, among others, Keats, Matthew Arnold, Kipling, Roy Campbell, and John Donne. Billany is both influenced by and rejects literary tradition. This is not “the Great Tradition” that F.R. Leavis defines in his book appropriately called *The Great Tradition*, but the tradition of popular middle-class liberal writers who are far more radical than their contemporaries. Leavis defines major novelists as those who “not only change the possibilities of the art for practitioners and readers, but that they are significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life” (10). Despite the seemingly inclusiveness of that

statement, Leavis's definition is quite narrow. He excludes, for example, Defoe's *Moll Flanders* because Defoe "made no pretension to practising the novelist's art, and matters little as an influence" (10n). Leavis is concerned with form; he writes that the great novelists "are all very original technically, having turned their genius to the working out of their own appropriate methods and procedures" (16-17). Although he would later change his mind<sup>1</sup>, Leavis does not, at first, include Dickens in his line of great novelists. Leavis writes that "Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than this description suggests" (30). Leavis reflects the gulf that developed within literature, a gulf John Carey points to in his book *The Intellectuals and the Masses*; Carey writes, although writing about a later period (1880-1939), that a "gulf was opening, on one side of which the intellectual saw the vulgar, trivial working millions, wallowing in newsprint, and on the other side himself and his companions, functionless and ignored, reading Virginia Woolf and the *Criterion*" (8). That is not to say that Leavis dismissed popular writers out of hand. In *The Great Tradition*, Leavis recognises that, in his definition, Dickens achieved a masterpiece in one novel: *Hard Times*. Leavis writes that in *Hard Times* the "prose is that of one of the greatest masters of English, and the dialogue – very much a test in such an undertaking – is consummate; beautifully natural in its stylization. But there is only one *Hard Times* in the Dickensian *œuvre*" (31-32). Leavis would later alter his view, stating, in *Dickens the Novelist* (co-written with Q.D. Leavis), that "Dickens of course was a genius" (ix). Yet

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<sup>1</sup> See *Dickens the Novelist* by F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis.



the point still stands; Dickens is part of another tradition. T.B. Tomlinson writes in *The English Middle-Class Novel* that there “is not, and never has been, any single ‘culture’ in England (or even two cultures) with all the constituent parts subtly interwoven to work for, and meet in, a common end” (11). Few cultures are that uniform. Dickens, therefore, belongs to a tradition that runs concurrently with Leavis’s Great Tradition.

The tradition that Billany is influenced by (and yet still, in many ways, separate from) is more radical in the political sense and far more *popular*. The two major authors of this tradition are Dickens and Hardy. In order to show how Billany works within and rebels against literary tradition, a comparison with Billany’s contemporary Walter Greenwood would be beneficial. While both working class writers are influenced by the same writers, their novels view their society in very different ways. Billany is the optimistic radical, who believes that, in spite of the oppressive capitalist system, the lives of the working class can be changed for the better. Greenwood, on the other hand, reflects a more Naturalistic vision and shows, despite Sally’s sacrifice, the destruction of the Hardcastle family.

*The Trap* is the one novel of Billany’s that shows Billany’s influences quite clearly. The novel, narrated by Michael Carr, is separated into three parts. The first part tells the story of the working class family the Pascoes. The remaining two parts relates Carr’s army training (Part Two) and combat experience (Part Three). It culminates with Carr’s capture by the Germans in North Africa. Carr himself is a young working class army officer. Carr has a close relationship to Billany, but it would be wrong merely to identify Billany with Carr. Holger Klein writes that the novel is “closely based on

[Billany's] life" (32). Superficially this is true; both are working class men who serve in North Africa as officers and are taken prisoner. Yet, they have significantly different experiences. For example, Carr tells us that his mother died when he was young (19); Billany's mother, on the other hand, survived him. More importantly, as the next chapter will show, Carr's capture by the Germans is dramatically altered from Billany's own capture. While Carr and Billany are not the same person, Carr does, at times, represent Billany's point of view.

In *The Trap*, Billany examines capitalism and its effect on the working class. Capitalism traps the working class in an endless cycle which the working class family, in this case the Pascoes, can never break, can never muster the financial freedom to escape the cycle. This is certainly the reason for the title of *The Trap*. Others benefit from the inexperience of the Pascoes; Carr writes,

I mean, for example, that the benevolent people who supplied the Pascoes with furniture on a system of deferred payments, were waiting every week for their money. These philanthropists – one doesn't blame them, they had to live, no doubt – seeing in John and Marion two inexperienced seafarers steering their flimsy craft over the ocean of life, had hastened to show them what tackle was necessary, and to supply it, asking no more than two or three times its value for their services, and the privilege of paying weekly. (38).

In this passage, Billany displays two of his distinctive characteristics: an awareness of reality combined with a brutal sense of irony. The Pascoes become prey not only to the large industrial capitalists but also the petite bourgeois, people who are equally trapped by the capitalist system. Those who provide necessary services like the tradesman who "added ten per cent for luck. His luck" (38). There is no mercy in society from any

quarter. Billany would disagree with George Orwell's statement in "The Lion and the Unicorn" that the "gentleness of the English civilisation is perhaps its most marked characteristic" (60). For Billany, there is no gentleness in the English civilisation, only a brutal cycle of oppression.

In terms of narrative technique, Billany in some ways echoes Proust, looks ahead to Anthony Powell, and is very sophisticated. For the first part of the novel, the reader learns little about Carr, only hinting at his past, and, like Proust, narrates event he did not witness. Carr writes about, in his words, about a time "long ago, when our fathers and mothers were young, and making endless plans, and life stretched before them like a land of dreams" (25). He writes about incidents in the Pascoes' lives not only before he meets them but also before he is born. In fact, he meets Elizabeth only after she wins an art scholarship that takes her to Bristol where they meet (69). Aside from the few anecdotes about his own past, Carr is largely absent from the narrative. Carr, for the most part, tells the story of his in-laws, the Pascoes, not his own. While there is no evidence that Billany read Proust, Billany's narrative voice is much like that of Proust. Roger Shattuck points out that in Proust's *Recherche* "'Marcel' [...] is mentioned only twice in 3000 pages" (43). Similarly, only in chapter eight does the reader discover Carr's first name, and only in chapter eleven does the reader discover his surname. Shattuck writes that in Proust "it is as if a point of negative space occupies the centre of the action, a hole in the fabric. We never learn how he really looks. He seems as much of an absence as a presence" (44). Carr is much like this in the first part of *The Trap*; he is an observer rather than participant.

The reader does eventually discover some of Carr's background. Carr gives hints to his background in order to establish his reliability as a narrator and Communist. While Ken Worpole mistakenly refers to Carr as middle class (69), Carr is at pains to make it clear that he is working class: "I am Working Class. I was born of workers amongst workers, and therefore I am a native of their country. I know how they order their lives, because my own has always been ordered in the same way" (29-30). For Carr, his working class identity is very important; he wants the reader to know that he understands the working class, which adds to the narrative's credibility. The reader discovers that, as mentioned earlier, his mother was dead by the time he was nine or ten (18-19). Also, when he begins his discussion of the Pascoe family, he uses his love for Elizabeth as the starting point.

Billany's narrative technique is similar to that of Anthony Powell in his twelve volume *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Both narratives begin with a similar conceit, in that both end where they begin. In *A Question of Upbringing*, the first volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, a group of workmen huddled around a fire suggests, to Jenkins, "Poussin's scene in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeards plays" (2). The classical associations cause Jenkins to think of his school days, thus beginning his reminiscence that makes up *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Powell returns to this scene in the final volume, *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, thus ending his narrative: "Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence" (272). Billany's point of departure is not a scene but an object:

There I stood, looking at the letter. I don't believe I ever

before in my life felt quite the same. I cannot describe my state. The postmark shook my very heart with confused emotions. (11)

Only at the end of the novel does the reader discover that the letter is the first letter from Elizabeth he has had in a number of months and that he receives it in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp. The letter triggers his reminiscence.

In each narrative, the narrators are part of the flow of action, even affecting the action, but neither Powell's Nick Jenkins nor Billany's Michael Carr are the main focus of the narrative. They are observers, a conduit through which the readers view the worlds within the novels. The difference is that Jenkins tends to be far more understated than Carr. Carr is always ready to express his opinions. Jenkins will, at times, express his own views, as this passage from *The Military Philosophers* illustrates:

He [Odo Stevens] had been, I recalled, unnecessarily public in his carrying-ons with Pricilla, had corroded what turned out to be Chips's last year alive. That might be no particular business of mine, but I had liked Chips, therefore preferred the circumstances should remain unresurrected. That was the long and short of it. (125)

This, however, is a rarity in Powell. Jenkins's personal affairs, when alluded to, are dealt with rather quickly:

I often undertook Kedward's tour of duty, as he liked to 'improve his eye', when training was over for the day, by exploring the neighbouring country with a view to marking down suitable sites for machine-gun nests and anti-gun emplacements. Lying in the window-seat, I would think how it felt to be a father, of the times during the latter part of the Aldershot course when I had been able to see Isobel and the child. She and the baby, a boy, were 'doing well', but there had been difficulty in visiting them, Stevens's car by then no longer available. Stevens, as Brent prophesied, had been 'Returned to Unit'.

(*The Valley of Bones*, 177-178)

Jenkins places rather intense personal information (his fatherhood) within military considerations. The reader may be forgiven for thinking that the passage lacks emotion on Jenkins's part. That, however, would be a false interpretation. Clearly, Jenkins has been considering his own situation. He does contemplate fatherhood, but the reader is not privy to those thoughts. His narrative (written years after the fact) is not concerned with his own life. Instead, the novels are reflections on society and the world around him.

Carr does this as well. Immediately after contemplating the deaths of his school friends, he writes, "I had better return unobtrusively to Polpryn [where the Pascoes live]" (20). The difference between the narratives of Powell and Billany is that, unlike Jenkins Carr will interrupt the story with to present his own strong views; early in the novel, Carr writes, "Oh yes, yes, yes, yes! I know I'm holding up the story, and I don't care a damn. I've wanted to say this for years" (29). Whereas Powell's work is a slow, meditative narrative of twelve volumes, Billany's novel is an angry attack on British society and its inherent class differences.

Carr, like Robbie Duncan in *The Opera House Murders*, is a very self-conscious narrator, constantly aware of his own motives and faults. Writing about Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*, William K. Malcolm remarks that Gibbon's character Ewan's

major characteristic as a youth in *Cloud Howe* is his cool self-possession, and although self-assurance is a crucial property in the mature Marxist hero, before this quality can be put to its full use, he must first be won away from himself. (158)

Carr is much like this as well. The major difference is that the reader witnesses Ewan's

change as it happens. Billany's narrative occurs after Carr has made the transformation from inexperience to maturity. As a result, Carr can use self-irony as a means of criticising his earlier self, giving the reader insight and sympathy for his character.

For both Billany and Powell, while events presented in their novels do have an effect on them, the effects on the world around them is their main concern. In contrast Evelyn Waugh, in *The Sword of Honour* Trilogy explores the effect of the war on one man Guy Crouchback, as a passage from *Men at Arms* shows:

He was a good loser, but he did not believe his country would lose this war; each apparent defeat seemed strangely to sustain it. There was in romance great virtue in unequal odds. There were in morals two requisites for a lawful war, a just cause and the chance of victory. (174)

Neither Powell nor Billany would indulge in this personal connection with the war. For them, comment on society, albeit different sections of society, is far more important than the personal.

That is not to say that Billany and Waugh are completely different. Like Billany, Waugh does attack the upper class of British society. After all, left wing and right wing commentators tend to highlight the same issues in society. The difference is the way in which they interpret and solve those issues. For example, writing about Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930), William Myers states that the second half of the novel "is not so much about sex and snobbery as about booze and money" (14). This monetary aspect of the novel, in my opinion, has been largely overlooked. Robert Garnett interprets the second half of the novel as Waugh's attempt to deal with the break-up of his first marriage (66-67) and writes that the thing that saved the novel from "lachrymose self-absorption was

an automobile race” (67). Garnett is too caught up in the personal aspect of the novel. He does, however, attempt to connect the novel to society at large and recognises that the race is “an apocalyptic vision of the Bright Young People themselves, caught up in the compulsive and unravelling acceleration of modern life” (70). It seems to me, however, that there is more to the novel than that. Waugh’s focus is on a group of people external to himself; he explores and satirises society rather than his own life and psyche. Only in novels such as *Brideshead Revisited* and *The Sword of Honour Trilogy* does he turn to the more individual, the more personal. Malcolm Bradbury is closer to the target when he writes that the

plot of [*Vile Bodies*] is about money, the need to possess it and the ease with which it is won or lost. Though essential, absolutely a condition of marriage, it comes from casual sources and symbolises a spendthrift attitude towards its security. (49)

He continues to say that the “divided generations form the two sectors of value, separated in understanding and purpose” (47). I would go further than Bradbury. Waugh not only divides the attitudes toward money by means of generations but also divides it along class lines. As Martin Stannard writes, Waugh’s books “pilloried no section of the community more aggressively than the rich” (217). In this way, Waugh edges closer to the way Billany critiques society. I would argue with Bradbury that there is more to *Vile Bodies* than merely a spendthrift attitude towards money; the Bright Young People have no concept of the value of money. They lack awareness of the world around them; they are too caught up in themselves. As a result, I would also dispute Samuel Hynes’s argument that the use of the word bogus throughout the novel “is a generation’s judgement of a world emptied of significance” (59). Hynes give too much awareness to Waugh’s



characters. Contrary to what Hynes believes, the authorial voice, not the characters, judges the world to be emptied of significance. This is the irony directed by the author toward his characters. While they accuse the world around them of being bogus, they are the ones who are bogus.

As an example of Waugh's irony, consider Nina's attitude toward her marriage as an example. When Adam tells her that they will be poor after their marriage, she replies,

‘Well, we shan’t be any poorer than we are now. ... I think it will be divine. ... Besides, we’ll be terribly economical. Miles says he’s discovered a place near Tottenham Court Road where you can get oysters for three and six a dozen. (151).

Nina obviously has no concept of being “economical”. For her, being economical is finding cheaper oysters. Clearly, she expects to retain the same kind of lifestyle after marriage as she had before. For the working class, however, economy means something far different. When Marion gives birth to David their second surviving child in *The Trap*, Carr comments that “the professional classes, the new-married couples discuss whether they shall have a baby or a small car. It is a question of upkeep. David was a luxury beyond his parents’ means. David was a wanton extravagance” (60). The lives of the working class are so dire that a child is an extravagance; money determines everything, including the building of a family. Unlike the Pascoes, Nina is completely unaware of economic reality. Waugh further reinforces this idea that the upper class has no real concept of the value of money when they are forced to interact with the working class. Late in the novel, when the characters go to the automobile race, they find that all the hotel rooms are full; they arrive at the “Royal George”. With only one room available,

the Landlady attempts to accommodate the party. Focused on their own needs, they have no concept of the trouble the landlady is going through. Miss Runcible says “If you don’t think it rude, I think I’d sooner have the empty bed” (156), adding “with tact, ‘I snore so terribly’” (156). Of course, it is not her snoring that concerns her but the fact that the landlady suggests that Miss Runcible sleeps in the same bed as the landlady and her daughter. The addition of the two words “with tact” is ironic; Runcible has no tact.

When they wake early in the morning, they leave without paying for the bill:

‘I wonder, do you think we ought to leave some money?’  
asked Adam, but the others all said no.  
‘Well, perhaps we ought to pay for the gin,’ said Miss  
Runcible.  
So they left five shillings on the bar and drove away to  
the ‘Imperial’. (157)

This clearly shows their ignorance of the value of money. The owners of the “Royal George” make their living from their hotel, as modest as it may be, yet the upper classes never take that into consideration.

Waugh shows the class divide from the point of view of the upper class, while Billany presents the point of view of the working class. For Billany, everything in the capitalist system is designed to frustrate the hopes and dreams of the working class. John Pascoe, the father of the family, has always had bad luck:

At work, if anyone was unpopular with foreman or manager, through speaking too plainly, it was John, and he would be the first in bad times, to be dismissed. If there was a rush for anything free, or unexpected, he would always be at the wrong end of the queue, and if he contrived by mere tenaciousness to get his share, he would as like as not lose it, be swindled out of it, or give it away. In short, he hadn’t at all enough of the quality which, if we are to survive and prosper, we must be born with -- self-interest (32).

Self-interest is the cardinal sin in *The Trap*; it is the source of all the trouble in society.

Self-interest is the engine that drives capitalism. Because of it, in Billany's words, "The scum always comes to the top" (61). Carr says that to survive one must be hard:

The good, the true, the generous, and the just, are easily trodden under. To be tender is to be vulnerable. You've got to be as hard as glass, and to have neither faith nor interest outside yourself, to survive and flourish. (61)

John Pascoe is a victim of society because he lacks self-interest. Self-interest is what drives a capitalist system; capitalists succeed by putting their own interests before the interests of anyone else. This selfish view of putting one's own interests ahead of someone else's has traditionally been viewed as a negative quality. Christian tradition has preached the philosophy of sacrifice and selflessness, but in the capitalist system this philosophy is turned on its head. While John Pascoe possesses a quality that has traditionally been viewed as a positive quality, in the modern capitalist society it becomes a hindrance, and he cannot get ahead.

Ironically, war, which furthers the efforts of capitalism to keep John down, allows him to escape, even if only briefly. He escapes to the First World War by joining the merchant navy. Going to sea indulged his desire for something more, a chance to experience something new and different: "It was the first and last revolt of the poet and vagabond in him, the last assertion of the boy who could not grow up" (33). John Pascoe is a failed Hemingway hero; John continuously dreams of "being a carefree, moneyless vagabond, taking his way gladly and easily through life and through the world, wandering in hot, beautiful countries beyond Gibraltar, beyond Singapore" (36). Returning from the war, Carr states that "among his competitors for jobs were men who had joined the Army,

and had been through Ypres, Mons, Vimy and Passchendaele: if society felt any obligation at all (one doubts it) it was to these" (37). So, while John was saved from the horrors of trench warfare, he loses out because he chose to join the merchant navy rather than the army. Capitalist society valued John's contribution to the war less than those soldiers it sent to the slaughter. Like the boys in *The Magic Door*, society discards John Pascoe when it no longer finds him useful. John is much like Nick Adams's father in Hemingway's short story "Fathers and Sons" (from *The First Forty-Nine Stories*); Nick writes that his father was "sentimental, and, like most sentimental people, he was both cruel and abused. Also, he had much bad luck, and it was not all of it his own. He had died in a trap that he had helped only a little to set, and they all betrayed him in their various ways" (406). John has an overly romantic view of what life could be like for him, if he was able to travel the world. Yet, he is trapped within a society that will not allow him to follow his dreams. The world of marriage, children, and work is a defeat, a betrayal, for John.

While certainly on the side of the working class in the class struggle, Billany is not blind to the flaws in the working class attitude. Billany reveals the fundamental flaw in Marxist theory. Like Billany, Lucien Goldmann, in *Towards a Sociology of the Novel*, argues that the Western proletariat assimilates into society rather than attempting the overthrow of the society (10). Just as society causes Rocket, the teacher in *The Magic Door*, to desire material objects, society teaches the Pascoes that material possessions define their lives. Angus Calder, in *The People's War*, writes that

It would be straining language to suggest that the working class, now that it was courted so sedulously by the expanding advertising industry and the brash, new-style mass circulation

press, was arriving at economic dominance. But along with the shift to home markets came a new cultural style, profoundly affected by superficially “democratic” gales from across the Atlantic, and strongly marked in the new mass entertainments, the radio, and more notably still, the cinema. (33)

Calder is right to put the word “democratic” in quotation marks, as these attempts, Billany would argue, to court the working class is nothing more than capitalism’s attempt to bind the working class to the capitalist system even further. Billany saw the threat in the new mass entertainment; in a letter dated 14 December, 1997, Joan Brake (Billany’s sister) states that “Dan didn’t like the cinema per se [...] just thought it was the opium of the masses and escapist romanticism.” For the working class family, the house and the acquisition of material goods defines their progress in the world; Carr describes the Pascoes’ house as having “no money in it, but the home was a conscious work of art: the planners had enjoyed the planning, and their home life was a happy savouring of the result” (18). The house is what shows that they are successful, what gives them the little pride they do have. The Pascoes are not radicals; they accept the status quo, accepting capitalist definitions of material success. Malcolm points to something similar in Gibbon’s *A Scots Quair*. Malcolm writes that the “eccentric political position of the indigenous Segget population thus confuses the neat Marxist opposition between the industrial proletariat and their capitalist oppressors” (145). What Malcolm fails to understand is that Gibbon and Billany know that the vast majority of the working class does not naturally view society in Marxist terms. In “The Lion and the Unicorn”, George Orwell writes that “[h]owever much one may want to admit it, it is almost certain that between 1931 and 1940 the National Government represented the will of the mass of the

people. It tolerated slums, unemployment and a cowardly foreign policy” (66-67). Both Billany and Gibbon show that the working class need to be educated (the role of a vanguard political party), that years of indoctrination by the capitalist system must be countered.

Billany understands that the easiest way for the capitalist system to prevent working class from becoming increasingly militant is to instil bourgeois aspirations in members of the working class. As Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel write in *Young People and Social Change: Individualization and risk in late modernity*, “for political action to occur, people have to develop an awareness that a group to which they belong to is being illegitimately disadvantaged” (104). The goal of the ruling class is social isolation; Joseph V. Femia in his study of Antonio Gramsci (*Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*) writes that because “of their social isolation and perceptual limitations, many members of the more disadvantaged strata are quite simply unaware of how deprived they are in relation to other groups in the stratification hierarchy” (222). W.G. Runciman in *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* argues that the ruling class may even give increased power to unions and other organised voices of the working class and states that “the seeming achievement of a greater equality of power was itself one of the influences which made working-class aspirations in general less a common resentment of the subordinate position of manual work as such and more an individual pursuit of middle-class prerogatives” (161). The ruling class can maintain control of society by convincing the working class to focus on their individual needs rather than concentrating on the

common needs. As a result, the working class does not organise and agitate for change.

George Orwell writes a similar notion in *The Road to Wigan Pier* when describing the Brookers, who own the lodging-house in which Orwell stays: “By local standards they were not so badly off, for, in some way I did not understand, Mr Brooker was dodging the Means Test and drawing an allowance from the PAC, but their chief pleasure was talking about their grievances to anyone who would listen” (10). Orwell exhibits some of the stereotypical views of the poor: the complaining couple who are trying to cheat the system. Orwell states that he does not understand how the Brookers are cheating the system, but there’s another thing that Orwell does not understand. He sees the effects of society on the Brookers, and he states that “it is no use saying that people like the Brookers are just disgusting and trying to put them out of mind. For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world” (14). Orwell stumbles upon a truth without realising it; after all, his political attitudes were quite naive until his experiences in the Spanish Civil War. What Orwell fails to recognise is that what the modern world has produced is a group of people imbued with middle class values but only have the economic power of the working class.

Because of the working class acceptance of middle class prerogatives, John and Marion Pascoe are caught between two worlds: the world of their dreams and the world of reality. John and Marion are not unusual in this; because of the structure of the capitalist system, the working class is always trapped between the ideal and the real:

Our civilization is a triumphant success, and no doubt a luminous epoch in the history of Man, but one can’t help wondering if ever before in our earthly story we have done so much Wishing that things were not as they

are, or so much Hoping they would change. (23)

Despite the apparent success of civilisation, social reality never reflects the idealism of the world. The world always compromises and accepts a less than ideal world. The Pascoes suffer for this; after all, the working class bears the brunt of the consequences when society falls short of its ideals. Carr writes that John had problems finding work:

John got odd days here and there, labouring, and one day went to a wealthy landowner's estate trimming overgrown trees. Odd catchwork with nothing permanent about it. Every day the Pascoes sank deeper into extreme poverty. (39)

Billany wants the reader to recognise the implication of John's job trimming trees for a wealthy landowner. Working class people like John suffer for capitalist society's inability to support everyone. As a result, the Pascoes get poorer and poorer.

Marion's ideals are different from her husband's; Billany writes that "Marion had, as you and I have, two lives, an external, real one, and an interior life of dreams and wishes. But she was not a sentimentalist, at least not after John's naïve style" (34). The dreams of women are different to those of men. Whereas John can dream of running away to sea, Marion's dreams are far closer to reality. The reality for Marion, as a woman, is that marriage "was a transitional stage between girlhood and wifehood" (34) and "was a matter of the household tasks she had done from her girlhood" (34). For John, marriage becomes confinement, separating him from his desires, but for Marion marriage is a continuation of her pre-married life. Society has given Marion no other choice in her life than that of wife and mother. As a woman, and especially as a working class woman, Marion's educational and employment opportunities are severely limited, if not non-existent. Because of this, all Marion's energies are devoted to her family and her



house. Billany writes that “her wish-life was very closely related to this reality; she saw herself and John happy in a ‘small, comfortable modern house’, with electric light and hot and cold water” (34). For Marion, her ideals are a middle class version of family life:

She, Marion, would wear pleasant, neat dresses, dark because she looked slight and graceful in a dark dress. John must be taught to comb his hair straight back, and *not* to pick his nose. When they could afford it, they would buy a little car, or at least a motor-cycle and sidecar. And the children would go to a good school. (And so she did, but it was not all as she had imagined.) (35)

Marion’s dreams may not be as grandiose as her husband’s, but they are just as unattainable.

This focus on the house is not surprising. A house, after all, can be the outward symbol of middle class respectability. A house is a status symbol. Writing about Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, Steven Marcus in *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey* writes that

Dickens repeatedly insists upon the labyrinthine, maze-like confusion of the streets, courts and buildings, emphasizing that quality of the district which makes its buildings seem indistinct as specific dwelling-places and yet at the same time suggestive of dens or dungeons. (64)

Dickens realises that buildings, whether houses or not, can convey outward representations of the relative prosperity of whoever lives or works within those buildings. Dickens extends this to the interior of buildings as well. For example, Dickens uses his surroundings to help convey the personality of Bill Sikes the burglar and murderer:

In the obscure parlour of a low public-house, in the filthiest part of Little Saffron Hill; a dark and gloomy den, where a flaring gas-light burnt all day in the winter-time; and where no ray of sun ever shone in the summer: there sat, brooding

over a little pewter measure and a small glass, strongly impregnated with the smell of liquor, a man in a velveteen coat, drab shorts, half boots and stockings, whom even by that dim light no experienced agent of police would have hesitated to recognise as Mr. William Sikes. (127)

Dickens cleverly moves from a description of the public-house to that of Bill Sikes;

Dickens uses Sikes's surroundings to show the reader Sikes's character. Billany uses this conceit as well. Marion's desire for a comfortable modern house is symbolic of her wish to show to the world that she and her family are successful.

Capitalism teaches working class families that ambition is good, that they should strive to improve their lives materially. The problem with this is that, in Billany's words, [f]ifty per cent of us can't really afford to live nowadays: with every breath we are living beyond our means. And, trapped down there in the cellar of civilization, dog eats dog and rat eats rat" (38). The dreams of the working class can never be fulfilled. In real terms, the reality, as Carr says, is that their house "was what they called a 'sham four'. You know the term: a kitchen and a scullery downstairs, and two small bedrooms upstairs" (37). Orwell, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, describes the working class houses as "houses in which I would not live a week if you paid me, and found that the tenants had been there twenty and thirty years and only hoped they might have the luck to die there" (47). Marion has no real support in her domestic dreams, as they do not match those of her husband. She carries the burden of these dreams on her own. She even delivers their first child on her own, as John, in the merchant navy for the duration of the First World War, is away "in Chinese waters" (35). To Marion that is perhaps her great tragedy, that she struggles on her own.

Capitalism does not allow a chance for people to live. With echoes of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Billany shows that even a day celebrating the saviour's birth is no break for the working class:

Dad was off work on Christmas Eve, with a severe cough,  
but was well enough to do his half-shift of four hours on  
Christmas Day. Mam and Elizabeth delayed their Christmas  
dinner till he came back. (58)

This is reminiscent, in Dickens, of Bob Cratchit's attempt to get Christmas Day off in which Scrooge responds, "A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December! [...] But I suppose you must have the whole day. Be here all the earlier next morning" (14). The irony is that while Scrooge has become the ultimate symbol of capitalistic greed and miserliness he is the one who, granted against his will, actually allows Cratchit to have the entire day off (under the condition that Cratchit comes in earlier on the twenty-sixth of December), while in reality John Pascoe is forced to work.

The division between the rich and poor to which Billany points is also shown by Jack London in *The People of the Abyss* (1903). London, when his trip to cover the Boer War for the American Press Association was cancelled, spent seven weeks among the poor of London's East End before covering the coronation of King Edward VII. For London, the coronation of Edward VII is a potent symbol for British society. On the day of the coronation (after spending his time in the East End), London writes that to "have enjoyed the Coronation, I should have come straight from America to the Hotel Cecil, and straight from the Hotel Cecil to a five-guinea seat among the washed. My mistake was in coming from the unwashed of the East End" (60). London, himself a Socialist, compares the extravagance of the coronation with the squalid poverty of the East End.

As London points out, there is “a Chinese proverb that if one man lives in laziness another will die of hunger” (61). London highlights the immense wealth of those at the top of British society:

five hundred hereditary peers own one-fifth of England; and they, and the officers and servants under the King, and those who go to compose the powers that be, yearly spend in wasteful luxury \$1,850,000,000 or (pound) 370,000,000, which is thirty-two per cent of the total wealth produced by all the toilers of the country. (62)

London wants the reader to compare these scenes of wealth with his earlier scenes of poverty. One particularly harrowing scene occurs when London is sent out to work at an infirmary by a workhouse. The men, after their day’s work, were given food, the food was scraps from the hospital, food that was, in London’s words, “pieces of bread, chunks of grease and fat pork, the burnt skin from the outside of roasted joints, bones, in short, all the leavings from the fingers and mouths of the sick ones suffering from all manner of diseases” (50). The hungry men “plunged their hands, digging, pawing, turning over, examining, rejecting, and scrambling for” (50). The only consolation for the poor on the coronation day, as London observes, was that “the police were elsewhere” (67). The police, as a result, were not able to move the poor along. Billany, like London, lays the blame for this division at the feet of modern society:

whereas at one time it was possible for a younger son to ponder such alternatives as literature, adventure, alchemy or divine philosophy, or even to throw in his lot with an itinerant Nazarene, he now, in a world whose productivity has increased more than a thousandfold, finds himself so stoutly harnessed to the Industrial Turntable, that he never for one moment faces any situation than the bridle and the bit. (25)

Modern society limits choices. Workers are harnessed to industry and cannot even begin

to consider other possibilities. Modern society is so narrow and confined that Christianity itself would not develop were Christ alive in the Twentieth Century because his disciples would not have the financial resources to follow him; they would be “harnessed to the Industrial Turntable”.

There is no escape from capitalism. Joseph Heller shows this in *Catch-22*. Even in war (something Billany will develop later in *The Trap*), capitalism is a potent force. In Heller’s novel, capitalism takes the form of Milo Minderbinder. Sanford Pinsker, in his study *Understanding Joseph Heller*, writes that “Milo is a study in free enterprise capitalism – with an emphasis on the ‘free’ – and a specialist in the art of the deal” (33). Milo’s deals are so complicated that they apparently defy logic. Milo attempts to explain to Yossarian how Milo can buy fresh eggs for seven cents apiece and sell them for five cents apiece while still making a profit:

“Because I’m the people I buy them from,” Milo explained.  
 “I make a profit of three and a quarter cents apiece when I sell them to me and a profit of two and three quarter cents apiece when I buy them back from me. That’s a total profit of six cents an egg. I lose only two cents an egg when I sell them to the mess halls at five cents apiece, and that’s how I can make a profit buying eggs for seven cents apiece and selling them for five cents apiece. I pay only one cent apiece at the hen when I buy them in Sicily.” (227)

Heller is making the similar point as Billany: that the war is there to maintain the existing systems in the United States and Britain respectively. This is what Pinsker posits when he writes that

as Milo might well insist, what could possibly be more American, more democratic, than M&M Enterprises [the name of Milo’s syndicate], a syndicate in which everyone owns shares and everyone shares in the profit? Moreover, isn’t capitalism – both as economic system and individual possibility – what our military

forces are fighting to protect? (34)

Milo himself argues in the novel that “[i]n a democracy, the government is the people, [...] We’re the people, aren’t we? So we might as well keep the money and eliminate the middleman. Frankly, I’d like to see the government get out of war altogether and leave the whole field to private industry” (254). This, however, is all a justification, Pinsker continues to point out that

Heller’s tone makes it clear that Milo’s “patriotism” is the last refuge of the profiteering scoundrel, and that the elaborate mess hall meals [of the eggs Milo purchases and then sells] ultimately cost wounded fliers the first-aid supplies they badly need. (35)

While Heller’s novel is not intended to be a realistic critique of capitalist society, this rampant capitalism of the war achieves ridiculous (and dangerous) proportions in *Catch-22*, when Milo Minderbinder (the capitalist high priest) orders a bombing raid on his own bomber group in order to protect his empire from a poor business decision:

M & M Enterprises verged on collapse. Milo cursed himself hourly for his monumental greed and stupidity in purchasing the entire Egyptian cotton crop, but a contract was a contract and had to be honored, and one night, after a sumptuous evening meal, all Milo’s fighters and bombers took off, joined in formation directly overhead and began dropping bombs on the group. He had landed another contract with the Germans, this time to bomb his own outfit. (252)

With Billany, as with Heller, there is no escape from the machinery of capitalism. Milo is not even reprimanded. In fact, he benefits from his efforts. Heller writes that

Milo had been earning many distinctions for himself. He had flown fearlessly into danger and criticism by selling petroleum and ball bearings to Germany at good prices in order to make a good profit and help maintain a balance of power between the contending forces. (361)

Carr and Yossarian both recognise the hypocrisy of the war because, to use Pinsker's words again, "you can't cheat an honest man" (35). Carr and Yossarian, in their respective novels, are the only two soldiers who are honest about themselves and those around them. As a result, they see all too clearly the real motivations behind the war and are, thus, the two characters who are tortured by the war.

Even illness causes a problem for the working class. When John Pascoe becomes ill, Carr writes, with his ever present irony, that "it was a more reckless extravagance in Dad to have tuberculosis" (60). Clearly, John is not to blame for his tuberculosis, but it is an extravagance because naturally he is unable to work and, therefore, unable to support his family. Carr remarks that it "did not help for Dad to see, on visiting days, that Mam was starving" (61). This is, of course, a time before social assistance. Jack London, in *The People of the Abyss*, shows the effect of illness on the working class. When exploring the east end of London, he meets a Carter who is forced out on the streets because of illness:

The Carter had buried his wife and children, with the exception of one son, who grew to manhood and helped him in his little business. Then the thing happened. The son, a man of thirty-one, died of the smallpox. No sooner was this over than the father came down with the fever and went to the hospital for three months. Then he was done for. He came out weak, debilitated, no strong young son to stand by him, his little business gone glimmering, and not a farthing. The thing had happened, and the game was up. No chance for an old man to start again. (41)

Capitalist society gives no second chance to the old or the weak. Anyone incapable of manual labour is of no value in British society. Employers do not help; London tells the story of Ginger who was injured on the job, writing that "the point is, the employer did

nothing, positively nothing, for the man injured in his employment, and even refused him ‘a light job now and again’, when he came out [of hospital]” (43). Illness, therefore, is a serious issue for the working class; with no help from either the state or business, illness could spell the ruin of the Pascoe family. Even Marion’s illnesses cause problems for the family. After the birth of David, their last child, Marion becomes ill. She is told to “rest whenever possible, always to go to bed early, keep the bowels open, take plenty of milk, cream, butter, eggs, fruit, liver and fish, and on no account to do anything at all strenuous” (61-62). This is sound advice; the problem is, as Carr points out,

*somebody* had to do the laundry; *somebody* must clean the windows: *somebody* had to scrub the floors and tables: *somebody* had to clear the ashes and make the fire: *somebody* had to swill the yard: *somebody* had to push the carpet-sweeper: *somebody* had to make the beds. (62)

That somebody, of course, is Marion. While John is trying to earn enough money for the family to survive, Marion must do those mundane, often overlooked, domestic duties. As a result, the medical orders are totally unrealistic. As a result, Marion is unable to take care of her own health and suffers further operations. Added to all this, of course, is the fact that the family cannot afford to buy wholesome food. Carr, earlier in the novel, points out that Marion suffered long term ill-effects from her diet:

During her pregnancy Marion had not been well fed, so that from that time onward her teeth became carious. Elizabeth’s teeth also suffered: though they were not malformed, they needed constant attention when she grew up, as they were readily subject to decay. (42)

Not only does Marion suffer from a lack of healthy food but so does her daughter. Under these conditions, the Pascoes cannot afford to live healthy lives. Orwell, in *The Road to*



*Wigan Pier*, argues that poor health is a national problem that has developed over the years:

If the English physique has declined, this is no doubt partly due to the fact that the Great War carefully selected the million best men in England and slaughtered them, largely before they had time to breed. But the process must have begun earlier than that, and it must be due ultimately to unhealthy ways of living, i.e. to industrialism. (91)

Both Orwell and Billany point to the physical damage that industrialisation brings with it.

Both imply that capitalism is, quite literally, killing people.

Now is an appropriate time to compare *The Trap* to Walter Greenwood's novel *Love on the Dole* (1933). Both Billany and Greenwood are working class writers writing about the same society at the same historical moment. Like Waugh, Greenwood's political position is quite different from Billany's. Whereas Billany is a Communist, Greenwood does not offer a political alternative to the plight of the working class. His novel is almost a naturalistic view of working class life, in which there is no political solution to the problems that plague the working class. Clearly Marxism is not the solution for Greenwood, as it is for Billany. Larry Meath the only Marxist character dies, symbolising the death of not only a political solution but of hope as well (212-213). The difference between the two is that, while Billany is a revolutionary Communist, Greenwood's novel seems to combine two literary traditions: the tradition of liberal radicalism of which Dickens and Hardy are a part and the naturalistic tradition of Emile Zola and George Gissing.

Most critics consider Dickens a middle class radical. John Kucich in his essay

“Charles Dickens” writes that the “innocence and the disarming joviality of Dickens’s devilry, coupled with a Christian sentimentalism very much in tune with evangelical tastes, had a particular charm for middle-class readers” (385). Kucich goes so far as to say that Dickens’s “vision of the popular crowd [...] served middle-class desires to repress class conflict by reimagining mass society in reassuring terms” (387). Yet Kucich fails to place Dickens within his historical perspective. Dickens was writing at a time before Socialist uprisings. The closest event to an uprising Dickens would have seen was the Chartist movement (1837-1848) which Alex Callinicos calls “the first mass working class movement in history” (1996, 27). Dickens, therefore, does not see Socialism as a natural opposition to capitalism in the same way as later writers do. Writing in 1898, George Gissing, in his book *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*, acknowledges that to “our mind, Dickens is in most things a Conservative” (188). Gissing adds, however, that critics “have to remember the reforms actually achieved in his time, to recognise how progressive that radical spirit was” (188). So, while Dickens was a radical, he is not a radical in the same way as Billany was. George Orwell, in his essay on Dickens, shows the obvious difference; Orwell writes that it “would be difficult to point anywhere in his books to a passage suggesting that the economic system is wrong *as a system*” (1965, 84). This is the key difference between Dickens and Billany. While they both attack inequality in society, Dickens believes that real and lasting change can come from a change within the individual, like Scrooge’s transformation at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. Billany, on the other hand, views society in Marxist terms and argues that real and lasting change can only come from changing the system. Dickens’s radical spirit is more

along the lines of the Parliamentary reform advocated by such twentieth century reformist Socialists as J.B. Priestley.

Like Dickens, Thomas Hardy quite often explored society and class, even in minor works such as the short story “Destiny and a Blue Cloak” in which the character Oswald Winwood exclaims, “What a great thing competitive examination is; it will put good men in good places, and make inferior men move lower down; all bureaucratic jobbery will be swept away” (1994, 15). Despite Winwood’s optimism, Hardy views capitalism with the same disdain that Billany does. Hardy shows the full mendacity of the capitalist system in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, when Michael Henchard auctions Susan, his wife, and Elizabeth-Jane, his daughter (75-79). As Martin Seymour-Smith writes in the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Henchard “deals with his wife and child as if they were animals: like the horses standing outside” (23). Everything Henchard does after the auction of his family shows him to be a proud and covetous capitalist. Jeannette King, in *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel*, writes that Henchard’s “desire for things of objective value – cash and status – blurs his understanding of love and friendship, distorting them into the desire for possession” (108). He goes so far as to forbid the woman he thinks is his daughter from seeing the man she loves, Donald Farfrae, who is also Henchard’s business rival. Just as in *The Trap*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* shows capitalism as an all-consuming force, and only the hard and unsentimental survive.

Perhaps Hardy’s most important discussion of class is in *Jude the Obscure*. An

unknown reviewer<sup>2</sup> in the 8 February 1896 edition of *Saturday Review* writes that Hardy “is the voice of the educated proletarian, speaking more distinctly than it has ever spoken before in English literature” (Cox, 283). Jude, of course, wants to attend Christminster University. As Jeannette King points out, however, “[c]lass distinctions stand in the way of Jude’s ambitions” (66). These social distinctions are clear from the beginning of the novel when Jude’s aunt, Drusilla Fawley, tells him that Christminster “is a place much too good for you ever to have much to do with, poor boy, I’m a-thinking” (19). Jude bides his time as a stone mason until he finally writes to some academics hoping to gain admission somewhere. He receives a reply from T. Tetuphenay the master of Biblioll College telling him that

I have read your letter with interest; and, judging from your description of yourself as a working-man, I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere and sticking to your trade than by adopting any other course. That, therefore, is what I advise you to do. (124)

As Merryn and Raymond Williams point out, the “contemptuous rejection of Jude is on class grounds alone, with no pretence of academic or educational judgement” (38).

Tetuphenay’s advice for Jude to remain in his natural position in life is much like the advice given to Robinson Crusoe by his father in Daniel Defoe’s novel: “mine was the middle state, or what might be called the upper station of low life, which he had found by long experience was the best state in the world” (9). This advice leads to Jude bitterly

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<sup>2</sup> John Goode, in *Thomas Hardy: The Offensive Truth*, attributes this review to H.G. Wells.

confronting a group of undergraduates in a pub and reciting the creed in Latin, which ends with Jude exclaiming to the undergraduates, “You pack of fools! [...] Which one of you knows whether I have said it or no? It might have been the Ratcatcher’s Daughter in double Dutch for all your besotted heads can tell” (129-130). Jude is aware that the irony of the situation is that the undergraduates are probably unqualified to judge Jude’s ability in Latin. While one would expect the educated students and tutors to go beyond the natural impulses and prejudices, Hardy shows that education does not guarantee sympathy. In an essay called “The Profitable Reading of Fiction”<sup>3</sup>, Hardy writes that “education has as yet but little broken or modified the waves of human impulse on which deeds and words depend (1966, 124). Like John Pascoe and Harry Hardcastle, Jude Fawley’s dreams for the future are frustrated by his lower class station in life. The British capitalist class system traps all three in roles they do not want to play.

Just as it is with Dickens, the difference between Billany and Hardy is the way in which they interpret society. Hardy is not some pre-Communist writer, focused solely on issues of class. George Levine in his essay “Shaping Hardy’s Art: Vision, Class, and Sex” writes that the power of Hardy’s novels “resides not in their implicit commentary on social or economic issues but in their ambivalent and culturally significant fusion of his great powers of vision with his deepest desires and anxieties about social success and sexual union” (535). Always presiding over Hardy’s work is the presence of Fate. Class combines with Fate to condemn his characters. Hardy’s characters not only face the

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<sup>3</sup> While I am using *Thomas Hardy’s Personal Writings* as my source, the essay was originally published in *Forum* (New York), March, 1888, pp. 57-70.

obstacles that society place in their way but also the obstacles destiny places in their way.

Some characters, like Michael Henchard, are victims of their own characters. When

Henchard is given the chance to reconsider his decision to sell his wife, his drunken anger gets the better of him:

‘A joke? Of course it is not a joke!’ shouted her husband, his resentment rising at her suggestion. ‘I take the money: the sailor takes you. That’s plain enough. It has been done elsewhere – why not here?’ (78)

While the capitalist system allows Henchard the chance to sell his wife, only his stubbornness and anger allows him to carry out the auction. As a Communist, Billany would dislike the determinism of Hardy’s social vision. In this way, Billany is more like Dickens. Dickens, middle class as he may be, still had a sense of optimism that things can change for the better. Billany’s Communism would give him the same sense of optimism.

Notwithstanding connections between Dickens, Hardy, and Billany, Billany, unlike Greenwood, stems from a different tradition: the tradition of the revolutionary. Unlike Dickens, Billany does not believe in reformism. Billany is not interested in pacifying the middle class; he is a revolutionary dedicated to the elimination of the existing class structure. Neither is Billany like Hardy. Hardy’s fundamental pessimism is at odds with Billany’s optimism. Greenwood, on the other hand, works within the middle class tradition of examining society. This leads to critical confusion<sup>4</sup> when trying

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<sup>4</sup> Succinctly discussed in Roger Webster’s “*Love on the Dole* and the Aesthetic of Contradiction”, pp. 49-50.

to place him within a radical working class writing tradition. Yet Greenwood is not writing within a radical working class tradition, but the tradition of Dickens and Hardy.

A significant difference between Greenwood and Billany is their attitude toward the family unit. Carr writes that

Days of poverty and hunger were not as dark as they sound.  
The home was, at any rate, a little universe, self-complete.  
There was a hearth and a fire, there was a door to close  
against the wind and the world: there was a baby, and its  
mother and father. Even the most ostentatious establishments  
don't amount to much more. (43)

This is what separates Billany from Greenwood; Greenwood's novel shows working class life as an unrelenting misery, while Billany shows that the working class life is not devoid of happiness. For Greenwood, there is no escape from the harshness of life. Billany, however, recognising the dual nature of life, shows that despite the struggle and conflict inherent in working class life there can still be happiness. This happiness comes from the connection between people. In Greenwood, unlike Billany, the family unit falls apart. Both Harry and Sally Hardcastle are forced out of their house by their father: Harry for getting Helen Hawkins pregnant (221-222) and Sally for taking a job with Sam Grundy who is presumed to own a brothel (246). Poverty leads to the breakdown of the family into bitterness and recriminations. The family seemingly does come back together because of Sally's sacrifice. Harry gets a job, and Sally goes away. Still, this reconciliation seems to be temporary and the familial relationship based on a false but inflexible moral code. Even events that seem on the surface to be positive, such as the birth of Harry and Helen's daughter (241-243), is overshadowed by the prospect of misery, such as Harry's apparent unreadiness to be a father (229). By the end, Helen is

repeating the actions of Harry's mother at the beginning, suggesting that the cycle of hope, disillusionment, and recrimination will be repeated with the next generation.

George Orwell, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, conveys the same feeling of hopelessness in his description of a young working class woman he sees from a passing train:

She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. (15)

For Orwell and Greenwood, there is only hopelessness and despair for the working class.

Billany does not have the same naturalistic vision. Certainly he is aware of the pain and misery caused by poverty. Yet in *The Trap*, there is a sense of connection between people. Billany does not ignore the conflicts between people. While he does recognise that working class life is not always miserable, he does not idealise the working class family. The youngest child, David, has a more fiery relationship with his mother than his sister Elizabeth. Carr establishes this unique relationship from David's birth.

Because his mother was quite ill after his birth

David, never breast-fed, and never enjoying his mother's secure presence because of her recurrent illnesses, was a nervous baby, subject to night terrors which paralysed his body with intense anxiety. He grew out of them when he was seven or eight. (62)

There is always a division between parents and children, and the Pascoe family is no exception: "there persisted always an invisible separation between Mam and Dad on the one hand, and David and Elizabeth on the other" (65). Even so, there existed a different sense of injustice in David. He feels that "Our Elizabeth c'n do anything. She c'd get



away with *Murder*” (65). Carr writes that an “unjustified punishment stayed for weeks in his memory. He would reproach Mam with things she had long forgotten, and her forgetting was as bitter a thing to him as his remembering was to her” (65). Carr writes that it “was either love or hate always between Mam and David, and always passionate” (67). They are always arguing and fighting. Carr shows a standard argument between the two which ends with David saying, “Shut up, woman, for the love of God. You never stop nagging. Give your tongue a rest, will you” (67). This does not mean that there is not feeling between the two. In a discussion with Carr, David shows his compassion and understanding of his mother. He begins by raising the question of their relationship: “why does Mum have to go mad at me? [...] I’m only ord’nary. Other boys in Polpryn do worse things ‘n I do, but their mothers don’t go mad at ‘em” (123). When Carr, playing Devil’s advocate, suggests that David would like to swap mothers, David shows his understanding of his mother:

She’s better than all the world to me. It’d break my heart.  
 She can’t help being like that. It’s her nerves. Ah, she’s  
 terrible touchy. Then when she gets mad she doesn’t  
 know what she’s doing. (123)

Billany shows the incredibly complex relationships between people. This scene not only shows David’s understanding of his mother but also allows the reader to sympathise with David. This is important in order to evoke the reader’s feelings later in the novel when David is killed in a German bombing raid.

In terms of Carr’s relationships, the connection between him and Elizabeth is the most important. As Carr is about to be posted to another part of England, David reveals how important Carr is to Elizabeth: “She thinks a terrible lot about you. It’s been good

for her, you being here” (129). In an understated fashion, David lets Carr know the depth of feeling Elizabeth has for Carr. This follows Carr’s emotional ruminations about his leaving. Watching the sea at Land’s End, he transfers his feelings onto the sea:

The sea’s sound was a steady, vast, repeated roar: low,  
hollow, desolate. Every wave that rolled in said the same  
thing: desolation, desolation, desolation. But it went deeper  
than any words. It was so hollow, so uncompromising, so  
cold. It was death speaking. It was beyond history. It was  
beyond grief. (128)

This is reminiscent of Hardy’s “The Darkling Thrush”, written on the eve of the Twentieth Century. In Hardy’s poem, the depressed narrator projects his own feelings onto the winter landscape:

The land’s sharp features seemed to be  
The Century’s corpse outleant,  
His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death-lament [...]  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I. (ll. 9-16)

Just as the Wessex landscape seems to feel the same as Hardy’s narrator so does the sea seems to share Carr’s feeling as he, in effect, goes to war: desolation and the sense of impending death. The passion between Carr and Elizabeth is strong enough to disregard social attitudes. This is clear in the only sex scene in the novel. Just before Carr leaves, Carr and Elizabeth find themselves alone in the Pascoe home. Carr’s passion gets the best of him:

I had come to that limit within which my inhibitions had  
hitherto constrained my life, and now I knew what  
long-built barriers must crack and crumble before I could  
be at ease and passive again: for now I was no longer  
resting in her love, but longing for a different equilibrium,  
a deeper – an ultimate equilibrium. (110)

Elizabeth feels the same way, telling him, “I know it’s wrong, but it must be, now” (112). They have the true connection between people, Donne’s “eye-beams twisted”<sup>5</sup>, a personal connection that goes beyond social convention.

In *The Trap*, everything furthers the capitalist system, including religion. Billany is not the only writer who makes this connection. In *Love on the Dole*, even the non-Marxist Greenwood implicates the church as one of the three pillars of capitalism with the pawnshop and the beerhouse: “Price and Jones’s pawnshop stood at one point of a triangle; the other two points were occupied, respectively by a church and a palatial beerhouse, each large, commodious and convenient” (27). Greenwood makes it clear, as well, that the church is palatial, while the poor live in less than palatial surroundings. Because of the lack of space in their house, Harry and Sally (brother and sister) are forced to share a bed until they leave home. The beerhouse and the pawnshop are natural symbols for the capitalist system, but the church is, in theory, supposed to help the disadvantaged. The church, however, adds to the misery of the working class. George Orwell, in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, writes, the “fact is that the Salvation Army are so in the habit of thinking themselves a charitable body that they cannot even run a lodging-house without making it stink of charity” (159). Orwell complains that the church takes away any pride and contributes “the stink” of charity which gives a sense of shame.

Billany, also, comments on religion within the capitalist system. Religion and politics have always been interlinked. Elaine Pagels, in *The Gnostic Gospels*, shows that

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<sup>5</sup> From “The Ecstasy” (l. 7).

even in the early development of Christianity politics was a powerful force: “these religious debates [in the early Christian church] – questions of the nature of God, or of Christ – simultaneously bear social and political implications that are crucial to the development of Christianity as an institutional religion” (xxxvi). Certainly Billany would have seen the Church as a force opposing the people in the 1930s. R.H. Tawney, in his book *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, argues that the Church and State in modern society “have no vital connection with each other” (8). Yet, despite Tawney’s protestations, history shows that the Church does, indeed, involve itself in the state, a point of which Billany would be well aware. The Spanish Civil War clearly shows this.

Paul Preston, in *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War*, writes that

Long hostile to rationalism, freemasonry, liberalism, socialism and communism, the Church played a central role in the political life of the Nationalist zone. With the exception of the Basque clergy, most Spanish priests and religious sided with the Nationalists. They denounced the ‘reds’ from their pulpits. They blessed the flags of Nationalist regiments and some even fought in their ranks. (158)

Preston argues that this opposition was not based on theological issues (although the Church would not automatically support organisations that were openly atheist) but for more secular reasons. Article 22 of the new Spanish Constitution (approved on 9 December 1931), in Preston’s words, “concerned the cutting off of state financial support for the clergy and religious orders; the dissolution of orders, such as the Jesuits, that swore foreign oaths of allegiance; and the limitation of the Church’s right to wealth” (35). The Church, as landholders, benefits from a capitalist system. After all, one of the major reasons for Henry VIII’s attack on the English clergy was his desire for their land. Trevor

Ling, writing in *Karl Marx and Religion*, contends that Marxist attacks on religion is denounced in a capitalist system because “since religion is a bulwark of the state, to attack religion was to attack the state” (9). Not only would Billany, as an atheist, disagree with the church on theological grounds but he, as a Communist, would also oppose the church as an agent helping to keep the working class oppressed. Jack London, in *The Iron Heel*, expresses the Socialist’s opinion about the church through his character Ernest Everhard. Everhard argues, “The Church is not teaching Christ these days [...] The Church condones the frightful brutality and savagery with which the capitalist class treats the working class” (33). Both London and Billany believe that the church supports the oppression of the working class by supporting the existing capitalist system.

In relation to Marxism and religion, most people think of Marx’s most famous comment, from his Introduction to *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, that religion is “the *opium* of the people” (1975, 244). Marx continues to say that the “abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is required for their *real* happiness. Marx continues to write that the demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the *to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions*” (1975, 244). For Marx, then, religion gives people the illusion of happiness. Billany, to his credit, does not merely parrot Marx’s view. He adds to it, explaining his objections to the church. Carr’s first comment on religion is not, at first glance, a direct attack on the church. It does, however, attack the fundamentals of Christianity. Carr writes that there are

three treacherous sisters whom I do not trust as far as I can see them, and their names are Faith, Hope, and Charity. Faith keeps doubtful company, and is often found in houses

of iniquity: Hope takes it on herself to fob man off with promises which have no basis in reality: and Charity sells cheap salves for sore consciences. (22-23)

Faith, hope and charity are the fundamental foundation of Christianity. Carr identifies three characteristics of religion that he dislikes. Taking them in reverse order, Charity allows people to feel better without actually doing anything. This is much like what Thomas Hardy attacks in *Jude the Obscure*; the Christians in the novel show no charity whatsoever and condemn Jude and Sue Bridehead on hearsay:

“She’s his wife, I suppose?”  
 “Some say Yes : some say No,” was the reply from the charwoman.  
 “Not? Then she ought to be, or somebody’s – that’s very clear!”  
 “They’ve only been married a few weeks, whether or no.”  
 “A strange pair to be painting the Two Tables! I wonder Biles and Willis could think of such a thing as hiring those!” (316)

The churchwarden then tells a story in which the Ten Commandments are being restored on a church wall when a figure (presumably the Devil) knocks the workers senseless and restores the Commandments leaving out the “nots”, forcing the church to reconsecrate the building (317-318). Immediately after the story, Hardy writes, that the listeners “gave one more glance, as if to see whether Jude and Sue had left the ‘nots’ out likewise” (318). The supposed charitable Christians move from an uncertain situation (no one is really sure if Jude and Sue are married or not) to associating a folkstory about the devil with Jude and Sue. Both Billany and Hardy accuse the religious of hypocrisy, rejecting those who need charity the most.

Hope gives false promises to the working class. This is much like Walter

Greenwood's attitude in *Love on the Dole* in which all the working class characters pin their hopes on various lotteries and contests in the hope of winning enough money to ease their lives. This follows from Marx's comment. A capitalist society needs a religion to create the illusions that religion gives. After all, religion depends on deferred reward. If a person is good and just in this world, then he or she will be rewarded in the next world (i.e. enter the kingdom of God). One of the most well-known quotations from the Bible is Jesus's comment that it "is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25). Luke also quotes Jesus as telling his disciples "Blessed be ye poor:/for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20). Yet religion is used to keep the poor satisfied with the status quo.

Billany equates religion with childishness. Relating a story from Elizabeth's childhood concerning a children's digest of the New Testament (referred to as the Jesus Book), Billany shows that beliefs are bred in our formative years and are easily revived in our minds:

There were pictures equally rich and stirring within the Jesus book: one of them impressed itself very firmly on Elizabeth's mind, though the Jesus book was lent and lost when she was five, and twelve years later, when she saw the original of Holman Hunt's picture, she reproduced from the darkness of the forgotten past, the phrase 'I am the Light of the World'. (49)

Billany also argues that people forget the influence these early ideas and items have on the human memory:

We are ungrateful, we adults, to the books and pictures which were so much to us in our childhood. We owe them a better remembrance; they shaped us, and helped to draw the patterns in which life's experiences were to

come to us. (49)

Our early experiences form the patterns of our lives. Billany writes that “[t]he Present is a room; the Past furnishes it, the Future lights it” (50). For Billany, this is an important idea to remember. He argues that religious belief

needs a child to accept [traditional characterisations of Christ], because a child has, above us, the ability to a conception in toto, whilst making all reservations in detail. A child believes that adults tell the truth, but knows that certain facts don’t fit; very well, it admits the total scheme, and leaves all the questions, as it were, hooked up on their question-marks, awaiting the answer of the future. A child is puzzled, but not incredulous. That’s why we grow up with such crazy beliefs. (50)

Religion, then, is an infantile attitude, comprised of a group of confused and illogical ideas that grip the adult imagination.

What Carr and Billany rail against the most, however, is the hypocrisy of the religious. Carr writes that

I once heard a woman teacher telling a class that they were Members of Christ. Now this particular woman teacher was one of the most brutal, vulgar persons I have ever met; she had no thoughts worth the name, and she was utterly without tenderness. (51)

Again, Billany, the teacher, returns to education. In a letter to Leonard Woolf, Billany writes that as “a protagonist in the conflict [within the educational system] I describe, I have not tried to be impartial.” Just as he did in *The Magic Door*, Billany uses education to illustrate his ideas. Because human ideas and experiences are formed at childhood, Billany argues that children need to have good teachers. This, then, is his attack on the Christianity of this woman. She purports to be a Christian and at the same time is a



brutal person. Billany shows his knowledge of the Bible in which Christ says that only as a child can someone enter the kingdom of heaven:

Christ who said 'Suffer little children to come unto me: of such is the Kingdom of Heaven': who took a child, set in the midst of the talkers, and said 'except ye be as one of these, ye shall not enter my father's kingdom.' Well, this woman was taking that name into her mouth and spitting it at the children. (51)

The hypocrisy Carr points to is the use of Christ's name to bully children. Billany continues:

'We are all of us Members of Christ's *body*. Now I want you all to say after me "I am a Member of Christ".' Which accordingly they did, all except one little boy who was soundly slapped for inattention. So there you were. I had not the remotest idea what she meant by 'Membership of Christ', and I assume she was no clearer. But God alone knows what the children understood by the words they repeated. (51)

While the children may not have understood their words, they would certainly remember the incident, especially the little boy who was slapped. Billany returns to one of his favourite themes in education. Billany exposes the education system for the hypocritical and brutal system that it is.

## Chapter Seven: Capitalism, War, and *The Trap*

For both Carr and Billany, the Second World War was merely the extension of existing pre-war capitalist policies. There is no romantic vision of the war as a necessary evil that will pave the way for a brighter future. A.J.P. Taylor, in *English History, 1914-1945*, reflects the traditional view of the Second World War when he writes that “[i]n the Second World War the British people came of age. This was a people’s war. Not only were their needs considered. They themselves wanted to win”

(600). Taking the opposite view, Paul Fussell, in *Wartime*, writes that

there has been so much talk about “The Good War,” the Justified War, the Necessary War, and the like, that the young and the innocent could get the impression that it was really not such a bad thing after all. It’s thus necessary to observe that it was a war and nothing else, and thus stupid and sadistic.  
(142)

The idea of a “just war” is wartime propaganda; in fact, David Morgan and Mary Evans, in *The Battle for Britain*, argue that many people in Britain “admired [Hitler] as a dynamic leader, a champion of capitalism and a committed enemy of Bolshevism and trade union power” (19). The propagandistic view of the war, in Fussell’s words, “The Good War” hides this fact. Billany, like Fussell, recognises this. Billany dissents from Vernon Scannell’s statement in *Not Without Glory* that the soldiers of 1939 “knew that the war against Hitler was — if the phrase has any meaning at all — a ‘just war’ and it had to be fought to the end at whatever personal cost” (19). In Billany’s work, there is no sense that the war is necessary. The prediction in *The Trap* is that the post-war world will inevitably revert to its pre-war attitudes, and class war will still exist. A passage from the end of the novel clearly states both Billany and

Carr's attitude, as Carr pledges a blood oath:

By the blood of those I loved who have died, by the years of my own life which have been taken from me, I swear I shall never again from humility acquiesce in the martyrdom of man, never again believe in the cunning sophistication of the world, its vulgar ignorant self-certainty, its cant and its sly admissions. I have seen the wise old world at its work: Folly and Falseness like two foul doctors poisoning their patient. The Worldly Wisdom which engendered the war was just this: Self-Interest, deliberate blindness, gay ignorance that climbs to fortune treading on its neighbour's face: all the quackery and political-economic mumbo-jumbo which is necessary to mask and justify these things. From now on till I die I shall not cease to smash my fist into the vacant, grinning face of our cant civilization, never cease from crying 'UNCLEAN!', never cease from pointing to the blood and bones of murdered men (365-366).

Alan Munton, writing about this passage comments that this

oath is probably the finest expression of anger against the war to occur in recent English war fiction. It is a personal statement whose formality and allusiveness give it the power of an immense generalization. The capitalized vices derive from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the repeated 'I shall not cease' from Blake's 'Jerusalem' [...] the image of smashing a fist in civilization's face from inter-war Communist rhetoric, the cry of 'unclean' from the Bible [...] These allusions give to this curse such substance that it becomes the expression of a vast collective anger (67).

While agreeing with what Munton says, I would like to add that the capitalised words suggest the Spirits (i.e. Spirit of the Pities, Spirit Sinister) in Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts*. These Spirits, Hardy suggests, are "sources or channels of Causation" (1924, viii). In Hardy, these Spirits can affect the action; for example in Act II, scene ii of the First Part the Spirit of the Years whispers a warning to Lord Nelson: "I have warnings, warnings, Collingwood,/That my effective hours are shortening here" (1924, 39). Similarly in Billany, the Spirits of Billany's age poison the world (Folly and Falseness) and go so far as to cause the war (Worldly Wisdom). Spirits that are,

in Billany's novel, malignant and destructive.

The oath also signals Carr and Billany's continued commitment to Marxism (although not to the Communist Party) and to the struggle against the capitalist power that destroyed those he loves. There is no vision of a post-war Elysium in *The Trap*, only a continuation of the bitter class struggle of the Thirties. Neither narrator nor author believe that the war is a struggle against oppression or a struggle for a better Britain. Rather it is a continuation of existing pre-war policies against the working class, just another way the ruling class traps the workers. Carr recognises, in relation to the Second World War, what Dunstan Ramsay, the narrator in Canadian novelist Robertson Davies's novel *Fifth Business*, recognises in relation to the First World War: "during my fighting days [Ramsay served in the front lines] I had become conscious that I was being used by powers over which I had no control for purposes of which I had no understanding" (110). Although Ramsay (not being a Marxist) would not interpret those controlling powers as global capitalism, in the same way that Carr would, he still recognises the truth of the war: that it aids forces greater than Dunstan Ramsay as an individual. Even early reviewers highlighted this idea. The anonymous reviewer, in a review called "Soldierly Eloquence", in *The Times Literary Supplement* writes that there

have been other accounts of the North African campaign: but perhaps none that conveys more skilfully the tenseness and excitement of preparation for battle, or the sense of futility that lies behind it. It is true that the book describes a defeat: but it is probable that the author's attitude would have been no different had he been engaged with the victorious forces advancing from Alamein. For in this book Billany speaks, with great eloquence and bitterness, for the dispossessed who regarded themselves as cogs in a murderous machine rather than as defenders of any kind of moral values (577).

This passage captures the essence of Billany's attack on the war. Billany's concern is with the ordinary people who suffer the effects of the war. The main thrust of Billany's argument is that the war has no redeeming qualities and brings nothing but misery to the civilian population. He argues this by first manipulating and undercutting (at times violently) the reader's expectation that war fiction initiates boys into manhood and then by attacking the idea that the war is a "People's War".

Billany's first concern is with of the perceptions of readers have about war literature. Perceptions about war literature have been shaped by a binary division that traditional criticism has imposed on the literature that emerged out of World War One. On one side there is the idealistic, patriotic writing of the early part of the war (of which Rupert Brooke is the most common example), and on the other side is the post-Somme, disillusioned, anti-war writing of the later war (represented by poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon). The example of First World War literature has so dominated critical response that it influenced how readers view all subsequent war literature. Even W.D. Ehrhart, a Vietnam veteran and war poet, complains that readers expect to encounter an Owenesque world in his work, writing in the poem "Imagine":

They listened, and they strained  
to visualize the words:  
newsreels and photographs, books  
and Wilfred Owen tumbled  
through their minds. (*To Those*, 19)

Owen clearly offered proof of war's horror to the generation that came of age in the anti-war 1960s of the United States, joining with the images of the Vietnam conflict to further reinforce established notions of what constitutes "war" literature.

In a recent article on John Dos Passos' novel *One Man's Initiation*, Stephen C.

Enniss encapsulates the attitude toward war literature, writing that we, as critics, “expect war to refashion the self. We expect it to turn boys into men, to open our eyes to man’s capacity for violence and to his capacity for selfless acts of sacrifice” (85). That change, from boy to man, can take many forms. This change can be destructive, as countless American movies about the Vietnam War have shown. Yet generally, readers expect the opposite, that war, no matter how horrific, causes a positive change within a soldier’s personality. Graham Dawson, in his book *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, highlights what readers look for in war narratives when he writes that “Military virtues such as aggression, strength, courage and endurance have repeatedly been defined as the natural and inherent qualities of manhood, whose apogee is attainable only in battle” (1). There have been countless narratives, such as Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, in which a boy becomes a man after experiencing combat. As readers we have been trained by years of criticism to expect that a character enters a war, any war, as an innocent boy; the character then goes through a process of initiation and attains the military virtues that Dawson points to and through this becomes a man. Even in the most anti-war novels and poems, many characters go through this positive change from adolescence to maturity. In First World War literature, Adrian Caesar has argued that even bitter anti-war writers like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon reflect positive attitudes:

The very depth of their sufferings commands our respect and homage; they are the heroes of their own poems, which, if read in humanistic ways may be said to represent a triumph of the human spirit in the face of appalling tribulation. (2)

The idea is that suffering makes a man strong, that if one can survive this horror one

can survive anything. Readers experience war vicariously through war narratives. These war narratives horrify and excite the reader, confirming attitudes already held by the reader that humans are capable of the most brutal violence and, at the same time, the most noble of sacrifices.

Billany, it seems to me, understands that readers expect certain attitudes to emerge from war fiction and even allows the readers to entertain those expectations; he lulls them into a sense of familiarity, that they are on recognisable ground, that there are no surprises lurking around the corner. Billany, then, undercuts these expectations. He exposes war for what it truly is: wasteful and horrific with no redeeming qualities whatsoever.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this point is by comparing Billany with Keith Douglas, who is perhaps the most famous British writer to serve in North Africa during the Second World War. Desmond Graham, writing in the introduction to the most recent edition of *Alamein to Zem Zem*, says that Douglas's book, "like his poems of the Desert War, is unique in the literature of its period, in that no other British poet of Douglas's quality had battle experience and survived long enough to write of it" (ix). While acknowledging Douglas's obvious talent, the fact remains that his is not the only book to portray the fighting in North Africa. Soldier-writers such as Billany, Hamish Henderson, John Jarmain, and Dan Davin have also portrayed the fighting in North Africa with just as much talent and quality as Douglas. Billany perhaps did not see quite as much action as Douglas did before he was taken prisoner, but he certainly saw a fair share of combat.

Billany and Douglas are interesting to contrast for a number of reasons. Their combat experiences reflect the different fortunes of the British in North Africa.

Billany fought and was captured when British circumstances were at their lowest. He was taken prisoner just before the fall of Tobruk, captured by Rommel and the Afrika Korps on 21 June 1942, an event that came to symbolise the failure of the British to defeat the Germans. Artemis Cooper reports that “in England its fall was seen as nothing less than a catastrophe. Churchill’s government suffered a sharp drop in public confidence” (188). Churchill himself, writing about the fall of Tobruk, said that “Defeat is one thing; disgrace is another” (565). Here the fall of Tobruk is clearly a disgrace in Churchill’s mind. Douglas, however, joined the fighting when the British began to beat the Germans. Douglas, disobeying orders to remain at Divisional headquarters, joined his regiment at the front on 27 October 1942. Unlike Billany, Douglas saw his first action in a battle in which the British were victorious: the Battle of El Alamein, which had started on 23 October 1942. The defeat of the Germans at El Alamein was the turning point in the Desert War and turned the tide in favour of the Allied cause. Douglas, therefore, was part of a victorious army, while Billany was part of a defeated, destroyed, and humiliated army.

Billany and Douglas also experienced the Desert War in different ways because of their roles in the army. While both were commissioned as Lieutenants, Billany was an infantryman and Douglas a tank commander. Douglas was, therefore, a part of the new mechanised war machine, while Billany, a part of the more traditional infantry, was not. Douglas himself highlights the difference in *Alamein to Zem Zem*; he writes that “[a]nyone who takes part in a modern battle in a tank, which is equipped with a wireless, has an advantage over the infantrymen, and over all the soldiers and generals of earlier wars” (107). This advantage comes from the fact that the tank commander is usually more informed about a battle because of his access to



the wireless, whereas the infantryman without the wireless is separated from the battle. This separation from the battle comes out clearly in *The Trap*. Except when recounting combat in which he personally takes part, Carr relates events only after they happen, only after he finds out what really took place. Anything else is just conjecture: “we had heard firing in the south for some time, and I formed the impression that the main attack was taking place there...This was not the case, *as I learned later*” (my italics: 288). Carr is constantly making these qualifications, giving the reader his first impression and then confirming or correcting that impression. At one point, the Germans fire Very lights into the night sky, and Carr observes that “it was like living on an small island: the lights marked the edge of the unknown, incalculable sea” (331). He is referring to the effect of the Very lights which only light up the area surrounding his position; however, he is also relating his platoon’s situation. They are ordered to a position in the desert and, unlike Douglas, are completely cut off from the war. The only contact with the war, until the battle in which they are captured, is an occasional messenger from their headquarters and intermittent glimpses of the enemy. The only action they see is when the German and British artilleries shell each other, and the shells fall short of their target into Carr’s position which is somewhere in between. When another officer, Burgess, counterattacks the German force that captures Carr, Carr realises, “Since the preceding night I had not known where Company H.Q. was. I suppose he had been in some fighting, and been driven out of his position” (348). The Desert War wages around them, and Carr’s platoon is completely divorced from it until they are attacked and captured.

Douglas, on the other hand, is close enough to the battle that at times he can

help to change the course of the battle. There are, of course, times when he is in the dark just as much as Carr is; there are just times when the battle is too wide-ranging for Douglas to know everything. Yet at one point, during an engagement with the enemy, Douglas writes that

At this moment my tank's engine failed altogether. We were down on the floor of the bowl, unable to observe. This was the worst thing that could have happened. If I could have looked over the top at this crucial minute, I might have been able to correct Piccadilly Jim's (and my own) impression...that the enemy were on the run (122).

This passage shows that, had he been in the right position, Douglas could have affected the direction of the battle, in this case correcting the false assumption that the enemy was retreating. Carr, without access to a wireless, could never even contemplate affecting the battle in this way. Douglas feels like he is part of the battle, whereas Carr and his platoon spend most of their time digging trenches.

Just as Douglas can be an integral part of the battle, he can also separate himself from the battle and become the observer. Douglas himself uses the metaphor of theatre and the cinema to express this separation, writing that the “view from a moving tank is like that in a camera obscura or a silent film – in that since the engine drowns all other noises except explosions, the whole world moves silently” (28). This is not the case for Billany. Writing about this passage from *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Roger Bowen points to the difference between tank commander and the infantry: “At ground level [...] in the role of infantrymen, facing close up the sight, sound, and smell of battle, this separation erodes; only while man and tank remain as one does the stage seem a safe distance from the balcony” (81-82). Douglas has the freedom to step back from the war and view it objectively that Billany does not. Billany is either

completely isolated or ignorant of the ongoing conflict or at the heart of the battle.

The most important area in which two authors differ, however, is in their attitude toward the war. This can be traced back to their political stances. Billany is, of course, the committed Communist, raging at the capitalist society. Douglas, however, is apolitical. In his biography of Douglas, Desmond Graham, writing about Douglas' time at Oxford (1938-1940), says that "Douglas was not interested in politics beyond the pleasure of general argument, but he joined both the Labour club and the China Society for their excellent dances and good selection of partners" (71). Douglas is aware that there are political issues surrounding the war. In *Alamein to Zem Zem*, he writes that rich and great men "are out for something they want, or their Governments want, and they are using us to get it for them" (15). Still, Douglas is, clearly, not interested in examining the political causes and consequences of the war. In *Alamein to Zem Zem*, Douglas states that there is nothing in the political aspects of the war "to excite the poet or a painter or a doctor" (16). He leaves those considerations to the financiers and politicians. There is no analysis of pre-war (or even post-war) society, and the narrative begins when he is in North Africa, whereas Billany, the social critic, must first illustrate the pre-war world.

Douglas is also not interested in criticising the military, as, despite being somewhat of a rebel, Douglas enjoyed military life. Graham writes that

it was Drill, a ritual which demanded skill, precision, and training and excluded thought, which absorbed individual identity into the discipline of communal order, which most attracted him (1974, 38).

This does not mean that Douglas ignores the horror of the war, although some critics do feel that he does. Adam Piette writes that "[t]he battle had to seem like a play

battle, or a battle in a play, or in a playground, so that real fear could be decently ‘vanished’ and real ruthlessness entertainingly masked” (29). He argues that “Douglas’s entire narrative skirts around saying this very damaging thing about the war in the desert, i.e. that the heroic 8th Armoured Brigade of the fabulous Eighth Army was actually playing at being pirates, but by dint of sheer accumulation of instances the message gets across” (29). Yet, it seems to me that Douglas does *not* mask the brutal realities of war. An example of this is the incident with an injured New Zealand officer. When rushing to the help of the New Zealander, the injured man directs Douglas to another comrade. Douglas writes,

He suddenly added, remembering: ‘Do something for the chap in the next trench,’ and seeing my face, ‘is he dead?’ ‘Dead as a doornail,’ said my voice. The words blundered out without any intention. God knows what made me say them. I had meant only to nod. I saw him wince and felt dumb embarrassment (51).

William Scammell correctly points out that this incident encapsulates Douglas’s problems as a soldier-writer: “how to achieve the correct dumbness, and nod in words” (43). How to convey what cannot be said. Yet, while what Scammell says is true, there is more going on in this passage. One notices that when Douglas recounts his verbal blunder he says “said my voice” and not “I said” (or words to that effect). There is his famous distance between what he says and him. His voice has become completely disembodied from him, and he is shocked by the brutality of his own nonchalant comment, a comment that evokes Dickens’s famous opening to *A Christmas Carol* and hardly seems appropriate. The passage in Dickens evokes amusement

Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail. Mind! I don’t mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might

have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as  
 the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the  
 wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile; and my unhallowed  
 hands shall not disturb it, or the Country's done for  
 (9).

Douglas begins his passage with an attempt at humour, much like Dickens, but what Piette sees as playacting is immediately undercut by Douglas's own realisation of the insensitivity of the callous words spoken by Keith Douglas "the soldier". Douglas is embarrassed by his lack of decorum. While there is a sense of detachment in Douglas's work, there are times when that detachment is undermined, when Douglas does recognise the true horror of war.

At the same time, Douglas fulfils a reader's expectations of war literature when, in *Alamein to Zem Zem*, he talks about the war as a personal test: "To say I thought of the battle of Alamein as an ordeal sounds pompous: but I did think of it as an important test, which I was interested in passing" (15). In this, Douglas is like the writers of the so-called "Auden Generation" who saw the First World War as a test that they missed. Christopher Isherwood writes, in *Lions and Shadows*, that like most of his generation he was obsessed by "a complex of terrors and longings connected with the idea 'War'. 'War', in this purely neurotic sense, meant The Test. The test of your courage, of your maturity, of your sexual prowess: 'Are you really a man?'" (75-76). The idea of a boy becoming a man under fire is a consistent theme in Douglas's work. In his poem "How to Kill", the opening lines of the poem clearly show this idea: "Under the parabola of a ball,/a child turning into a man,/I looked into the air too long" (ll. 1-3). Because Douglas sees the war as a personal test, he is able to achieve the detachment upon which so many critics remark. Bernard Bergonzi comments that "Douglas faced the idea of his own death coolly, and he wrote with detachment about

the deaths he had seen on the battlefield” (*Wartime*, 74). He is able to do this because he sees the war as a test that can be objectively examined to determine success or failure.

There is no such detachment in Dan Billany’s attitude toward the war. Whereas Douglas sees the war in personal terms, the Communist Billany views it in socio-political terms as a continuation of the trap that capitalist society sets for the working class. Unlike Douglas, who was at Oxford when he enlisted, Billany enlists after living and struggling in the lower class of the British capitalist society of the 1930s. Both Douglas and Isherwood were largely isolated from the realities of the 1930s economic situation; whereas Billany had faced the full effect of poverty. Billany’s anger at international capitalism is, therefore, the driving force behind *The Trap*. Alan Munton writes that Billany interprets the war “not as an isolated episode but in an historical perspective, whilst its causes are subjected to a socialist critique by a working-class author (and narrator) who is prepared to express his anger at what he finds” (67). Billany is always quite willing to express his anger.

In *The Trap*, the war is always in the background. Even as Billany describes the brutal pre-war society, Carr is already in the Prisoner of War camp, and the novel, starting where it ends (Carr receiving a long awaited letter from Elizabeth), is presented in the form of flashbacks and reminiscence. The events Billany depicts in the novel are all designed to culminate in his comments on the war. The war is just another trap that the Pascoes fall into and in which they are destroyed, a trap that even ensnares Carr who will spend the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp.

From the beginning of Carr’s wartime service, Billany uses hyperbole and absurdity to strip away any heroism or romance associated with the war or the army.

In one scene, Michael Carr is putting his equipment on with the help of Morris, his batman. While the scene is reminiscent of the arming of Achilles in *The Iliad*, the language Billany uses to describe the process invokes the image of Carr as a modern day knight getting into a suit of armour:

The gas-cape was ready rolled: he had it on my shoulders in an instant, the tapes through the respirator-D's, as I always liked them. Then the belt and brace equipment, then the epaulettes buttoned over the straps and pistol-lanyard: the small pack (the side-valise was already attached): the water-bottle; map-case on the left shoulder: binoculars around my neck; and Morris completed the ceremonial preparation of Childe Michael by clapping my steel helmet on my head (98).

The passage's precise attention to detail allows Billany to elevate the description to ludicrous proportions. The description begins realistically, but by the time the reader gets to Carr's reference to himself as "Childe Michael", Billany is clearly allowing Carr to mock himself and his preparations. The term "Childe", originally meaning a youth of gentle birth, became a title bestowed upon a young noble awaiting knighthood in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. Literary antecedents include Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (a poem Anthony Powell quotes in *The Soldier's Art*), Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", and the "White Knights" from David Jones's *In Parenthesis*. The choice of this word is not a coincidence. The title "Childe" evokes images of boyhood; a man would be a "Knight". Michael Carr has yet to become a "Knight", for he has not seen battle and, as such, not taken that step from "Childe" to "Knight", from boy to man. So while it seems that the reader's traditional expectations of the war novel are being met, Carr's ironic humour at his own expense strips away any seriousness and solemnity in the passage.

While at first the passage may seem to be nothing more than Carr having a small joke at his own expense, the passage becomes far more meaningful when combined with Billany's other comments on war. Billany makes it abundantly clear that he is mocking the traditional attitude that battle turns boys into men. Carr is a willing participant to the hyperbole; Carr is always aware of the irony he (and Billany) directs at himself. Billany needs Carr's participation in the irony and anger directed at those (including himself) within British society and the British army. Carr's participation in the irony allows Billany the freedom to direct his ironic anger at those he sees as responsible for the war. Billany wants the reader to focus on the real targets of the novel: the capitalist society that brought about the war and those who actively maintain that society.

This tone of mockery is consistent throughout the novel. In a letter to his girlfriend (and future wife), Elizabeth, Carr describes his training:

Great sport is had when the enemy attacks. We lie down in the trenches we've been digging all night, and aim our rifles. Having no blanks, we can but snap our bolts at him, whereas he, having blanks, is far more minatory. Exasperated, we shout 'Bang, Bang'! The total effect is highly remarkable. Finally he charges with fixed bayonets. Our cries of 'bang'! make nature's buildings shake.  
(138)

If training soldiers shouting "Bang" at each other is amusing, Carr quickly raises it to the level of absurdity:

The umpires, who have been darting like pale ghosts from tree to tree, run up and tell us who is dead, who wounded, and who missing. Argument ensues. Corporal Adams bellows in my ear that he shot the enemy platoon commander. The enemy platoon commander says Corporal Adams missed him. Corporal Adams wishes to God he'd had a round of ball up the spout: the enemy sergeant says he shot Corporal Adams. The umpire shouts, the sergeant shouts, Corporal Adams shouts, the enemy officer shouts, I shout. (138)



The absurdity lies in the image of grown men who are training to fight a fanatical, highly disciplined Nazi army running around shouting at each other like a group of schoolboys arguing about a game of war. Billany ends the absurdity with a wry comment: “What’s the use of playing if Johnny won’t be dead? Then we return to our trenches and continue our interrupted Three-card Brag” (138). There is a sense of unreality in the training. Their training merely consists of card-playing that is occasionally interrupted by a chance to play at being a soldier.

Paul Fussell in his book on the Second World War writes “[a]s novelists like Thomas Pynchon and Joseph Heller have understood well after the fact, the war was so serious it was ridiculous (*Wartime*, 132). Billany, however, understood this during the war, or, at least, had the time to write about it during the war. A comparison between Billany and Heller is obvious, for like Billany, Heller presents the war as a absurdity. A passage from Heller’s *Catch-22* illustrates this:

Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn’t have to; but if he didn’t want to he was sane but had to. (46)

Heller, writing about American bomber crews, constantly reinforces his view of the war as absurd. The repetition in the passage quoted bears witness to that fact. The logic in this passage is, as Sanford Pinsker points out, “akin to the ‘logic’ that reigns in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* rather than conventional war novels” (20). That is, of course, the point. Neither *Catch-22* nor *The Trap* are conventional war novels. Both Yossarian and Carr find themselves trapped in a world of chaos and madness, and neither of them know how to get out.

That is not to say that Carr is oblivious to the seriousness of the situation.

Indeed, he seems to be the only one who *does* realise the seriousness of it all. Earlier in the novel, after a run-in with his Adjutant over the fact that Carr had left his platoon during a march to telephone Elizabeth, Carr rages against the army: “Was it an army, or had I strayed by mistake into a third-rate girls’-school?...This was how we squabbled, ‘*peached*’ on each other, backbit, while the Nazis roared through Europe like a flame” (115). Carr complains that the Army is too busy fighting amongst itself, too busy shouting “Bang” at each other, to fight the real threat, the Nazis. He adds, bitterly, “Thank God the Bolsheviks were not polishing *their* badges” (115). There is also the ever-present hint of self-irony here as well. Carr complains that the army is too selfishly involved in its own personal considerations to fight the Germans; yet, Carr clearly breaches his duty by leaving the march to call his girlfriend, committing the same foul of which he accuses others. Yet Carr, constantly self-aware, recognises his guilt:

Of course, the main purpose of my fulminations against the army was to ease my conscience; when you are about to injure anybody, you generally alleviate your sense of guilt by finding good reason why the victim deserves it. (116)

Carr continues to accept his failure:

The soldier who deserts his duty cannot be defended, of course: one would not attempt a defence. There have been times before today when my conduct has been indefensible, and I don’t doubt there’ll be such times in the future. (116)

Carr is prophetic in this; this will not be the last time that he will fail to fulfil his duty as an officer.

Writing about Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy, Steven Trout argues that Waugh “engages the reader, on many different levels, in a recurring – and

perversely compelling – cycle of raised expectation and disappointment” (126).

Billany engages the reader in much the same way. Carr’s military career, at first glance, seems to be honourable, seems to fulfil reader’s expectations of temporary soldier serving in the Second World War; namely, he does seem to want to fight the Nazis (although it is never made explicitly clear exactly why Carr joined the army). Yet, these expectations are consistently disappointed. Carr effectively fails as an officer and a soldier. This cycle is used only in relation to the soldiers, the ones who the readers would expect to do the fighting. In both Waugh and Billany, the civilians are the ones who seem to be on the war’s front-line rather than those in uniform. Trout observes that in Waugh “nearly all the deaths and injuries in *Sword of Honour* [...] are ridiculous, the results of clumsiness or incompetence, of almost anything, in short, but enemy fire [...] [o]nly Virginia and Peregrine, two civilians, die at German hands, blown up by a random buzz bomb” (127). In *The Trap*, the civilians, the Pascoes and their neighbours, are also the ones who suffer at the hands of the Germans. Carr’s experiences seem almost incidental, and, much like Waugh, the only military death that Carr sees, as I will show later, is absurd and ludicrous.

The image of soldier as schoolboy is something that Billany pursues later in the novel. Carr tells the reader that successful officers (Carr, like Billany, is a Lieutenant) “often seem to live on the level of Baden-Powell’s boys. Loyalties are straightforward and unsubtle, training is a thing demanding all one’s heart (and that’s the fun of it!)” (175). Baden-Powell, of course, created the Boy Scouts. Soldiers, like Boy Scouts, are trained to believe that issues are black and white. Britain and the King are good, and the foreign enemy, in this case Germany, is evil. This attitude allows the governments of both countries to hide the truth about the true horror of the

war:

Boy Scouting is a fine and pleasant game for some...but there are those for whom the fun was expensive. There are those who paid and never understood the game. Oh yes, *our* Boy Scouts stand up in voluble indignation and blame Hitler, and Hitler blames them, and both sides take good care not to look at the bodies. But they may, for they can be confident that, on whatever side the blame finally stays, those bodies won't get up and walk again. (176)

This ties into the absurdity of the training, and this is Billany's main point about the military. The Army disguises the reality of the war in silly games and indignant propaganda. The reality is that people, soldiers and civilians alike, are being killed. Billany and Carr are both intent on showing that there is real horror in that reality. They clearly show this in a description of the effects of a German bombing raid on the civilian population. In the raid, Elizabeth's thirteen-year-old brother is killed, and her parents are badly wounded. The loss of the house and the exorbitant wartime costs force Elizabeth and Carr to marry so that she will be able to receive his military pay in order to begin to rebuild the destroyed family. This is one of Billany's clearest attacks on the idea of the "People's War". The war becomes nothing more than a way for the petite capitalists to make money out of other people's misery. The high rents exploit the masses when they are the most vulnerable.

When describing the raid, Billany is not afraid to show the horror of modern warfare and graphically describes the death of a neighbour:

The explosion had blown in the end wall and crumpled the floor. Her husband had been trapped between the twisted floor-joists: at the same time the fire had shot out from the grate. He had roasted slowly: the wood round him took fire. His wife had heard his shrieks and seen the charred creature jerking and writhing. The rescuers had thrown water over the flames, but could not put them out (154).

This is the reality that the rhetoric of the military wartime propaganda masks: the reality of an innocent victim slowly roasting to death while his wife and possible rescuers are powerless to save him. Billany continually reinforces the horror of war and shows the devastating effects of the war on society. Certainly, there is no doubting Billany's view of the war in the following passage in which Carr attends the funeral of his girlfriend's thirteen year old brother, David Pascoe. His parents, John and Marion, are still in hospital recovering from the wounds they received:

Over the bodies of children and old people the wolves are scrambling. Diplomatic wolves, wolves who knew all about oil concessions, international credits, trade routes, and a steady five per cent. The diplomatic wolves show their grinning polite, pointed teeth. Over the bodies of children and old people. Once in England, wolves' heads were worth a silver shilling. And his mother did not know he was dead. She thought he would visit her soon. Perhaps she was thinking of him now, muddled in her thoughts, while we watched the sextons lower the coffin (swinging, clumsy) hand over hand on the rope, till it stopped suddenly on the bottom of the long, narrow, deep hole. There it lay, a long wooden box, deep down between the narrow walls of clay, and David lay under that lid. No goodbye. The sexton threw onto the coffin lid a spadeful of earth, crude lumps of clay, and the last signs of him went under, beyond all those who loved him. He was under the ground. His mother did not know that he was dead. The clay soon covered him and lay solidly upon him: David. John and Marion Pascoe, it was this that your long lives and your struggles led him to. But such incidents may be unavoidable in the maintenance of a steady five per cent. (165-166)

This rather long but important passage encapsulates everything Billany is trying to convey in *The Trap* and is one of the most moving (certainly the most bitter) passages anywhere in English literature. Billany personifies the twin pillars of capitalism, government and business, as wolves. The two ultimately collapse into one as he says that the diplomatic wolves (government) know all about the tools of business: "oil concessions, international credits, trade routes, and a steady five per cent" (165). The

government is a willing partner to capitalism and is certainly not interested in social reform, radical or otherwise. In what Billany sees as a brutal irony, wolves who once were hunted and killed for bounty have gained control of the country; now they control society. This is a powerful condemnation of war equalled only by Richard Aldington's vituperations on the First World War. Both writers adopted a similar, combative, tone, despite their different interpretations of the war. Aldington views the war as a personal vendetta, or (as he writes) an "impersonal vendetta" (200), whereas Billany, the committed social critic, does not.

The weakest members of society are the ones who pay the cost of capitalism. The Pascoes, the civilians, bear the brunt of the war. Even Carr's experience as a soldier is not as horrific as the experiences of his in-laws. In one bombing raid their lives are destroyed. Just as there is no meaning or dignity in David's death, dying merely to maintain "a steady five percent" commission, the burial itself lacks any kind of dignity. The coffin is lowered "swinging" and "clumsy" into the grave. The insertion of these two words in parenthesis undercuts the grace of the funeral by describing, in an understated fashion, the awkwardness of the burial. In a very bitter comment Billany switches his attention to David's parents, saying that "it was this that your long lives and your struggles led him to" (166). The Pascoes struggled to build a good life for their family only to have their family sacrificed to the capitalistic desire for a five per cent commission. Capitalism, however, will accept these incidents as unavoidable. Billany intends this comment to be highly ironic, showing that global (not just German) capitalistic greed leads to the war that destroys the Pascoe family. British capitalism is as much at fault for David's death as the German bomb.

Compare these scenes of the war for the civilian population with the earlier scenes of the military training exercise, and it becomes clear that Billany wants to rip this mask away to reveal the horror and brutality that lurks beneath, to force the reader to recognise the war for what it really is. This horror is the very thing that anti-Nazi rhetoric and propaganda hides. The war is not the game of Carr's training but a hard, brutal, and callous attack on the lives of the working class.

Not only does the "Boy Scout" training of the soldiers hide the true horror of the war, but it also hides the reality of life in the front-lines. While in training there is squabbling about who shot whom, the real concerns are much more fundamental than that:

Even such intimate matters as excretion and urination were quite communal: there was only one latrine per platoon. It was a simple wooden box set over a deep hole in the ground, with a suitable hole in the seat, and a lid. If any man in the platoon developed crabs, it was obviously a matter of immediate significance to all his fellows who had to use the same latrine. We were living so much together that we had to be intimately aware of each other (254).

This is not the romantic, schoolboy game of training. Rather, the soldiers must be aware of the most basic hygiene of their fellow soldiers. Their day-to-day fight is not against Hitler and the fanatical Nazi hordes of the propagandist but against dirty sanitary conditions. Billany shows, as so many writers of the Second World War do, that a soldier's life largely consists of fighting boredom and the mundane.

Later in the novel, Billany explores the concept of the ideal soldier in a more unified way with the character of Frank Shaw, a soldier in Carr's platoon. Alan Munton slightly misses Billany's purpose with Shaw. He is correct when he says that "Carr spends a great deal of time trying to humanize...Frank Shaw, an eighteen-year-

old with the mind of a boy of fourteen” (64). Carr certainly does attempt to do that; as Munton shows, at one point in the desert Carr explains the stars and the solar system to Shaw who responds “Nobody’s ever told me such things” (260). Munton is also right to say that “To the army, Shaw is rubbish; to his officer he matters intensely, partly for reasons of military efficiency, but predominantly because he is another human being” (65). Yet when Shaw is shot and killed after being captured, Munton’s only comment is that this relationship is broken, but Billany has taken care to create this relationship. Munton does not give the relationship the consideration it deserves. In fairness to Munton, this lack of consideration is most likely the result of having a limited amount of space in what is a short introduction to Second World War British fiction, in which his discussion of Billany is merely a few pages.

The key to understanding Shaw and his death relates back to the expectations readers have of war novels: military virtues coming to the fore in battle transforming a soldier’s character. Not coincidentally, Billany uses the name “Shaw” which was the name under which T.E. Lawrence joined the Royal Tank Corps and which he legally adopted by deed poll in 1927 when his reputation of “Lawrence of Arabia”, as Robert Graves states, “had become a romantic catch-word and a great nuisance to him” (1927, 11). In the interwar years, Lawrence was identified as the great World War One hero whose reputation fuelled British ideas of what a hero should be. By taking the name “Shaw”, Lawrence gave up the romantic role of “hero”. Billany uses the name in much the same way, divesting the idea of “hero” of all romantic connotations. At first glance, Billany seems to give the reader what is expected, seemingly taking Shaw’s character through the transformation from boy to man. From the first time Shaw is introduced, Billany sets up Shaw’s inadequacy as a soldier and as a man.



After pushing Shaw through a march, Carr reflects on Shaw's character:

I understood him...Too neglectful and apathetic to report ill-fitting boots, too uninterested to darn his own socks, too lazy to wash his feet -- oh God yes, I understood him, because I was all those things myself (105).

Carr not only claims to understand Shaw but also recognises his own character in Shaw. The difference, however, is that Shaw "must understand all that, he must learn to take blame himself, he must understand that he himself had inflicted sores and blisters on himself (on his soul as well as on his heel) and then he would be grown up" (105). Carr, presumably, has already made this realisation himself. Here, Billany *seems* to be fulfilling the expectations of the readers: that Shaw must learn to take responsibility for his own actions and in this way he will become a man. Yet the words Billany chooses once again border on hyperbole, especially when he talks about the sores and blisters on Shaw's soul and the interjection of "oh God yes". When Shaw takes responsibility for himself, he will be "grown up". Taken at face value, passages like this could be read as merely over the top melodrama. I want to suggest, however, that the use of these words is deliberate and once again conveys a mocking, exaggerated tone rather than one of high seriousness. The very deliberate use of the melodramatic tone undermines the apparent seriousness of the surface meaning of the words. Carr, writing after Shaw's death, mocks the very attitude he displayed. Here Billany subtly manipulates the reader's expectations. This mocking tone is injected into passages that are conventional, that convey the words and actions that maintain the reader's expectations.

Shaw, then, appears frequently in the novel, usually when he is in trouble because of drunkenness. Carr attempts to defend him at a court-martial when Shaw

returns from leave a day late because his mother became ill. As a result of an error on his part, Carr inadvertently allows the President of the court to believe that Shaw is pleading his own case. Shaw is unable to defend himself properly because he does not understand Army Regulations (147-148). Shaw is then sent to a military prison, only to be reassigned to Carr's platoon when they are ready to go overseas. Shaw is sent overseas not because he is the best soldier but specifically because he is a *poor* soldier. This, it seems, is a common occurrence:

When their documents were handed to me, I found, as I had expected, that the majority had bad army records. They felt that their inclusion in the draft had the force of punishment – or rather, that their units had thrown them out (191).

Like Shaw, soldiers who are misfits in society and the army are the ones being sent to fight. Those soldiers are the ones fighting and dying for a society that despises them. Carr, ever the militant Marxist, wryly comments that it is a “pity [Shaw] hadn’t the savoir-faire to be born into the Upper Middle Class instead of the Lower Working Class. He’d still have been at school!” (148). Evelyn Waugh has a passage similar to this in *Men at Arms* when Guy Crouchback recommends Sergeant Soames for commission because he is, in the words of Major Erskine, “a nasty bit of work” (173). Again Waugh and Billany point to the same problem with the conduct of the war: personality decides what happens in the war.

This attitude of war turning men into boys is so engrained in society that Carr uses it in an attempt to reshape Shaw. After a few problems on the voyage to North Africa, due mainly to gambling, Carr brings up the idea of manhood again, exhorting Shaw to “Be real. Be a man” (216). Carr is sympathetic toward Shaw. He believes that the immature Shaw is weak, not believing Shaw’s promise to abstain from

gambling. Still he tells Shaw that Shaw can depend on him: “you can trust me to the limit. You can put *all* your weight on me, and I won’t fail – not for a second. Lean on me as hard as you ever like” (216). Carr believes that what Shaw really needs is someone to trust and who will be honest with him. As Shaw’s officer, Carr feels that it is his responsibility to take on that role. Billany has, therefore, established a far more complex relationship between Carr and Shaw than Munton seems to perceive.

Shaw is not the only soldier trapped in the military. The title, *The Trap*, not only refers to the Pascoe family but also refers to Carr himself. Carr is caught in the trap of war just as much as the Pascoes are. On one hand he is the Marxist railing against society, but on the other hand he is the officer who has to lead his troops effectively. While Shaw may be immature and irresponsible, once in battle the lives of Carr and his platoon could depend on Shaw. As a result Carr is forced to use those attitudes of manhood that he would normally reject in order to prepare Shaw for combat. Carr finds himself in a situation similar to Siegfried Sassoon in the First World War; as officers, both men were both obligated to fight effectively in a war that neither of them supported in order to protect the soldiers they led. This obligation caused Sassoon to return to the front after his protest letter against the war. In his memoir of the period 1916-1920, *Siegfried’s Journey*, Sassoon writes that, while back in England being treated for shell-shock, “I had felt as though part of me were still commanding a company in France, and thoughts of that company had often been with me. It was only decent to feel like that, after a long period of self-identification with a set of men, most of whom one liked, and all of whom one did one’s best to look after” (73). Sassoon felt this obligation even though, as he confessed to Robert Graves in a letter dated 7 December, 1917, he told a General Service Board that he had not

changed his mind about the war and his opposition to it (1983, 196). In a diary entry (dated 12 January, 1918), Sassoon goes so far as to state, “I am home again in the ranks of youth – the company of death” (1983, 203). While Carr may not feel at home at the front, his obligation to protect his platoon forces Carr, despite his hatred of and objections to the war, to accept the responsibility of turning Shaw into a good soldier, when no one else would. Like the Pascoes in the pre-war world, Carr lives a divided life in the army; he is caught, trapped, between his Marxist idealism and the reality of military obligations.

Carr is also faced with the difficulty that he does not see himself as a natural leader. Early in the novel, he writes that

I don't know that it's important to say it — perhaps it is: in actual warlike games, as a boy, I was not ever in the lead. My part was vatic: I stood in the rear and shouted my comrades on to victory. A misgiving still haunts me, that such is my nature still; in fact, I know it is. (19)

This is, remember, written after Carr's capture, after Carr fails in his responsibility as an officer. Carr is thrust into leadership, a role that, even as a child, he does not naturally fill. In his childhood, the only time that Carr takes a lead roll in war games is in his romantic fantasies directed toward the girl with whom he is in love:

My fantasies were like this: I would lead a band of boys from our street to make war upon the street she lived in. She, a Boadicea, would command the opposing force, and great hand to hand fighting would occur, broomhandles, bottles, half-bricks and wooden swords figuring. Finally my men would break and fly, and I, fighting desperately, but gashed across the forehead with a brick, would be made prisoner by the soldiers of the girl in blue. They, and she, would torture me, and I would faint: and as I lay semi-conscious, she would bend over and stroke my forehead, and her lips would be near mine. (19)

What he will eventually discovered after he is captured in the war is that the reality is

not a romantic liaison with a beautiful woman but an experience filled with fear, death, and disillusionment. Carr states that he is uncertain whether his lack of leadership ability is an important fact, and, at this point, he tells the reader, the information is not important. As the novel progresses, however, and Carr is given the responsibilities of an officer, this lack of natural ability becomes increasingly significant. Carr is unable to help Shaw through the transformation from boy to man.

Billany does show a change in Shaw, allowing the reader to believe that war will bring about the expected change in Shaw's character. At one point, Carr writes that "Shaw altered for the better whilst he was in the desert, partly because there were no temptations...Toward me he showed gratitude mixed with scorn" (252). The last comment, reaffirming the complex relationship between officer and soldier, eventually proves to be telling. Billany keeps reinforcing the idea that the child "was learning to be a man" (304). He wants the reader to feel secure in the knowledge that expectations will be met. Shaw even shows an aptitude as Carr tells the reader that Shaw unexpectedly shows "reliability as a runner" (264). Billany is giving the reader what is expected: that the war becomes an initiation into the responsibility of manhood. Shaw is learning to be a man. Then, Billany savagely destroys this, pulling the rug out from beneath the reader.

First Carr disappoints Shaw, despite his earlier claim that Shaw can lean on him. After days of digging in the desert, there is a water shortage, and Carr's men are desperate for a drink. Carr remembers that he has a beer hidden away in his pack, and he refuses to share the precious refreshment. He is forced to take Shaw's bayonet when Shaw and the other men are asleep in order to open it. Shaw hears Carr open the can and says "Good health, sir" (313). Carr does not respond but creeps away, saying

“Share that tin I could not” (313). The officer who has exhorted Shaw to be a man and who tells Shaw that he can be trusted shows himself to be a selfish coward, unwilling to share a precious drink and unable to overcome his own weakness. Even after Carr and his platoon are captured, Carr admits to Shaw that he is not as strong as he pretends to be. Shaw suggests that Carr remove his pips so that Carr will go to the same prison camp as his men; officers and the ranks are being separated. Carr tells Shaw, “I can’t, Frank. I’m still under military law. Besides – it’s me, myself, kid – I haven’t the guts” (347). The relationship between the two is broken by these two incidents and not at Shaw’s death as Munton maintains. Carr cannot find the strength in adversity to stay with Shaw and the others. His weakness completely destroys his credibility as an army officer and as Shaw’s advocate.

Billany undermines Carr’s trustworthiness as a wise and caring officer and then proceeds to cast doubts upon Shaw’s successful initiation into manhood. As Dawson stated earlier, military virtues culminate in battle, and when he does see battle, Shaw hardly faces it like the stoic hero: “Oh God I don’t like this, sir. I don’t wanna be mangled up by them bloody tanks. They can get into a hole like this” (341). In fact, as they cower in a hole and fire at the Germans only when they are certain that the Germans cannot see them, none of the soldiers act as the stereotypically brave soldier. After a brief skirmish, they are quickly captured. Carr, Shaw, and the others are still only frightened children, unlike the children in *The Magic Door* who choose to fight.

The one moment that Carr’s platoon does fight is ineffective. Carr himself is possessed with a wild excitement:

*Were we beaten, then? Were we broken? Had the tanks silenced us? Had they? By God, hear those*

guns, burst after burst — hear that savage, incessant, intolerable chattering, chattering — hear them now, hear them — tanks eh? tanks. Even tanks don't like it to rain lead — again, again, again, all three guns outbraying each other, hammering the air, with a combined roar like three pneumatic drills, or all the riveting-machines in a shipyard. (342)

The repetition of words such as “chattering” and “again” is intended to give the reader a sense of the noise of battle. Carr gets caught up in the excitement in battle; the reader can almost hear him shouting at the tanks “*Were we beaten, then?*” or shouting it as encouragement to the men under his command. The effect on his men is similar, and Carr writes, “We were transformed. The platoon was fighting. ‘We’ll stop the buggers, sir, we’ll *stop* ‘em’” (343). The irony that Carr, narrating the events after they have occurred, knows is that the platoon did not stop the tanks and that the platoon was beaten. The platoon is subsequently captured by the Germans.

Significantly, this is very different from Billany’s own capture. In an unpublished letter (housed at the Imperial War Museum in London) to Joan Brake, Billany’s sister, Alan Prough from Faber and Faber quotes a letter he received from Major C. Huddleston (Billany’s company commander), concerning their capture. Huddleston says that the platoon was to hold a defensive “box” at Rotunda Ualeb, forming part of the “Gazala Line”. Rommel (who was in the first wave of tanks) put the entire weight of his offensive here. They were surrounded and subjected to unceasing attack for 5 days and were finally overrun on June 1st by German armour when their supplies of artillery ammunition was exhausted. Huddleston was interrogated by Rommel, himself (letter to Brake 30 August 1950). Billany purposely downplays Carr’s capture. Carr’s platoon, unlike Billany’s own experience, cannot heroically fight off a German attack for days. This would undermine Billany’s

purpose. After all as David Pennistone says in Anthony Powell's *The Valley of Bones*, "Action might have confused the issue by proving too exciting" (107).

Pennistone is referring to Alfred de Vigny's *Servitude et Grandeur Militaire*, but he could have easily been referring to Carr's capture in *The Trap*. In order to show the war in an unheroic light, Carr and Shaw's capture must be equally unheroic. Action would have confused the issue by diverting the reader's attention away from the absurdity of the war and added an unwanted sense of heroism.

The platoon's capture is not Billany's last comment on Shaw. Shaw is killed by a German, after a squabble about Shaw's bayonet. Carr writes that "it struck me that probably the German wanted Frank to remove it" (349). While it is never clear, the German soldier appears to believe that Shaw refuses to remove his bayonet when, in fact, Shaw most likely did not understand what the German wanted. Even Carr, at first, is unsure of what the German wants. Carr tries to interpret, but the German acts before Carr is able to interpret, and Shaw is killed. The death of Shaw after his capture is surprising at first, although it was foreshadowed, as twice Carr says that Shaw looks like a corpse as he sleeps (309, 312). Shaw's death serves the same purpose in *The Trap* as the death of George Winterbourne in Richard Aldington's First World War novel *Death of a Hero*. Aldington's narrator writes that "George's death is a symbol to me of the whole sickening bloody waste of it, the damnable stupid waste and torture of it" (35). Shaw's death is initially a shock because it does not easily fit into the reader's expectations of military virtue in battle. The German soldier acts without orders and kills Shaw, over what appears to be an extremely minor incident (a lack of communication), and no other British soldier taken prisoner in the action is killed:



‘Oy! George!’ shouted the German, apparently supposing all Englishmen to be called after their King. Frank looked round; the German signed him to run. Frank turned and trotted away towards the wagon. Before I had realised what was happening, the German raised his rifle and shot him in the back of the head. (350)

Instead of the heroic death of a boy who has become a man, the reader is presented with a death that is the result of a bayonet. Shaw’s death is, as Aldington ironically writes in reference to Winterbourne’s death, “A clean sportin’ death, an *Englishman’s* death” (14). Billany would agree with the irony. The death is absurd because of the trivial nature of the incident. This absurdity highlights what Billany has been trying to show with Shaw. Not only is the murder of Shaw Carr’s final inability to protect Shaw (Carr had tried to intervene) but also the way Shaw is killed subverts those attitudes which Dawson argues have come to define manhood: aggression, strength, courage, and endurance. Shaw does not attain these virtues and dies not heroically in battle but because of some absurd quarrel with an unnamed German captor, who appears in the novel only long enough to kill Shaw and then disappears, apparently unpunished. Both Carr and Billany would agree with Falstaff in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV Part One* when he says “What is in that word ‘honour’? What is ‘honour’? Air. A trim reckoning” (V.2.134-135). Honour serves no purpose for Shaw.

Billany and Carr, of course, are not content to let the death go without comment and refuse to let go when they have the reader firmly in their grips, continuing to force the reader to recognise the horror that is modern war. When Carr goes over to him and lifts the body, he reflects “here was his flesh, solid and real to my touch, and his clothes, yet I could not say anything more to him, ever: could not tell him I was sorry I had not saved him after all. The same hands, the same limbs, yet

he wasn't there" (350). Not only does Carr fail to protect Shaw, but he is inadvertently responsible for Shaw's death. Here the idea of initiation is destroyed with Shaw's death. Life in the desert may have changed Shaw for the better, but that change is pointless, as the war destroys Shaw and any chance to enjoy his manhood. Billany exposes the ultimate waste of the war. Like Aldington, Billany shows not the glorified heroism but the regret at the mindless destruction of young men, trapped by forces beyond their control.

Neither is this an initiation for Carr. For, while Carr does recognise his failure, this is not an epiphany. Carr does not go through any kind of change, as he is constantly aware of his limitations, accepting responsibility for his own actions. He is the same person he is after combat as he was before combat. The only change is that now he is a bitter Prisoner of War instead of a bitter free man.

The war destroys everyone, even those who are braver than Shaw and Carr. This is shown in one of the strangest scenes in the novel. Shortly after Carr and his platoon have been captured, Carr's Company Commander (Captain Burgess) decides to mount a counterattack:

I could see each individual section of the attacking platoons... Burgess, pistol in hand, was running in front of them. Running with one leg stiff; he must have been wounded already...They could see Death running to meet them...Burgess half-turned -- only seventy yards from me -- shouted 'Charge'...I even heard the involuntary cry of the men as they sprung forward to the last assault. Simultaneously the German guns roared, in less than ten seconds I saw half the company fall...Death struck them on the run...Burgess still ran. He was only twenty yards away now. He could feel his men still at his back. But now the situation changed very quickly. Because of the unrelenting German fire, there simply weren't enough men left to charge...While some of the Germans continued to fire, others jumped up on their feet and shouted to our men to surrender...Burgess stopped, glanced back at the few men with him, turned to the enemy again, and aimed his pistol at a German soldier standing near me. The German brought his rifle

to the shoulder: Burgess fired twice, the German once. Burgess fell flat on his back. Later I saw that the bullet had entered his face between the nose and the upper lip (348-349).

Carr is in the strange situation of seeing his own side attack toward him. Munton is right when he says that the “incident is disturbing because the unusual point of view allows Carr to admire the courage and organization of Burgess and H.Q. Company, and also observe the skilful rifleman and the Germans who invite surrender. The assumption that in battle we are exclusively engaged on one side or the other is here undermined” (62). Munton feels that this scene bears out Billany’s idea of “hollowness” in the lives of the men and the war (61). The incident certainly does that. Carr watches as the war destroys Burgess and his men who are obviously brave and have decided to die rather than be taken prisoner. The reader has to question what the deaths of these men serve and wonder if society could not use these men in a more constructive way rather than wasting them in a useless counterattack in the North African desert. The irony is that Carr survives because he is a “coward”, while the brave Burgess and his men die.

Even the German soldiers are seen as victims of capitalism. This is not an anti-German novel, and there is no anger directed at the German soldiers. Even Shaw’s death elicits no anger. Carr is shocked, horrified, and saddened but not angry. Billany recognises the similarities between the British and German soldiers. Billany’s attitude is similar to that of Charles Hamilton Sorley in the First World War. In his sonnet “To Germany,” Sorley writes that “You are blind like us” (l. 1) and that “the blind fight the blind” (l. 8), concluding “We’ll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,/When it is peace. But until peace, the storm/The darkness and the thunder and the rain” (l. 14). Just as Sorley identifies with the soldiers in the opposite trenches so

too does Carr identify the British soldiers in the desert with the German enemy.

When Carr looks at Shaw, he comments that Shaw reminds him “of one of Hitler’s Boys in uniform” (201). Billany is aware that there is nothing out of the ordinary of the Hitler Youth; they are not mindless, fanatic Nazis. In fact, they are just like Shaw, and the discontent and naïveté of boys like Shaw are what allows extremist forces to take control of society. Set free boys like Shaw, socially, politically, and economically, and society is freed with them. Nazi Germany is not the enemy; it is the capitalist system that is the enemy. The rise of the Nazis is merely a symptom of the disaffection of boys like Shaw. The Nazis gave the disaffected a sense of belonging, while capitalist Britain alienates the disaffected even more.

Billany is quite clever in giving Carr the role of a non-participating observer in the final counterattack. This way Carr does not engage himself on one side or the other (to use Munton’s words). In this way Billany can comment on both sides of the conflict. The British and German soldiers are both brought here because of the same international forces. The Germans are as much victims of capitalistic greed as the British soldiers are. Billany, therefore, can show the Germans more sympathetically, showing them trying to save the attacking British by trying to convince them to surrender and then showing the skill and precision of the German rifleman.

By the end of the novel, Carr reflects on what has happened; he is too tired to think, too tired to find a lesson in it all: “How to draw a moral from it all I do not know” (379). He is more certain about his beliefs though: “I do not ‘believe’ in the war – in this or any other” (380). He is not fooled by the wartime propaganda: “I do not hate the Italians, the Germans or the Japanese. I hate many things they have done, and I hate many of the things we have done” (380). He has realised, as the reader

should also, that, unlike Boy Scouts, loyalty is not so clear cut and that any dispute between nations is fundamentally unreal: "Only the sufferings are real. The causes for which we suffer are contemptible and ridiculous" (380). Even before highly controversial wartime Allied actions, such as the bombing of Dresden, Billany recognises that neither side can claim the moral high ground. As he stands in the Prisoner of War camp, Carr realises the only true thing in life is the connection between people, a realisation that he comes to when he receives a letter from Elizabeth (by now his wartime bride): "And there I stood looking at the letter: seeing Elizabeth's writing: knowing that when I broke the censor's sealing-strip, I should have her with me again: knowing that the period of separation was over" (380). Billany expertly conveys Carr's feeling of joy at finally re-establishing contact with his wife. Carr's loyalty and commitment to those he loves is what drives his political commitment. The fight against capitalism becomes more than an intellectual ideological stance. For Carr, communism becomes a way of avenging those who have died and protecting those who survive. Without that commitment to others, in Billany's view, the political commitment is hollow. This is, above all, for what Marxism stands. William K. Malcolm writes that Lewis Grassie Gibbon was less concerned "with the mechanics of social organisation and economic theory than with basic moral issues and human ideals" (2). George Orwell, in an essay republished in *The Observer*, agrees with this position, writing that the "real objective of Socialism is human brotherhood. This is widely felt to be the case, though it is not usually said, or not said loudly enough" (3). Billany would agree with Orwell, as both writers see their political beliefs (whether Communist or Socialist) as a way of strengthening the bonds between people.

An interesting counterpoint to Billany is the idea explored in Alki Zei's novel *Achilles' Fiancée*, which follows the exploits of Achilles, a Greek resistance fighter, who first fights the Nazi invaders and then fights for the Communists in the Greek Civil War (1944-1946). Achilles falls into the one trap that Carr avoids; his political commitment overshadows his commitment to Eleni, his wife. He never lets emotion get in the way of his political activities. As the novel progresses, Achilles changes from a strong leader to a hollow man who alienates his wife. The alienation is so complete that Eleni never calls Achilles (a code name he adopted when fighting the Nazis) by his real name (which is never revealed in the novel), and he never refers to her by her real name (Daphne). Eleni says "Achilles doesn't know that my greatest hardship is to lie down beside him without talking about all the disturbing things that are about to change our lives. It's not in any way the fault of socialism, to be sure, that you can't talk to your husband in bed" (Zei, 250). Billany would agree with Zei. Political commitment must be joined to commitment to others to have any kind of relevance.

The second issue Billany takes with the war is the idea that the war was what has become known as "The People's War". Angus Calder, in his very influential book *The People's War: Britain 1939-45*, defines this view of the war, arguing that

the people surged forward to fight their own war, forcing their masters into retreat, rejecting their nominal leaders and representatives and paying homage to leaders almost of their own imagination – to Churchill, to Cripps, to Beveridge, to Archbishop Temple and to Uncle Joe Stalin. The war was fought with the willing brains and hearts of the most vigorous elements in the community, the educated, the skilled, the bold, the active, the young, who worked more and more consciously towards a transformed post-war world. (21)

This myth, of people from different classes and trades banding together to fight the

war for a better Britain, has been propagated from the war onwards. This myth affirms “the quiet heroism of the People across the classes” (Calder, 1991, 251-252). In recent years, this view of the war has been attacked. Adam Piette writes that the wartime culture “with its big propaganda machines, its fabricated communal feelings and military regimentation, aimed at transforming private imagination into public spirit, turning its soldiers into actors-out [sic] of its historical drama” (2). Even Calder himself has questioned his earlier views in his later book *The Myth of the Blitz*. As an example, he writes that “Looking [*The People's War*] over again, I saw that I accepted almost without question the mythical version of ‘Dunkirk’, though elsewhere I flatter myself that I wasn’t beguiled” (1991, xiii). Calder re-examined his position as a result of post-war society’s creation of this myth of the war as a “People’s War”:

My anger, firstly over the sentimentalisation of 1940 by Labour apologists, then over, the abuse of ‘Churchillism’ by Mrs Thatcher during the ‘Falklands War’, led me to speak, every which way, to undermine the credibility of the mythical narrative – for instance, by questioning British ‘morale’. (1991, xiv)

The myth was propagated during and after the war by many people, including Socialists like J.B. Priestley who saw the war as a way of providing for a better future for Britain and the world. Priestley believed that the war was certainly monstrous, but it was also necessary to defeat the forces of evil. The war will leave behind a more egalitarian society; a passage from the end of *Three Men in New Suits* (1945) clearly shows Priestley’s belief in a bright future:

We have at last to have faith in people, compassion for people, whether they have white faces, brown faces or black faces. This hope of a home on earth, this faith and this compassion are now at the very centre of our lives. If we’re moved by them, if we base all our actions on them, we begin to live, drawing strength from the waters of life. But if we pretend they aren’t there, if we try to

ignore the great task, then we cheat ourselves into cruelty and murder, sink into madness, turn into stone. And – by Heaven! – politics, economics, psychology, philosophy, religion – though they still speak with different voices, they all look the same way now. This is the choice. Either the earth must soon be the miserable grave of our species or it must be at last our home, where men can live at peace and can work for other men's happiness. (164)

This exhortation is spoken by Alan Strete (an aristocrat) when he, his sister Diana, the farmer Herbert Kenford, and the miner Eddie Mold (both of whom served in the war with Alan) meet to discuss the shape of post-war Britain. Priestley has the three men agree that the world must, and will, change to ensure that the sacrifice of the war was not in vain. Priestley shows the classes coming together in his romantic Socialist vision to cleanse society of the evils that plague it. The union includes soldiers and civilians (represented by Diana Strete, who also represents the women of Britain) alike.

Billany, as early as 1943, was one of the first writers to attack this view of the war, although there has been some debate as to whether or not Billany does support the idea of the "People's War". Holger Klein lists *The Trap* as one of the novels that supports the idea of the Second World War as a "People's War". He does this presumably because he believes that "the People/people at the time were overwhelmingly working and lowest middle class in a traditional sense" (41). Klein's reasoning, although not articulated in a very vague passage, seems to be that, since the "people" were the working and lower middle classes and since *The Trap* is a working class novel, the novel must support the People's War. Alan Munton takes the opposite view. Munton writes that "Billany does not interpret the war as a People's War that would eventually transform the struggling lives of such people as the



Pascoes" (65). He states that Billany believes that the war "continues by other means the economic and political policies of the 1920s and 1930s, the very policies which had initially defeated them [the Pascoes], and multitudes like them" (65). He continues to say that it "is possible that Billany interpreted the war between capitalist states in which it was not possible to take sides" (66). This was the attitude taken by the European Communist Parties until 1941 when Germany broke the Nazi-Soviet Pact and invaded the Soviet Union, after which the Communist Party of Great Britain supported the Allies. Munton acknowledges that

[a]lthough the 'imperialist war' line ceased to be official policy, there is no reason why individuals should not have continued to hold it...Perhaps it was a view that could only legitimately be held by someone who had fought the war with the conviction shown by Michael Carr. (66)

While Munton seems hesitant to ascribe definite attitudes to Billany, Munton's position is, in fact, supported by an analysis of the text.

Billany shows no coming together of the British people in union against Germany in order to achieve a brighter future. *The Trap* supports Adam Piette's view that the popular perception of the war stresses "vital resistance, public heroism, [and] stoic good humour" (5) and, as a result, does not show the "deep fissures and rifts in the society" (5). After the bombing of the Pascoe house, Carr and Elizabeth are stunned by the prices for renting a new place: "we did find a house shortly to be empty, the rent was fantastic, a wartime rent, a blackmail rent: refugees could be made to pay a good price for safety" (170). Carr and Elizabeth get no comfort from the government either. When they go to the government office to report the losses in the bombing, they are stunned at the insensitivity of the officials:

We saw wretched people (mainly women with young children), who at a blow had lost most of all they prized in the world,

tormented and harassed by a niggling, suspicious, hostile, inadequate and incompetent system of Inquisitorial Assistance such as left in their hearts only bitterness, grief and contempt. (168)

The situation is so bad that one woman shouts, “It’s to be hoped the Government is fighting Hitler as hard as it’s fighting us” (169). Even as the working class is suffering and sacrificing everything for the war effort, the government is still a source of problems and pain. As George Winterbourne comments in Aldington’s *Death of a Hero*, “one of the horrors of the War was not fighting the Germans, but living under the British” (242). For Billany, the war becomes nothing more than a way for the petite capitalists to make money out of other people’s misery. The high rents exploit the masses when they are most vulnerable.

William K. Malcolm argues that Lewis Grassie Gibbon makes a similar point about the First World War in *A Scots Quair*. Malcolm writes that “the Great War witnesses a substantial upsurge in [...] greedy materialism and sounds the final death-knell for the Kinraddie crofters towards the end of the novel” (141). The difference between Gibbon and Billany is that while Gibbon, concerned with the disintegration of a tradition, uses the war as the final nail in the coffin of the rural way of life Billany, concerned with showing the oppression of the present socio-economic system, uses the war to reinforce his view of capitalism. Billany does not believe that post-war society will make the lives of the working class better. The war destroys the lives of the working class utterly and completely. Every character, whether civilian or soldier, will somehow be destroyed by the war. To ignore this is to miss the point of *The Trap*.

As Munton argued, *The Trap* argues that the war extends the peacetime

capitalist efforts to keep the working class in poverty. George Orwell writes in “The Lion and the Unicorn” that

The left-wingers who wail that “this is a capitalist war” and that “British Imperialism” is fighting for loot have got their heads screwed on backwards. The last thing the British moneyed class wish for is to acquire fresh territory. It would simply be an embarrassment. Their war aim (both unattainable and unmentionable) is simply to hang on to what they have got. (85)

Billany disagrees with part of this statement; a capitalist war is not *necessarily* a war for “loot”, to acquire new territory. A war designed to control another capitalist power (like Germany) and to protect existing territory (like the British Empire) can also be defined as a capitalist war. This latter definition is how Billany sees the war. The aim of the war is to maintain the capitalist system, a view that Orwell, a supporter of the war, cannot share.

Carl von Clausewitz in his famous statement in *On War* writes that “[t]he war of a community – of whole nations, and particularly of civilised nations – always starts from a political condition, and is called forth by a political motive. It is, therefore, a political act” (21). Louise Willmot interprets this statement as meaning that “Clausewitz is [...] asserting that war should never be waged for its own sake, but always with the rational objective of protecting the state and its interests. The political goal for which war is being waged must never be allowed to slip from view” (xiv). The problem with the Second World War was that there seemed to be no political goal. Churchill only discussed war aims reluctantly, and this split the government on the issue of even raising the question of war aims. Paul Addison writes that “[s]ome of those in authority (though not Churchill) believed that it was important for the sake of raising popular morale to announce promises of a better

post-war Britain” (121). In 1941, Labour MP Arthur Greenwood was appointed as Minister without Portfolio and was put in charge of questions of reconstruction (Jeffreys, 114). As Kevin Jeffreys point out, however, “[o]ne of the major stumbling-blocks facing Greenwood had been the knowledge that Churchill was opposed to the discussion of any politically contentious themes” (114). With Churchill opposed to discussing of politically divisive issues, the discussion and implementation of war aims was slow. As a result, “[t]he second half of the war [...] witnessed an active phase of reconstruction, with the government outlining its commitment to reform in a series of white papers. But these departures [...] did not necessarily imply a radically new approach to social policy. The coalition was, if anything, characterised by prevarication in domestic policy” (Jeffreys, 113). Churchill, perhaps remembering the controversy about war aims in the First World War (most famously remembered for Sassoon’s protest against the war), avoided all discussion of the political goals that Britain would secure in return for their involvement in the war.

Through the wartime hardships of the Pascoes, Billany argues that the idea of the war as a “People’s War” is a myth. Billany maintains that capitalist society fools people like the Pascoes into blindly accepting its ideology. Capitalism teaches the Pascoes that they can achieve their dreams through hard work only to betray them by taking everything away from them when their house is destroyed and their son killed in a bombing raid. The meagre possessions that gave them so much pride are gone, years of hard work that has been destroyed in one night. After Carr and Elizabeth find a new place for them to live in temporarily, Carr comments that “[o]ur roots were not there, it was just a temporary shelter, not a home. There were no household gods in it at all” (183). The household gods are those items that became the idols to the Pascoes

materialistic dreams. The Romans built shrines to their household gods, but in the modern capitalist society of Britain, the shrines themselves have become the household gods. The possessions themselves have replaced transcendental deities. By destroying their possessions (and therefore their household gods), the capitalistic war has destroyed the very essence of the Pascoes, that of home and relative security.

The raid not only destroys their home, but it destroys the spirit of the parents and the future of the children. When Carr visits John in the hospital, he says

As I remembered him, he was a fairly broad, healthy, cheerful middle-aged man, with a shadow of a stoop...Now he was an old man with the last gleams of middle-age leaving him (182).

He makes similar comments about Marion: "She was shrunkened, withered to a leaf-like thinness. Her face seemed mere skin folded over a tiny skull" (159). While it finally ages the parents, the most devastating effect is on the next generation. David, a thirteen-year-old boy, is killed; he has no future. His older sister, Elizabeth, has her life changed as well. Carr quickly marries her so that his pay will go to her when he is overseas in order to help her with money, but the change in her is more fundamental than just her marital status. The destruction of her family has drastically changed her spiritually. Carr recognises this and comments that

With one glance direct into her eyes I knew she was not the girl I had left. She was less my wife than before we were married. She had gone further from me than ever she had been before (181).

He knows that the war and the bombing have changed her into a person he does not know. The war has forced her into the role her parents can no longer fulfil, that of family provider. Even worse for her future, she tells Carr that because of money concerns she must leave her art studies in order to find a job (178). Thus, her future

options are closed for good, and she must harness herself to the Industrial Turntable in order to enable her family to survive. She becomes another victim of relentless war and capitalism.

Even the soldiers under Carr's command recognise this fact. Marlowe, one of Carr's men, comments, to Carr,

'Sir, this is a fine way for a man to spend his f-----g life, isn't it? Have you ever heard of Class Distinction, sir? I'll tell you what it means, it means Vickers-Armstrong booking a profit to look like a loss, and Churchill lighting a new cigar, and the "Times" explaining Liberty and Democracy, and me sitting on my arse in Libya splashing a fainting man with water out of my steel helmet. It's a very fine thing if only you're in the right class — that's highly important, sir, because one class gets the sugar and the other class gets the shit.' (354)

Of course Carr has heard of the class distinction; Carr's entire narrative is devoted to it. Marlowe's comments are a long way from the propaganda of the "People's War". Marlowe reflects what Arthur Marwick writes in his book *War and Social Change in the Twentieth Century*, that the "expressions of exaltation and of social solidarity are to be found almost exclusively in the diaries and comments of middle- and upper-class people" (156). Even the soldier in the field realises that, for the working class, this is not a war for democracy, not a war for a better future; instead, it is a war for profit, for the status quo, for capitalism. In "The Lion and the Unicorn", Orwell writes that despite its snobbishness and class-ridden social views England "is the only great country in Europe that is not obliged to drive hundreds of thousands of its nationals into exile or the concentration camp" (67). Billany would argue that sending off men like Carr, Shaw, and Marlowe to fight and die in the North African for King and Country serves the same purpose.

### Conclusion: The Development of a Literary Reputation

The entirety of Billany's published work had one goal: to present a vision of what British society could be. Instead of a society in which the capitalist system protects itself and destroys the less fortunate, Billany argues for a society in which everyone takes care of each other. The world Billany envisions is one in which people are free to develop in their own ways, a world in which people are not harnessed to the Industrial Turntable, a world in which people are free to follow their dreams.

Billany is no mere idealist; he is quite aware of the struggle and effort it will take to achieve his goal. All his characters face obstacles. Robbie Duncan, in *The Opera House Murders*, faces death in order to protect Jack Kirby; the boys in *The Magic Door* face a hostile and uncaring education system that tries to stifle their creativity. The prisoners in *The Cage* have their freedom taken away from them, separated from the world by a capitalist war. In *The Trap*, Michael Carr faces not only death and incarceration but his own weaknesses. They all must struggle in the face of what seems to be overwhelming opposition. In the end, they all achieve their victories, no matter how small. Duncan, in the greatest melodramatic fashion, defeats the criminals and wins the love of the beautiful woman. The schoolboys, exploited until the end, learn what loyalty and comradeship truly mean. The prisoners, their futures still in doubt, experience the fascist defeat and escape (even if temporarily) captivity. Carr, although in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, is reminded that what makes people really human is the ability to love others.

With his emphasis on the individual, Billany opposes dogmatic views of Marxism put forth by Communist theorists, such as Gyorgy Lukács or Louis Althusser. Nowhere in Billany's writing is a vanguard Party represented; all of Billany's main characters work at the grassroots level. There is a sense of collective action, but there is no Party (such as the Communist Party of Great Britain) guiding that action. This lack of dogma carries over to his literary ideas as well. While never officially disassociating himself from the ideas of Socialist realism, Billany clearly did not follow the tenets of the literary movement. His wide range of influences allows Billany to use a variety of forms to present his political ideas. He used this variety of form to great advantage in his career, although he never allowed the political message to interfere with the particular genre he choose to adopt. He allows his individual talent the freedom to express itself rather than limit himself to the strait-jacket of literary movements, such as Socialist realism. Billany shows that a variety of literary techniques can be used to develop political ideas and concerns.

Billany, after all, does examine many of the same ideas that his contemporaries explore. He is very much a "Thirties" author, participating in and commenting on the political and literary debates that preoccupied his more famous contemporaries. The debates that dominated the work of writers such as W.H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell inform Billany's work. Billany, however, stands outside, and is actively antagonistic to what Samuel Hynes calls "The Auden Generation", the middle class, public school educated group that dominates the literature (and critical responses to) the Thirties. Billany's voice is the articulate voice of the frustrated, disillusioned, and angry



working class. His work casts a whole new light on the period roughly between 1900 and 1943. Through his political radicalism, Billany shows British society and the capitalist system for what they truly are: brutal, oppressive, and callous.

Having said that, Billany's literary reputation has not achieved the level that it deserves. Even a writer like Walter Greenwood is, at least, remembered, no matter how grudgingly, as a writer. Billany is not even given that consideration. After all, despite its obvious popularity at the time of publication and its link with the social issues of its time, *The Trap*, unlike other novels of the Second World War, has been largely forgotten. How can a novel so acclaimed at the time of its publication be forgotten so quickly? Phyllis Lassner in *British Women Writers of World War II* points to one possible reason. Writing about Tom Harrisson's manifesto ("Why Not War Writers") which he co-signed with other male colleagues in October 1941, Lassner argues that Harrisson defines war literature as representing combat experience, and, because of this, Lassner writes that "women's debates and experiences of the war do not figure in the studies which define war experiences" (2). Just as Lassner shows that definitions of what constitutes "war literature", with its focus on the combatant, excludes the experiences and (it has to be said) the dangers women faced, the definition that constitutes the literature of the Second World War excludes the experiences of writers like Billany. Billany, as a front-line soldier, would not suffer exclusion on this basis. In fact, Billany, as a combatant, should naturally be of interest to critics who study war literature. This means that Billany's exclusion from "war literature" must be based on something other than his role as a soldier. Ken Worpole and Alan Munton both offer other theories to explain the reason

for the critical neglect of Billany. Worpole maintains that the way “in which the war has been reconstructed in popular literature since 1945 [i.e. concepts such as “The People’s War”]” (70) means that “really significant books such as Billany’s have been both marginalized and in some ways silenced” (70). Worpole’s view, then, is that the collective cultural memories surrounding the war exclude those writers who do not conform to accepted attitudes. Those novels that attack the idea that the Second World War was a “People’s War” or a “Just” war are pushed to the literary margins. Billany’s attack not only on capitalism but on the war itself certainly does not conform to accepted views. This goes part, but not all, of the way to explaining why Billany has fallen through the literary cracks.

Alan Munton offers a different theory and believes that Billany’s neglect is a result of the novel’s tone. He writes that “[o]ne of the tones of Billany’s discourse is anger” (66) and continues to say that “English fiction can always admit characters who are angry for specific reasons, and readers may become angry reading of injustices suffered by the innocent. Angry authors are a different matter, for they demand an assent that we may not be prepared to give” (67). For Munton, then, readers react against Billany’s tone. The position Billany takes, as committed Communist, forces the reader to agree with his criticisms in order to read the novel sympathetically. This is, I would argue, based on how the Second World War has been reconstructed in the cultural narrative. Billany’s anger compels the reader to agree with his inherent criticisms of the war, a position that reader, because the war has been defined as a justified war, is unwilling to take. This explains why extremely angry books about the First World War,

like Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* or Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, remain popular. Reader can easily accept that the Great War, fought for dubious aims, was a brutal and nasty conflict that served no purpose. When Billany, however, levels the same accusation at the Second World War and then goes farther by arguing that the war is nothing more than a cynical attempt by the British ruling class to keep the working class oppressed, readers pull back from the criticism, unable to make that ideological connection.

Readers can accept a writer who has specific complaints about the conduct of the war. For example, Evelyn Waugh, in novels such as *Put Out More Flags* and *The Sword of Honour* Trilogy, also criticises the conduct of the war, and his novels are not forgotten. In fact, Waugh is, justly, very much celebrated. The difference is in Billany's rejection of the idea of a "just war". Where Waugh criticises the conduct of the war from a traditional conservative position, Billany does so from an angry revolutionary position. Waugh never questions the fundamental necessity of the war; he merely objects to what he sees as the betrayal of the values the war was supposed to protect. Billany attacks the very basis of the war and rejects the accepted view of the war. Readers can accept Waugh because he is not attacking traditional assumptions of British culture; he does not ask readers to give assent to ideas that are revolutionary, which Billany does (following Munton's argument). Waugh reaffirms traditional British values, while Billany is intent on destroying the existing social structure in favour of Communism.

Not only is Billany a Communist, but he is also very much an individualist. Billany was so much an individualist that he was even prepared to deviate from the

Communist Party line about the war. *The Trap* was written after the Communist Party of Great Britain changed its policy toward the war. Noreen Branson, in *History of the Communist Party: 1927-1941*, states that on 4 July, 1941, (twelve days after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union) the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a statement that "the Communist Party would support every measure of the government designed to secure victory in the common cause for the complete defeat and destruction of Hitlerism" (332). For the Communist Party, with the Soviet Union at war with Germany and, therefore, a British ally, the war was no longer an imperialist war, but a war against Fascism. Billany, on the other hand, never deviates from the view that the war is a struggle between two capitalist powers, ignoring the view of the Communist Party. The alliance between Britain and the Soviet Union had no effect on Billany's anti-war stance. Where the Communist Party of Great Britain was willing to co-operate with the existing social structure during the war, Billany was not. Billany's almost American individualism unsettles the British social and literary establishment which puts social stability before the individual. Similar to Thoreau's ideas in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience", Billany believes that his only obligation is to do what he feels is right; therefore, he is unwilling to allow himself to be controlled by outside forces, for example the Communist Party.

Even the British left has never accepted dissenting voices easily. Early in the war, those who deviated from the Party line were removed from positions of power. The Party decided that Harry Pollitt, who from the beginning of the war argued that the Party should support the war, in Noreen Branson's words "should not continue as General

Secretary but should take on other duties” (270). Pollitt (being the good Party man) accepted the decision only to return to that position when the Party changed its view of the war. Prior to the war, George Orwell was constantly at odds with the British socialists. His experience of the Stalinist campaign against other leftist groups during the Spanish Civil War incited his bitter opposition to the Soviet Union and its influence among Communists in Britain. Even before 1937, Orwell’s relations with other Socialists was far from amicable. Richard Hoggart, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier*, writes that Victor Gollancz objected to the book’s second part, an attack on British Socialists. Hoggart writes that Gollancz felt that Orwell had “given him more than he bargained for — a ‘highly provocative’ piece, he said pawkily, as he twisted and turned to protect his readers and his club’s [Left Book Club] ideological purity from this rude old Etonian” (v). Orwell’s polemic against what he saw as the hypocrisy of the British left caused outrage among those on the left. Orwell, by this point a fairly established author, could withstand the ire of the left thanks to his growing reputation. Billany, a little known author who died before his two best novels (*The Cage* and *The Trap*) were published, could be quickly and quietly ignored by those, in the post-war, who disagreed with his arguments.

British culture, as a whole, has often had problems with novels that attacked it, novels that fundamentally wanted to change society. As Robbie Duncan, the rogue narrator from *The Opera House Murders*, says,

In this land of free thought nobody takes the least exception to your believing that the capitalist system works unfairly. You can draw whatever morals you like from Lord Blank’s luxury yacht on the one hand, and an underfed schoolchild’s free bottle of milk on the other. When you see the queue at the Labour Exchange, you

can think just what you like about Lord Bonehead's town house, and Lord Bonehead's country house, and Lord Bonehead's fleet of Rolls-Royces – so long as you only think it. Far be it from our benevolent rulers to put fetters on the spirit – they can't anyhow. It's when you come to translate your theories about property into practice that you encounter opposition. (17)

This is, of course, Duncan's self-justification for attempting to steal ten thousands pounds from his rich client, thus ending his career as a detective. Yet, Duncan does point to a serious issue; British society allows free thought but not free action. George Orwell, in "The Lion and the Unicorn", writes that in Britain "[t]he liberty of the individual is still believed in, almost as in the nineteenth century. But this has nothing to do with economic liberty, the right to exploit others for profit. It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above" (59). Billany argues that liberty has limits set upon it. Orwell assumes that British society gives the individual the freedom to "do what you like in your spare time", but Billany believes that this freedom is a false freedom, that there is no freedom of action. At times, novelists suffer for this attitude. Robert Tressell, a sign writer and housepainter (?1870-1911) and author of the popular novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, is a case in point. Tressell's novel has become considered a classic working class novel, and yet the novel was edited in order to tone down its revolutionary, Socialist message. Alan Sillitoe writes that the first edition he read "had been cut to half length [...] made to end on a note of despair suggesting that cranks who believed in Socialism could do nothing better than think of suicide" (1964, n.p.). Billany has been a victim of a similar literary fate. Just as Tressell's novel was edited so as not to offend middle class readers so to has Billany's angry and revolutionary

novel been pushed to the margins of critical consideration. The conservative literary establishment finds ways to undermine truly revolutionary novels either through editing the revolutionary ideas as with Tressell or by ignoring those ideas altogether as with Billany. That is not to say that there has been some kind of conspiracy directed against Billany himself. The forces that create the canon merely developed in a way that left Billany and his fiction behind.

Billany's death in the war also helps to explain his lack of standing in the canon. Unlike Orwell, Billany had yet to make his mark on the literary world before his death, his "arrival" happened, if it happened at all, posthumously. Billany was not able to continue to publish and, thereby, was unable to get himself recognised by the literary establishment. A comparison with Wilfred Owen provides, I think, an appropriate example. Owen could have suffered the same fate with his death on the bank of the Oise-Sambre Canal on 4 November, 1918, but Owen had literary champions in writers like his friend Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell. Sassoon and Sitwell were able to ensure that Owen's work was not forgotten. Through the efforts of editors such as Sassoon, Edith Sitwell, Edmund Blunden, and C. Day Lewis, Owen became an influential and much anthologised figure in spite of his early death. While his family should be commended for getting both *The Cage* and *The Trap* published, Billany had no such champion, had no one to reveal the great loss that he was to his family and to the literary community.

In the end, the literary establishment has been unfair to Billany; his neglect is a harsh judgement. His stance against the war and against capitalism helps readers and critics view attitudes to the war from a more dissenting point of view. His writing attacks

the myths of “The Auden Generation” and adds to critical understanding of the period. Further, Billany’s war shows that the literature of the Second World War is not a monolith of praise for the “Good War”, for the fight against fascism. Billany enables critics to see the war from a broader perspective. The neglect of Billany and his work begs the question: how many other writers like Billany have been forgotten by the reading public? Ignoring dissenting voices skews the view of the Thirties and the war. Perhaps now is the time to bring writers like Billany in from the cold. As time gives a necessary distance to the intense emotions incited by the war, a new generation of literary critics should push back the boundaries of understanding about the Thirties and the Second World War.

Billany is a truly revolutionary artist in spirit and purpose. His Communism is not some intellectual or literary game. Billany’s strength as a writer lies in his deep concern for the individual, for those who are helpless in the face of an oppressive system. His work reveals what it means to be human. While his novels are at times violent and brutal, there is, at heart, an essential goodness, an essential idealism. Billany’s fiction is fuelled by the belief that humanity is capable of so much more than the selfish, greedy, and enslaved society that has developed under capitalism. Communism becomes for Billany not a prescriptive dogmatic ideology that ensnares the people; instead, it is a way to free society from the chains that, like Scrooge and Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, humans have forged. Billany’s hope is that humans can be free to follow their dreams, to follow their own paths in life, and, finally, to be with those whom they love.



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