

Excavating Blitz-Time

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A Junior Research Fellow explores the literary and cultural impact of the London Blitz

If you can blow whole places out of existence, you can blow whole places into it.' So says Pepita in Elizabeth Bowen's 'Mysterious Kôr' (1942), an extraordinary short story that takes place in a World War II London likened to the timeless setting of H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887). Where the earlier book is an exemplary text of the 'lost world' literary genre of the *fin de siècle*, dealing with a period in which imperial adventurers travelled to discover archaeological history, Bowen's story is set against the modern violence of aerial bombardment. In Pepita's version of Haggard's world, Kôr is hermetic, protective, and stable, an 'abiding city' that offers an imaginative shelter against the ravages of air warfare. She is so absorbed by this fictitious setting that she confuses her own reality: 'What, you mean we're there now, that here's there, that now's then?' her boyfriend asks.

The story's haunting deixis does double duty. For while 'here' and 'there' refer to London and Kôr, they also refer to the doubled space-times of Blitzed London. During air raids on the city, the wartime truism of being 'bombed back into the stone ages' found its ironic corollary, as bombardment uncovered older archaeological ruins while creating new ones out of present-day infrastructure. On a particularly destructive night of bombing, 29 December 1940, twenty-eight bombs fell around St Paul's, revealing parts of the millennia-old Roman London Wall for the first time in two hundred years. Kenneth Clark, then director of the National Gallery and the War Artists' Advisory Committee, commissioned Duncan Grant to paint the cathedral which never 'looked more beautiful than it does rising out of this sort of Pompeii in the foreground', he stated in a letter. Other architectural wonders discovered as a result of the bombings included an underground chamber paved with tiles, conjectured to be part of a baptistry,

below the altar of St Mary Le Bow Church on Cheapside; a Gothic blocked-up doorway in the south wall of St Vedast's Church, on Foster Lane; and a seventh-century Romanesque arch behind the organ of All Hallows Barking Church in Byward Street, west of the Tower of London, which was previously concealed by panelling.

Between 1940 and 1945, one-third of the City of London was destroyed, which continually opened up the capital's landscape for archaeologists to investigate. *The Times* wrote in 1944 regarding these archaeological revelations: 'The centuries fall away as the war approaches its climax, or its end, and disclose new views of old London ... [they] yield a rich harvest of interest. The long past as well as the present and future are here, and we may look back and forward as no man has done since



Bomb damage at All Hallows Church, December 1940. An arch formed of Roman tiles without a keystone, dating from the latter part of the seventh century, was found behind the organ.

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1660'. The wealth of 'new' old ruins led to a section dedicated to such findings in the first National Buildings Record exhibition in June 1944, held at the National Gallery. The enthusiasm for London's material past persisted into the early post-war years, leading to several large-scale excavations and, in 1946, to the inauguration of the Roman and Medieval London Excavation Council.

The uncanny way in which past and present co-existed in mutually revelatory ways became the grounds on which writers and artists attempted to narrate continuity out of discontinuity. For example, such sites of conjunction between heritage destroyed and heritage found are documented in William Kent's *The Lost Treasures of London* (1947), which compares London before and after the Blitz. What is remarkable about Kent's book, and many others at the time, is its meticulous descriptions of pre-ruined London: accompanied by maps for walkers to 'tour' the contemporary rubble, it emphasizes the power of memory in suturing the violence of the present, encouraging the reconstruction of what once was. Such acts of temporal elision and mnemonic selectivity would re-appear in various guises. Arthur Mee's *London: Heart of the Empire and Wonder of the World*, an encyclopaedic tome of London's districts and their histories, was originally printed in 1937 but reissued in 1946 with virtually no edits, save for a new preface entitled 'Eternal City'. In the visual arts, too, temporal resilience abounds. As with Grant's painting, Muirhead Bone's massive two-metre-tall *St Bride's and the City after the Fire, 29th December 1940* (1941) focuses on St Paul's Cathedral, which was remarkably unscathed during the war. Bone's picture presents an aerial perspective of the Blitz that guides the viewer's line of sight through the destruction below, leading to the looming cathedral in the distance and the hope it represents. Meanwhile, in cinema, Ealing Studios' first comedies were filmed on bombed ruins before they were cleared away. In plots about criminal gangs and juvenile delinquency, these films probe reconstruction in both material and sociological terms.

Much of my research fellowship has been dedicated to deepening and extending the study of what I have called 'Blitz-Time', not just in



Muirhead Bone, St. Bride's and the City after the Fire, 29th December 1940 (1941)
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terms of sifting through archival material in the Imperial War Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum of London, but in terms of understanding the cultural and political implications of narrative approaches to representing catastrophe. Blitzed London was what some cultural historians and historiographers call a 'narrative community', one in which civilians-artists' and writers' interpretations have significantly impacted how the event is subsequently remembered. Because 'the narrative form allows the nation to be imagined as continuous, and for discrete events to be interlinked into a meaningful history,' Marek Tamm writes, discontinuity itself became an essential and fundamental part of a story about the persistence of national continuity. This was, of course, a method of interpretation favoured by propaganda. From Winston Churchill's claim of Britain's 'finest hour' to J.B. Priestley's broadcasts, which spun the Dunkirk evacuation into a triumph – 'we began this war by snatching glory out of

defeat and then swept on to victory’, he said in 1940, when victory could not seem further away – the war was often presented as though it has already passed. It was a memory even while it was taking place.

The role that narrative plays in perceptions of nationhood and historical representation has obvious relevance for the literature of the day. Although much has been said of late twentieth-century and contemporary treatments of World War II, until fairly recently, scholarship viewed the 1930s and 1940s as fallow decades in so far as literary experimentation was concerned. The impression of artistic paucity was itself a carry-over from the wartime and immediate post-war period, when writers repeatedly drew attention to the difficulty of creative and imaginative work. As Pamela Hansford Johnson stated in 1944, ‘It is possible that no novel of major importance will be written during the present war. The impact of external events, the constant fluctuations in social and moral temperature, must affect the flow of the artist’s creation.’ George Orwell has also suggested ‘the *impossibility* of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape.’ My work accounts for the writings that did appear during the convulsions, and for their stylistic and thematic diversity. From autobiographies about childhood to spy-thrillers about amnesia and memory loss; from fragmented, myopic short stories written during air raids to early post-war novels that map centuries of history and geography: Blitz writing is rich and variegated, spans the middlebrow to the highbrow, and insists on an aesthetics of pastness to address the present

and the future.

Bowen seemed to have anticipated our task of belated literary criticism. As she wrote in her novel *The Heat of the Day* (1949): ‘You’ll have to re-read me backwards, figure me out – you will have years to do that in, if you want to.’ Ultimately, a literary-cultural analysis of the Second World War within discourses of narrative and temporality testifies to the importance of re-considering how and why the event is figured the way it is within cultural memory today. According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory ‘comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose “cultivation” serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image’. It relies on references known to a certain group, and the invocation and perpetuation of these references reinforce a sense of collective identity, which is as much a reality as it is an image-perception, thereby ‘preserv[ing] the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity’. Thanks to such repositories of cultural memory – drawn from television documentaries and blockbuster feature films, from exhibitions in galleries and museums, from commemorative events or conversely, from the commemoration of events in no way related to war through wartime iconography (air shows and the ceremonial flying of World War II aircraft come to mind) – the war is as present as it has ever been. If, as one historian puts it, “[r]emembering” World War II requires no immediate experience of those years’ today, it is well worth not only remembering, but interrogating, where such ‘recollections’ came from in the first place. ■