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Review Article

Service in Exile: Poets Abroad in Wartime

"Many Histories Deep": The Personal Landscape Poets in Egypt, 1940-45. By Roger Bowen. Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1995. Pp. 246. \$39.50.

The opening sentence of Roger Bowen's interesting book about the *Personal Landscape* poets in Egypt between 1940 and 1945 reveals the potential scope of such a work: "'*Many Histories Deep*' is a study of writers in wartime" (15). However, "writers in wartime" turns out to mean "specific writers in a specific locale." This narrow focus is a pity; the attitudes and problems which Bowen analyzes were shared by other writers from different backgrounds and in different theatres between 1939 and 1945. While he discusses the Egyptian milieu of his authors in detail, and pithily establishes the context in which this group of well-educated British exiles (mainly non-combatants) spent the war years after the fall of Greece and Crete, Bowen does not refer to other writers in other places of exile during the same war. There is clearly no overriding reason why he should, and what he does, he does well. But there are such marked similarities among exile-writers during the war that his informative evocation of this particular milieu would have gained from some reference to others in other places. A sense of context would have been established for his more closely focussed examination of one group of

writers and the poetry magazine they produced in eight numbers between January 1942 and 1945.

The magazine, *Personal Landscape*, was an especially good poetry journal with a distinctive ethos and tone. Bowen offers a sensitive analysis of that tone, and carefully examines the ethos of the exile-world of its main contributors. The similarity of interest, outlook and values among the group is notable. Their cohesiveness is in itself a justification for a book-length study of the group. Their response to geographical and cultural dislocation, however, was remarkably similar to that of writers experiencing the same kind of dislocation in other parts of the empire they were serving. To have established this commonality within an analysis of the distinctiveness of the Egyptian group would have given "*Many Histories Deep*" greater resonance.

Roger Bowen begins his study with a Prologue entitled "War, Empire, and Memory." In this chapter and the next two he is at his best. The Prologue is followed by "Wartime Cairo: Exile and Empire" and "Personal Landscapes." All three of these early sections of the book establish the complex setting (historical, cultural, political) of the Cairo literary scene in wartime and also delineate the connections among the main literary players. Bowen explains how and why they ended up in Egypt in the early 1940s, and discusses the backgrounds and interests which they shared.

He goes on, in the remainder of the book, to devote a chapter to each of the *Personal Landscape* poets he has selected: Keith Douglas, Terence Tiller, Bernard Spencer and Lawrence Durrell. There follows a section on Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, entitled "After the Fact," in which that postwar fictional re-creation of Egyptian life at the end of the imperial epoch is discussed in relation to Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. "*Many Histories Deep*" concludes with an Epilogue in which the author outlines the careers of his major writers after the war, and the subsequent history of critical commentary on their work.

Without exception the chapters on specific authors are less successful than those early general chapters on the historical moment in Egypt from 1940 to 1945, and the cultural background of the middle-class exiles who commented, in *Personal Landscape* verse, on their by-passed status as lesser imperial servants in a corner of the world that had known successive imperial regimes.

The discrete studies of individual writers are self-contained, and attempt to give a comprehensive outline of their work up to their Egyptian period, with a particular focus on the writing they produced in Egypt during the war. Poets like Tiller and Lawrence Durrell (discussed as a *poet*) did not produce enough significant verse in the period to make such commentary compelling, while the work of others such as Keith Douglas and Bernard Spencer is too complex to benefit from a summary discussion growing out of the Egyptian period. The chapter on Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, although interesting in itself, does not really advance the argument of the book. It does establish Durrell's retrospective view of the society he inhabited during the war and the end-of-an-era imperialistic ethos of British presence and dominance in an ostensibly independent dependency. But here, too, Bowen's instinct to get it all down, to explain a work in its entirety, acts against a strong sense of argument. This is true of the argument about the *Quartet* itself, contained in the chapter, and even more so in relation to the argument of the book as a whole.

Bowen sees the connection between the *Alexandria Quartet* and Durrell's wartime poems "in the themes of love and identity, in the masks of personality and the mutable character who deceives everyone, even himself" (164). This is really a very broad kind of linkage. Those particular themes are not specific to any period or locale. The more important link is offered by the cultural and historical setting of the novels:

What is importantly added to the *Quartet*, and provides a more traditional novelistic skeleton, is the political and social collision of East and West, and an accompanying critique of the West's defensive measure in this collision, the discourse of Orientalism. The absence of contemporary Islamic Egypt in the poems becomes a gaudy presence in the novels, and this presence in turn provides the means of that critique. John Holloway has described Durrell's Alexandria as the "metropolis of terminal colonialism," and that sense of an imperial last hurrah is as important to the weft of these novels as gnosticism or the theory of relativity. (164)

Bowen has—in his opening chapter—carefully described the complex imperial relations that existed between British officialdom and Egypt in the war years. Those steely relations were the backdrop to the inward-

turning reaction (hence the title) of most *Personal Landscape* writers to their tedious lives as minor officials or teachers in a colonial, or at least colonized, environment during a war which was both imperial and democratic. In this the Egyptian writers were not alone in the years 1939 to 1945, although their roles were less clearly connected to the imperial mission than those of other writers in East Africa or India. Durrell's post-imperial, retrospective view of this era is, of necessity, driven by a different impulse from that of the wartime writers (including himself) who were advancing the imperial cause, whether or not they understood that the colonialism in which they found themselves was terminal. To write, after Nasser, after the Suez crisis, and with Israel established in the Middle East, as Durrell does in the *Quartet*, is to write with a completely different kind of consciousness from that of the pre- and immediately post-Alamein era, with Germany very much undefeated and Japan the major imperial power in the Pacific.

In the same vein, the concept of "Orientalism," which Bowen investigates in relation to the *Quartet*, is very much a post-imperial analytical tool, rooted as firmly in the culture of the postcolonial as the *Personal Landscape* poets were rooted in their wartime roles as insignificant servants of Empire. This distinction is noted by Bowen, but he does not solve the organizational problem which that condition sets for his study. The "After the Fact" postscript deals with a cultural perspective quite different from that which forms the subject of the remainder of the work. Bowen points to this change, but does not resolve the disjointed effect which it creates.

The subject of the postscript is in reality a different one from that of "The *Personal Landscape* poets in Egypt, 1940-45." Bowen writes:

Durrell was a spectator at that last imperial "assembly point," and in his repossession of Cairo and Alexandria for the *Quartet* ten or so years after the war, there is a species of textual recolonizing. This *re*-presentation of Egypt adds a late postscript to the tradition of Orientalist discourse I have earlier alluded to, a tradition that is both the enabling force and the product of imperial power. As Edward Said puts it: "the Orient was almost a European invention and has been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." He could be describing the *Quartet*, and the *Quartet* itself only reinvents what has gone before. (165)

Said's point is that unthinking European writers created a tradition of oriental mystery in their attempts to come to terms with their own experience of foreignness. Bowen's point is that Durrell's postwar fiction re-creates an Egyptian world in which that European tendency is understood and imitated:

If Orientalist discourse is a form of political control, of knowing, compartmentalizing, and structuring an alien culture . . . then Durrell's participation is more often ironic, self-conscious, and playful. . . . As Durrell recreates his Egypt according to the conventions of Orientalism, the fact of the war and the Arab nationalism it served to accelerate ensure the decay of the literary tradition on which he self-consciously depends. The *Quartet* becomes an epitaph for a lost world, for a political and aesthetic balance of power no longer in place. (167)

All of this is a far cry from the mood and predicament of wartime writers in Egypt. G. S. Fraser, who was a figure in the Cairo literary scene, and then transferred to Eritrea, makes a comment on his exile-role that illustrates the chasm between post-colonial analysis and the *cris de coeur* of those in forgotten places (Eritrea made Cairo appear to be in the heart of things) serving in a patriotic war against a tyrannical enemy. In an essay entitled "Asmara Diary, 1942" Fraser argues that his "best friends are all in Aberdeen, in London, in Cambridge, and Cairo, and other inaccessible places, and my importance for them must be becoming, at the best, marginal" (Waller and de Mauny 29). For that reason his importance to himself is also marginal: "I am on my own margin. I am no longer caring so much about what I really believe, about love, or about fame. . . . I wonder a little if for all of us, all over the world, the sense of life—that sense which it is so hard to keep lively—has become a little marginal" (29-30). In this spiritual desert, his response is typical of many soldier-writers during the war:

There is a phrase the Army uses, one of its many sinister and eloquent phrases—"the necessary bodies"; we are all necessary bodies now, and if we would rebel against that, we must find a desert more remote than the Sahara or a secret city farther away than Harar. It is not our own satisfaction, or even the satisfaction of self-sacrifice for some concrete tradition, that matters practically—it is rather the patience to go on working for a purpose only vaguely imagined and abstractly conceived.

It is the sense of the future, of the possible, of what may somehow be achieved, if we clench our hands, and calm our nerves with a drink or a smoke, and carry on. There is no longer a center, but we on the margin can somehow create one. (30)

Fraser was in the army (in a clerical position), and as a soldier—even a non-fighting one—he did know a different set of limitations from those of the *Personal Landscape* poets discussed by Bowen, with the exception of Keith Douglas. The sense of purpose wrestled with here is not evident in the detached mode of much *Personal Landscape* writing. The restrictions and absurdities of army life added a further challenge to exile-existence for writers during the war, but the need to survive gives an edge to writing like this which is different from most of the work in *Personal Landscape*, except that by Douglas.

Keith Douglas is the pre-eminent British soldier-poet of the Second World War, and the poems he published in *Personal Landscape* are among his best. Killed in Normandy in 1944, he had no postwar career, and that too distinguishes him from other writers dealt with in "*Many Histories Deep*." Because of his own determinedly individualistic response to the groups in which he found himself, his poems suit the personal emphasis of *Personal Landscape*, but their distinctive stamp differentiates his work.

The other poets discussed by Bowen had various civilian jobs in wartime Egypt. There were three editors of *Personal Landscape*: Robin Fedden, Lawrence Durrell and Bernard Spencer. Terence Tiller was also closely associated with the magazine. As Bowen observes: "Tiller's name did not appear on the masthead; as advisor rather than editor, he remained *Personal Landscape's* 'fourth man'" (40). All were well-educated and all shared an experience of and love for Greece and things Greek. The occupation of Greece had driven them and others like them into the Egyptian holding tank of British influence and military power in the eastern Mediterranean.

Robin Fedden had been in Egypt since 1934. In 1939 he went from Cairo to Athens to become Cultural Attaché in the Legation. There he met Lawrence Durrell who had been living in Corfu since 1935 and had moved to Athens on the outbreak of war to work for the Information Service. Durrell moved from the Embassy Press Office in Athens to the British Council and there met Bernard Spencer, who had joined the

Council in February 1940 and had taken up his first post shortly after at the Institute of English Studies in Salonika. Bowen writes: "By the end of the year the Council had ceased all operations in Salonika, and staff members were evacuated to Athens. Among Spencer's homeless colleagues was an old acquaintance from Oxford, Robert Liddell" (39); the mid-century heyday of Oxbridge intellectual polish and sprezzatura was much in evidence.

This group of intellectuals and hellenophiles all made their way from Greece to Egypt—often in dangerous circumstances—during the conquest of Greece and Crete by the invading German army. The group included Olivia Manning and her husband Reggie Smith (also with the British Council), who feature as Harriet and Guy Pringle in Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* and *Levant Trilogy*. Robin Fedden had missed the Greek disaster, having returned to Egypt in the summer of 1940 to the English Department at Fuad I University. Terence Tiller had come directly to Egypt, taking up a position at Fuad I University, lecturing in literature and history. Durrell and Spencer continued their association with the British Council in Egypt. Soldier-writers who appeared in Egypt during the desert war, and mingled with the *litterati* already there, included Keith Douglas, G. S. Fraser and Ian Fletcher.

Bowen is excellent when describing the mood of wartime Cairo in which these individualistic intellectuals, who were basically modernist in taste, worked in cultural or official posts which were part of the British war effort, or at least part of the promulgation of British culture associated with the war. There was inevitably friction between them and the older British officials and military types who saw their imperial duty in a different light. Bowen writes:

Neither did the British Council always get on well with local British residents; these generally young 1930s educated men were frequently more comfortable with native cultures and students and their contemporaries than they were with the established British networks of government and business. The political and generational gap between old colonialists and young expatriates existed before their meeting in Egypt. (43)

The writers' need to keep "the sense of life—that sense which it is so hard to keep lively" described by G. S. Fraser was shared by many

intelligent people forced into either the military or an official herd by the circumstances of war. In Egypt—at least in Cairo and, to a lesser extent, in Alexandria—the absurdity of group rituals was accompanied by a further sense of unreality. Although part of an enormous military base, the civilians were detached from the war itself and its deprivations. Furthermore, they lived in "unreal" European or Levantine style in an African city with a predominantly Islamic population. Isolated from the kind of cultural refinement which they craved, exiled from their adopted Greek "homes" which they had been forced to flee, they were also separated from the daily lives of the teeming inhabitants of their Egyptian workplace.

Bowen stresses the elegiac tone of their writing: "The literary 'castaways' who passed their years and days in Cairo and Alexandria were, consciously or not, elegists as well as exiles, elegists of personal loss as well as of personal crisis" (16). He further emphasizes their being particular recorders of the break-up of the empire they served:

all had intimations of this historical break-point they were living through; their exile was a time of transition as well as a foreign place, a crisis moment as well as an accidental homeland they had to struggle against, appropriate, and invent in poetry and fiction. If their tone is frequently elegiac, that now seems percipient of them for their world has not survived. Theirs is a tale, intentionally or not, of the end of empire. (24)

This is a little heavy-handed. All writing about experience in Africa or India or South-East Asia between 1940 and 1960 is a tale of the end of empire. Many writers, who would not normally have been sent to far-flung imperial outposts without a world war, comment on their ambivalent attitude towards their unwished-for imperial roles in much wartime writing. What distinguishes the *Personal Landscape* group is their fortuitous propinquity in Egypt, where they shared so many values and attitudes.

The special quality of the group that insisted on non-groupiness is well captured in the following passage from "*Many Histories Deep*":

The conduct of their private lives occasioned at the least disapproval on the part of their employers: the flat that Durrell shared with Spencer for six months in central Cario was christened "Orgy Hall"; there were legendary bouts of merrymaking and visits, when funds allowed, to the

more established, and the more louche venues of Cairo's night life. They were all in a sense *déclassé*, having distanced themselves from the philistine establishment by their commitment to art, then finding that that same concern also divided them from the lower ranks. (42)

The use of the word "louche" suggests Roger Bowen's own Cambridge origins and his resulting ease with and sympathy towards the tone of *Personal Landscape* antics.

It is the classically-trained nonchalance of the *Personal Landscape* stalwarts which distinguished them from other wartime writers in Cairo, who also produced anthologies. *Oasis*, subtitled *The Middle East Anthology of Poetry from the Forces*, was published by three editors whose highest rank was corporal, and to whom the idea of compiling an anthology came in the coffee room of Music For All, a service club run by Lady Russell Pasha, wife of the Cairo Police Chief, at which live concerts and gramophone recitals were held (Selwyn, "Looking Back" 227).¹ Their service origins distinguish this group from Spencer, Fedden, Durrell *et al*; to them, the respite offered by the weirdly dualistic Cairo was more pronounced than its enervating otherness. In an essay entitled "My War," G. C. Norman captures both the quality of the city and the sense of furlough which this provided the serviceman:

. . . Cairo was a dream world of music, theatres and opera, cafés and cinemas, museums and mosques, where we strode the crowded, unblackened streets like conquerors, accepting the homage of shopkeepers, dragomen and shoe-blacks as to the manna born.

I suppose we should hardly recognize it now. Is Groppi's bar still serving Tom Collinses and real Vienna truffles? . . . What strangers now dwell in "Music For All," that astonishing wartime outpost of the arts? Who now inhabits the Victory Club with its immense, life-giving library and a dozen other establishments created especially for us, where, as exclusive guests, we could briefly forget the war and the desert over roast chicken and miniature eggs and chips. (*Return to Oasis* 224)

Although not quite demotic, these pleasures are certainly not "louche." The memory (the essay was published in 1980) shows how clearly all reminiscences of this period share a sense of "end of empire." The reality of Cairo life was understood by many who did not also manifest the tendency of the *Personal Landscape* inner core to exclude the war (except

for memories of the fall of Greece) from their writing. In *Return to Oasis* G. S. Fraser reflects on the mood of the *Oasis* poets in a manner that recalls his contemporary "Asmara Diary":

The special feelings that *Oasis* poets express are often a reaction to new, strange, and picturesque surroundings (the mixture of opulence and squalor in Cairo, for instance), homesickness, loneliness (typical feelings of the civilian soldier), but not the pessimism of the First World War poems. . . . No serving man in the Second World War felt, as Sassoon had done about the First, that the war was pointless; Hitlerism was something which threatened the very humanity of man and had to be destroyed. ("On War Poetry and *Oasis*," *Return to Oasis* xxxi)

The war out there in the desert ebbed and flowed while the civilian writers continued to cope with their exile lives. In *Middle East Anthology*, published in 1946, Erik de Mauny writes that, to those like himself, "marooned in Cairo," the city "asserts itself again" as the war moves further away westward after the Battle of Alamein: "This city! It is violent and crude and sensual, glowing with ruby fires at sunset, cold and wan as an outgrown passion in the morning. And we, who think we know it, know nothing of it: and yet it grips us in the entrails and we hate it and are fascinated by it" (Waller and de Mauny 134).

As one who saw action (*From Alamein to Zem!*), Keith Douglas knew Cairo as a base city of hedonistic opportunity ("Shall I get drunk, or cut myself a piece of cake?"), but he is at his most compelling when comparing this world with the stark reality of that other world he also knows and understands. Although atypical of *Personal Landscape* verse in many respects, his "Cairo Jag," which appeared in *Personal Landscape* Volume Two, Part Two in 1944, offers the defining statement on the suspended nature (to the serviceman) of Cairo pleasures:

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world
 the vegetation is of iron
 dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery
 the metal brambles have no flowers or berries
 and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine
 the dead themselves, their boots, clothes and possessions
 clinging to the ground, a man with no head
 has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.²

Typical of serving soldier-poets is the easy identification with the dead enemy. The man with no head has a souvenir of the enemy base town, which—like Cairo—has its own souvenirs and delicacies.

The informing impulse of *Personal Landscape* was clearly described by Robin Fedden in his introduction to an anthology of poems from *Personal Landscape*, published in London in 1945, and subtitled *An Anthology of Exile*. While arguing that the contributors to *Personal Landscape* "share no common outlook and subscribe to no common policy," he explains that they have acquired something of the "exile-minded": "it is not to the tragedy of exile that the word is here applied but rather to its *stagnation*" (Fedden et al 7). This is not the mood of "Cairo Jag" of "*Vergissmeinnicht*," but it does capture the flavor of most of the contributions. Fedden is just as specific in 1966 when revisiting the informing impulse of the magazine:

In the garden of the Union [the Anglo-Egyptian Union in Cairo], with ice tinkling in our glasses and bulbuls in the trees offering throaty comment, the idea took shape between Lawrence Durrell, Bernard Spencer and myself for a wartime periodical devoted mainly to verse. . . . The title expressed our wish to emphasize the importance of personal life and values when the current of all thought and feeling around set strongly in the channels of war, and when it was growing ever more difficult to exist outside the "war effort." (Fedden, n.p.)

Although the *Personal Landscape* poets reacted with a very particular flavor to their need to express themselves outside "the current" of official thought, this urge in itself was typical of many intellectuals between 1940 (the date of the extraordinary cohesion in British attitudes after Dunkirk) and 1945. Bowen does not establish this general context; as a result, his study gives a misleading sense of the uniqueness of the attitudes of the writers he discusses. Major wartime editors like Cyril Connolly in *Horizon* and John Lehmann in *Penguin New Writing* worked constantly at achieving just that independence of spirit and outlook in the face of group thinking and group attitudes which were often a part of British propaganda and war tactics. The war was indeed a People's War, and it was also officially necessary to create the sense that it was such a struggle in order to prosecute it successfully. Many writers and thinkers saw their own contribution to the war effort as a striving for the

preservation of intellectual freedom in the face of the twin threats of first a Nazi-occupied Europe and second a group-thinking, cohesive Britain. John Lehmann extended this attack on conformity to satirizing Soviet conformist attitudes in the latter years of the war when "our gallant Russian allies" were not easy targets to attack.

Part of the struggle to insist on personal sanity in opposition to clichés and officialese was an investigation of the duplicity of well-worn phrases and words. One of the most successful, and typical, *Personal Landscape* poems is Bernard Spencer's "Letters," in which his distrust of standardized emotion and the pain of his exile-separation from loved ones are both captured with urbanity:

The "dear" and "darling" and the "yours for ever"
are relics of a style. But most appears
mere rambling notes: passion and tenderness
fall like a blot or a burst of tears.

Now public truths are scarce as sovereigns,
what measure for the personal truth? How can
this ink and paper coursing continents
utter the clothed or the naked man?

(*Personal Landscape* 3 [June 1942]: 11)

Personal truth was what the civilian editors of *Personal Landscape* particularly wished to preserve, and their aim was shared by many other wartime writers. Even when public and personal truth seemed elusive—as in Spencer's lines—the obligation to articulate experience truthfully was an obscure purpose associated with war service, an act of civilization with which to oppose official barbarism on either side of the lines.

An extraordinarily similar mood to that of Spencer's "Letters" is to be found in Roy Fuller's "War Letters," published in his volume *A Lost Season* in 1944. Fuller was a Marxist in the 1930s and had no imperial illusions when posted to Kenya in the Fleet Air Arm from 1942 to 1944. He was a radar technician, never exposed to combat, and separated from his wife and children in a racially categorized part of the Empire. Longing for his wife is a constant element in his poems from Africa, and in his "War Letters," truth and lies are wholly personal:

The letters are shockingly real,
Like the personal belongings
Of someone recently dead.

The letters are permanent,
And written with our hands,
Which crease into their lines
And breathe, but are not so
Living as these letters.
Our hands are seas apart;

A pair might cease to live
While the indestructible letter
Turned lies, flew to the other. (40)

The lie into which a letter might turn in this case is entirely dependent on the absence of presence, life or death, of the loved one. When Fuller turns to public truth in his African poems, that truth is part of a general sense of self-awareness or self-knowledge. In his sonnet, "The Legions," he cynically asks if we shall be "free" when cataclysmic conflict is over, "Or shall we merely look upon our nails / And see what kind of beasts we have become; / And weep at that." Such an understanding is the public truth that emerges from danger-free exile in Fuller's case:

Exile has sores which battle cannot make,
Changing the sick from sound, the truth from fake. (*A Lost Season* 48)

Sickened and "truth"-ful, the victims of Fuller's kind of exile live in a more bitter world than those in Cairo, but their concerns are remarkably similar.

Similar too is Fuller's reaction to the privileged distance he keeps from the racially-divided local, colonized community. Once again his tone is sharper than that of the *Personal Landscape* teachers and public servants, but his assessment of terminal imperial disease is close to that which Bowen attributes to the Cairo group as a distinguishing trait. The last stanza of Fuller's "The Green Hills of Africa" makes a political point more explicitly than anything in *Personal Landscape*, but the condition described is similar:

The murder done by infinitesimal doses,
The victim weaker and weaker but uncomplaining.

Soon they will only dance for money, they'll
Discover more and more things can be sold.
What gods did you expect to find here, with
What healing powers? What subtle ways of life?
No, there is nothing but the forms and colours,
And the emotion from a world already
Dying of what state to infect the hills. (*A Lost Season* 11)

Even Fuller's retrospective views show a similarity to the attitudes of the founders of *Personal Landscape*. When lecturing on war poetry as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Fuller generalizes in a way that would have suited an editorial note in a *Personal Landscape* early number:

On a general, perhaps rather superficial view, the values asserted by the English poetry of the Second War seemed to be exclusively personal—an expression of sadness at the calamity that has befallen humanity, a nostalgia for the kindnesses and truths of domestic love. The virtue arising from the erotic affairs of two people—sometimes this seems to be all the poet is able to set against the disasters of a world. ("English Poetry" 128)

The non-combatant, of course, enjoyed the luxury of danger-free lamentation. Fuller's comments illustrate a feature of the Second World War. Comparatively little poetry of action or combat was written. Keith Douglas is distinctive in many ways, not merely among *Personal Landscape* poets. Personal obsession, as in the case with many *Personal Landscape* poems of exile, becomes both particular and general in Fuller's "In Africa," which deals with the solipsism of yearning: "This great geography shrinks into sad / And personal trifles":

For those who are in love and are exiled
Can never discover
How to be happy: looking upon the wild
They see for ever

The cultivated acre of their pain;
The clouds like dreams,

Involved, improbable; the endless plain
Precisely as it seems. (*A Lost Season* 9)

Between 1940 and 1945 wartime exiles "see for ever / The cultivated acre of their pain" in many theatres beyond Egypt. Roy Fuller writes from East Africa. Soldiers in India and Burma were even more firmly part of an occupying imperial army than the public servants and soldiers in Egypt, and the cultures they encountered even more impenetrable. Like the Eastern Mediterranean, however, India had a long history of foreign penetration.

Several poems in *Personal Landscape* record the history of successive imperial campaigns and occupations in the Eastern Mediterranean. This was one way in which the hellenophile, classical orientation of most of those associated with the magazine was manifested. In "Conon in Alexandria" (*Personal Landscape* 2, Part 4 [1945]: 9), Lawrence Durrell re-creates the Egyptian exile-scene from the perspective of its classical persona, "four years bound here" on an "Ash-heap of four cultures, / Bounded by Mareotis." Hugh Gordon Porteus attempts a similar balancing of the ancient and the contemporary in "A Fragment of History." The cycle of Middle-Eastern imperial conquest revealed in the poem is related by implication to the present war conducted by foreigners in the same arena:

After the Satrap on the peacock terrace
Fell to the Hellene sword: of the Persian palace
Nothing remained but jasmine, rose and iris,
And shattered fragments of iridescent [*sic*] glass
And over Tyre and Sidon set the sun.

Then came the Consuls, and the rigid line
Of matrons, highways, aqueducts (the wine
Flowing like water) and the fine
Distinctions of the law; till the Divine
Wrath that in an instant razed Berytus.
(*Personal Landscape* 2, Part 2 [1944]: 6)

To see one's own exile-condition in the context of history is one way of coming to terms with its foreignness. The comfort of this attitude is in understanding the familiarity—from a historical perspective—of the

transience of successive imperial presences amid impenetrable ancient cultures such as those of the Far and Middle East.

Like Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis was a serving poet, destined for combat, who died on active service. His anguished letters to his wife from India embody the exile-pain referred to by Roy Fuller, and frequently suggest the non-Western otherness of an alien Indian world. His poem, "The Peasants," reflects this contrast between timeless peasant values and the temporal concerns of the current occupying army:

Across scorched hills and trampled crops
The soldiers straggle by.
History staggers in their wake.
The peasants watch them die. (*Ha! Ha!* 57)

Less rhetorical, but conveying the same sentiment, a letter from Lewis to his wife places him firmly in the role of exile-outsider in a temporary imperial occupation:

Every time I look at an Indian peasant, I feel tranquil, especially when we are on some fantastically strenuous exercise, for the peasant is so utterly different and settled and calm and eternal that I know that my little passing excitement and worries don't exist in his world and are therefore not universal and will disappear. (*In The Green Tree* 48)

Tranquillity may seem a strange condition in the midst of such alienation, but it is the extension of his range of experience which makes the apprehension of difference worthwhile. "I feel utterly strange here," Lewis writes to his parents on April 7, 1943,

and I sense a perpetual under-current of hostility among the people. Some villages are very friendly; others cold and reserved. I don't know why. But I am glad of the experience. The world is much larger than England, isn't it? I'll never be just English or just Welsh again. (34)

There is an earnestness about Alun Lewis's soul-searching which clearly differentiates his writing from that of the *Personal Landscape* insiders, both non-combatant and combatant (Keith Douglas). Nevertheless, the concerns revealed and the predicaments faced by Lewis and

several other temporary imperial exiles in India are similar to those informing the Egyptian poetry magazine.

"*Many Histories Deep*" is an illuminating study of a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances affecting a remarkably cohesive group of English writers during the Second World War. Roger Bowen's depiction of the milieu which influenced their work is valuable not only for its specificity but also because it provokes a questioning, not raised by Bowen himself, of how typical—among wartime exiles in other theatres—was the reaction he analyses.

NOTES

1. *Return to Oasis* contains the original anthology as well as retrospective comments or vignettes.
2. Graham uses the *Personal Landscape* version of "Cairo Jag": Vol. II, Part 2 (1944): 11-12. He points to an alternate version in a letter to Olga Meiersens in Feb. 1943.

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