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Citation: Einhaus, Ann-Marie and Shaw, Kristian (2022) Writers and Intellectuals on Britain and Europe, 1918-2018: An Introduction. Open Library of Humanities, 8 (1). pp. 1-11. ISSN 2056-6700

Published by: Open Library of Humanities

URL: <https://doi.org/10.16995/OLH.8890> <<https://doi.org/10.16995/OLH.8890>>

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Einhaus, A-M and Shaw, K 2022 Writers and Intellectuals on Britain and Europe, 1918–2018: An Introduction. *Open Library of Humanities*, 8(1): 15, pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.8890>



Open Library of Humanities

Writers and Intellectuals on Britain and Europe, 1918–2018: An Introduction

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Introducing a Special Collection focused on exploring the engagement of artists, writers and intellectuals with Britain’s relationship to Europe, this short essay reflects on common strands and recurring themes in such engagement across a turbulent century. It draws out parallels between three time periods covered by articles included in the collection: the inter-war period, the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and the period from the 1970s to the EU referendum.



In 1926, the English travel writer Robert Byron closed the opening chapter of his first book, *Europe in the Looking-Glass*, with the hope that it might ‘further the new sense of “European Consciousness” that is gradually coming into being’ (2012: 20). In expressing this fond wish, Byron was writing in line with a significant proportion of his fellow authors, artists and intellectuals in Britain at the time. The upheavals of the First World War, and especially the extreme speed and ease with which violent conflict had smashed up close cultural and political ties built over centuries, had a deeply unsettling effect on many. As Richard Overy observes in his book *The Morbid Age* (2009), the war triggered a deep sense of crisis across Europe, including Britain: a sense of impending doom that culminated in the very real disaster of the Second World War and its wide-ranging repercussions that spanned well beyond Europe—though many of the effects of the two wars in other parts of the world also impacted Europe eventually.

Yet, at the same time, the period was marked by optimism for better transnational understanding, with particular emphasis on the power of art and literature to mediate between nations and peoples. PEN, founded in England in 1921, quickly became PEN International, with branches in countries across Europe and beyond. That an organisation like PEN was founded only a year after the League of Nations indicates the perceived importance of artists, writers and intellectuals in the process of creating lasting peace, and indeed, many early members of PEN were also active in and on behalf of the British League of Nations Union. Their creative work as writers, artists or translators was often deeply intertwined with their transnational and/or peace activism. Moreover, the advent of the Second World War caused another crisis of faith, as writers, artists and intellectuals on both sides had to negotiate their position vis à vis the Nazi regime and Allied resistance. Renewed war and genocidal oppression, however, also highlighted the resilience and capacity for mutual support among the literary and artistic community. British writers were mostly supportive of their continental European colleagues in exile, but they were by no means unanimous in their understanding of Britain’s relationship to the rest of the continent, either politically or culturally. Katherine Cooper (2020), for instance, has tracked in detail this position in relation to Europe for novelist and journalist Margaret Storm Jameson, PEN president from 1938–1944. Elsewhere, Margery Palmer McCulloch’s work (1993) has explored Edwin Muir’s deeply felt affinity to continental European literature and culture, while Birgit van Puymbrock (2020) has scrutinised the European thinking of Ford Madox Ford, T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Aimé Césaire and Nancy Cunard.

As post-war Britain slowly struggled to come to terms with its diminished position on the global stage, its relationship with Europe gained new relevance and in response the parameters of Euroscepticism became more pronounced in British

literature. Menno Spiering correctly identifies that, when it comes to critical analyses of the tumultuous history between Britain and Europe, a vital ‘cultural component’ is often overlooked (2015: 74). Indeed, when we consider post-war British literature, an entrenched island mentality makes it appear as if ‘we are dealing with two opposing concepts. The one is called Britain, the other Europe’ (Spiering, 2015: 2). In this post-war period, there is a startling lack of engagement with Europe in British literature; diagnosing the ailments affecting the body politic, writers turned instead to the imperial legacies of the British Empire, the decline of the Commonwealth, or Britain’s ‘special relationship’ with the United States. In several critical literary surveys of the post-war period in Britain, Europe—or, more narrowly, the various incarnations of the European project—fail to even garner a mention, which may reflect the extent to which Britain has resisted being seen as a part of the European community in favour of strengthening its exceptionalist stance as an island nation standing apart from the Continent. Those writers who did offer commentaries on developments pertaining to the European community often did so from a decidedly Eurosceptic perspective; for all their protestations that they considered themselves Europhilic members of the literary world, in practice British writers struggled to embrace the idea of a political or economic union with Europe.

Following the United Kingdom European Union (EU) membership referendum of 2016—which delivered a forceful reminder of Britain’s ambivalent European attachments—a growing body of scholarship is now emerging in relation to Brexit and Britain’s historical relationship(s) with Europe more generally. Works by political commentators such as Fintan O’Toole (2018) have demonstrated the overlooked continuities between post-war Britain and recent political developments—a sense of exceptionalism writ deep in the national consciousness. Academics have also started to make sense of how literature fuels such debates. Robert Eaglestone’s edited volume *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (2018) tracks a wide range of ways in which Brexit interacted with literary and cultural production in past, present and future. Kristian Shaw’s *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project* (2021) is the first monograph to try and make sense of these developments from a post-Brexit perspective, indicating how cultural Euroscepticism, a crisis of Englishness, the decentralisation of government power through devolutionary dispensations, the legacies of deindustrialisation, anxieties surrounding immigration and recent populist movements are interrelated stimulants that influenced the 2016 EU referendum. Crucially, Shaw asks what role, if any, literature has in responding to these political developments, and signals the return of the author as public intellectual in an environment of increasing anti-intellectualism.

Although, as Tombs identifies, the ‘EU question has become more polarized ideologically in Britain than anywhere else in Europe’ (2016), various EU member states witnessed a sense of crisis and a concomitant sense of positivity towards transnational understanding following the referendum. Critics and scholars who specialised in other periods during which relations between Britain and Europe had been strained or complicated (e.g., the inter-war period; the immediate post-war decades; the 1970s) were quick to see parallels between those earlier periods and the present. Then and now, artists, writers and intellectuals contributed to public discourses on Britain’s place in the world. In a much-cited newspaper article for *The Observer* in 2017, bestselling author John Le Carré intervened in post-referendum debates by recalling his own passion for learning German and reading German literature in the face of great prejudice just after the end of the Second World War, declaring that ‘[t]he decision to learn a foreign language is to me an act of friendship’ (2017). Le Carré’s understanding of learning (and teaching) other languages, of reading foreign-language literature and engaging with another country’s culture as an act of friendship, echoes, among other writings, Stephen Spender’s 1943 article ‘Hoelderlin, Goethe and Germany’ in *Horizon* magazine (Spender, 1943), in which he outlines that post-war rapprochement between enemy nations could best be accomplished by (re)educating both nations using the great literary voices of the German past.

Writers and Intellectuals on Britain and Europe, 1918–2018, the title and topic of our Special Collection, engages with the literary movements, cultural developments and political ruptures that have defined the 20th-century, and looks ahead to potential futures on the horizon for 21st-century Europe. The collection is based on a conference held in early November 2018, which brought together contributions by Humanities researchers from several European countries with an interest in Britain and Europe. The broad scope of the collection connects research on literature and culture across two periods (the period from c.1918–1948 and the 21st-century present) and indicates the interdisciplinary value of literature as a cultural medium capable of responding to and shaping cosmopolitical debates. Our cast of contributors is international as well as multidisciplinary, including European researchers based outside of and inside the UK, bringing together different perspectives on writers’ and intellectuals’ contribution to Anglo-European relations in the inter-war period and the present. The central questions and concerns addressed by the Special Collection are Britain’s relationship to Europe and the part played by writers and intellectuals in the ongoing process of defining this relationship. This is likely to remain a relevant concern for some time to come, as the consequences of Brexit continue to unfold.

What sets this Special Collection apart from other edited volumes on literary or intellectual engagement with Europe is, first, its emphasis on primarily British writers and intellectuals in combination with, second, its broader-than-usual temporal scope. Existing volumes of essays, such as Sascha Bru's *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent* (2009) or Mark Hewitson and Matthew D'Auria's *Europe in Crisis: Intellectuals and the European Idea, 1917–1957* (2012), adopt a narrower temporal scope and include essays on geographically diverse writers and intellectuals. While it is not our intention to question the value of such an approach, we reverse this emphasis to focus on Britain's relationship to Europe in particular, and trace writers' and intellectuals' contributions to and their intervention in this relationship from a broader view which ranges from the end of the First World War to the present day. Such an approach allows us to track continuities over time while also capturing a range of specific contexts.

The essays in this Special Collection also illustrate the ways in which the politically fraught relationship between Britain and Europe could be anticipated through earlier cultural developments. The overall aim of *Writers and Intellectuals on Britain and Europe, 1918–2018* is to suggest how literary discourses comment upon and supplement debates on ethnonationalism, Euroscepticism, and devolution, and to imagine new futures not just for 21st-century Europe but for the territorial governance of the UK.

The collection begins with two articles that consider the pre-war period to establish the complex historical ties that exist between Britain and Europe. Alexandra Peat casts an eye back to the 1938 British Empire Exhibition in Glasgow: a celebration of imperial rule that brought global attention to Scottish society. Held at a moment of crisis when the imperial project and European stability was crumbling, the exhibition was marked by nostalgia and regret; yet it offered a utopian vision of what Scotland might have been, representing a 'spectral alternative history' (Peat, 2020: 23). Through an examination of how the exhibition revealed the 'knotty inheritance of conflicting national identities' (Peat, 2020: 25) and the unresolved debate over international affiliations that continue to the present day, Peat indicates how seeds of discontent—that would continue to trouble Scotland as it reconsidered its ambivalent position and loyalty to the union—were planted and took root.

In her contribution on the literary magazine *Horizon*, Ann-Marie Einhaus (2020) interrogates the transnational editorial policies of a periodical with a profound influence on wartime cultural discourse in Britain. Einhaus's article traces the magazine's engagement with the impact of war on Europe, continental European literature and

culture, and the question of post-war cultural exchange. While *Horizon* regularly discussed European culture and managed, despite practical obstacles because of wartime circumstances, to include a range of foreign-language contributions (both in translation and in the source language), the magazine's editorial policy was nevertheless as a whole characterised by its editor's privileged cosmopolitan ideas. Consequently, *Horizon* showcases a deeply biased and limited view of European literature and culture, rooted in English public-school education. In this sense, *Horizon*'s understanding of Europe, and of the place of Britain—and specifically England—in relation to Europe can be seen as a forerunner of later writers' and intellectuals' fraught and often exclusionary relationship to Europe.

While Kristian Shaw's term 'Brexit' primarily refers to recent fictions that directly respond to Britain's exit from the EU or the subsequent tangential consequences of the withdrawal, Shaw's contribution to this Special Collection demonstrates that several pre-Brexit Eurosceptic fictions anticipate the thematic concerns encapsulated by this term, including 'the nostalgic appetite for (an admittedly false) national heritage, anxieties surrounding cultural infiltration and a mourning for the imperial past' (Shaw, 2018: 18). Shaw identifies how early warning signs of British antipathy to European integration were evident in post-war literature as Britain assumed the role of the reluctant European, symbolically cutting itself off from the continent through the reinforcement of an island mentality in the cultural imaginary. Drawing on the personal opinions of key literary figures in this period, including Kingsley Amis, Nancy Mitford, Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury, Shaw 'reads Brexit backwards' to interrogate the ebbs and flows of Euroscepticism from the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. In so doing, he traces how Europe became the scapegoat for the internal ailments affecting the British body politic.

Christian Mair's article likewise engages with the troubling legacies of Eurosceptic discourses, locating the origins of emotionally-loaded Eurosceptic rhetoric (evidenced during the UK's 2016 EU referendum campaign) in the 19th-century and post-war period. Integrating discourse-analytical and corpus-based methods, Mair delivers a linguistic examination of the language of Brexit, revealing how the desire to 'take back control' or create a truly 'Global Britain' develops from discourses of long historical standing, particularly in relation to the British Empire and the lingering nostalgia for imperial rule. Mair then demonstrates how the process of Britain's withdrawal from the EU has already 'left a lasting imprint' (Mair, 2019: 1) on the English language, by deconstructing the neologisms and vocabularies associated with Brexit as well as the overlooked role of the English as the global *lingua franca* in 'directing currents of

migration' (Mair, 2019: 20). Read together, Shaw's and Mair's articles demonstrate the cultural, political and linguistic continuities of British Eurosceptic discourse since 1945, and that political elites maintain misplaced external resentment when faced with the erosion of Britain's position as a world power.

Media attention on Brexit focused on the breakdown of the vote across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; however, it is often forgotten that Gibraltar also participated in the 2016 EU referendum (as a British Overseas Territory), returning an overwhelming 95.91% vote in favour of remaining in the EU. Ina Habermann's insightful article on the novels of Gibraltar writer M. G. Sanchez provides a necessary reminder of Britain's complex historical ties to continental Europe. Drawing on Derrida's concept of 'hauntology', Habermann illustrates how Sanchez's novel *Solitude House* (2015) reconjures the ghosts of colonialism even as Gibraltar itself, overlooked and ignored, 'turns spectre, a revenant from Britain's colonial past' (Habermann, 2020: 19). By way of comparison, Habermann argues that *Jonathan Gallardo* (2015) turns to the ways in which a 'border consciousness' defines how Gibraltar negotiates, on the one hand, its relationship with Spain and, on the other, its complicated identity as an 'outpost' of Britain. Published just before the Brexit vote, Sanchez's novels possess a clear predictive power in their insistence that, when it comes to the European question, 'we ignore the past at our peril' (Habermann, 2020: 19).

The final articles in the collection assume post-Brexit perspectives to consider the response of literary figures following this moment of political rupture. As Arianna Introna identifies, while the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence from the UK (Indyref) saw an outpouring of critical attention from Scottish writers and intellectuals, the Brexit vote itself was met with deafening silence. Introna investigates the reasons behind this differential interest, considering the 'structurally nationed' (Introna, 2020: 3) disciplinary framework within which Scottish literature operates and the troubled position Scotland enjoys within the British constellation. Beginning with a detailed examination of author Andrew O'Hagan's 2017 keynote lecture 'Scotland your Scotland', which attacked Westminster for once again ignoring the sovereignty of the Scottish Parliament, Introna moves on to consider a range of authors whose works not only respond to the Indyref but allude to causal factors behind the Scottish Remain vote. The concluding analysis of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* (2016–2020)—perhaps the most infamous literary response to the EU referendum—reinforces this perspective. Smith's decision to represent the Brexit conjecture 'through the prisms of anti-migrant policing' (Introna, 2020: 19), Introna argues, substantiates the ongoing debate surrounding the devolution of powers; however, her politically subversive

attacks on internal borders reimagine ‘the space for a different society to be created outside the logics of the competing sovereigntisms’ (Introna, 2020: 21) that define our current political contexts.

Barbara Korte and Christian Mair provide a corresponding European literary perspective on the post-Brexit period through a sustained reading of German author Sibylle Berg’s acclaimed novel *GRM Brainfuck* (2019). Set in an authoritarian Britain of the near-future in which Brexit has given rise to entrenched xenophobia, *GRM Brainfuck* imagines potential futures for a European continent that appears to have lost its ‘We-feeling’. On the one hand, Berg’s novel continues the *dys-eutopian* trend Shaw identifies in the post-war fictions of established British authors; however, rather than reiterate Eurosceptic fears concerning a federal ‘superstate’, Berg instead focuses her critique on the insular nature of British society which reinforces class privilege and gives rise to media manipulation. As Korte and Mair identify, “‘Brexlit’ (Shaw, 2018) is no longer exclusively a British affair, nor does it need to be written in the English language’ (Korte and Mair, 2021: 2). The transnational and multilingual aspects of Berg’s novel, they argue, force us to read beyond the ‘national’—as opposed to merely offering a ‘Continental’ perspective on Britain—and promote a transcultural reorientation in British Studies.

Finally, Chloe Ashbridge provides a sustained analysis of a key post-Brexit novel, Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut* (2017)—commissioned specifically to respond to Britain’s withdrawal from the EU—to suggest how uneven regional development and the cultural politics of devolution continue to shape the British state. Engaging with the politico-media discourse that surrounded the Leave vote in particular, Ashbridge identifies how the weaponisation of nostalgia influenced the referendum campaign. In turn, Cartwright’s ‘deployment of nostalgia’ (Ashbridge, 2020: 18) reflects the parochial image of the ‘North’ that exists in the cultural imagination. Consequently, while *The Cut* may gesture towards the need for constitutional reform in confronting the fractures within our disunited kingdom, its reliance on a romantic, deindustrial nostalgia ‘ultimately prevents the realisation of alternatives to the present’ (Ashbridge, 2020: 22). Though cultural and political commentators have looked to literature to provide answers for our troubled political moment, the cyclical nature of Cartwright’s novel, Ashbridge argues, intimates a more ‘pessimistic idea ... of the reconciliatory potential of the Brexit novel’ (Ashbridge, 2020: 25).

The Special Collection ends with a re-evaluation of literary responses to Europe from a post-Brexit perspective, addressing emergent issues such as the British Labour Party’s losses in the past few general elections, including those in former perceived Labour heartlands; the re-emergence of debates surrounding devolutionary dispensations;

independence movements and programmes aimed at distributing resources more equally between the different regions and constituent parts of the UK; and a shift in European attitudes towards Britain following its act of political isolationism. As a whole, this Special Collection first historicises the cultural relationship between Britain and Europe; it then identifies the ways in which writers and intellectuals have engaged with geopolitical developments reshaping the continent; and finally, it offers an insight into how literature can serve as a potent socially constitutive medium that challenges prevailing discourses and heightens public consciousness of political events. It is only by acknowledging these thematic and cultural legacies that the power of literature, in a rapidly shifting European landscape, can be realised.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the wonderful contributors to this Special Collection, the generous peer reviewers and the OLH editorial team who made this Special Collection happen over the course of three years: Helen Saunders, who got us started; Rose Harris-Birtill, who kept us going through the pandemic; and Katherine Parker-Hay and Simon Everett, who got us over the finish line. We would also like to acknowledge the intellectual input of all attendees at the original ‘Writers and Intellectuals on Britain and Europe, 1918–2018’ conference, held in November 2018 at Northumbria University and generously funded by Northumbria’s Institute of Humanities and the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES). Special thanks go to our two keynote speakers, Prof. Bob Eaglestone and Prof. Jason Harding.

Competing Interests

The authors of this introduction are the editors of this Special Collection.

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