Women's writing, 1945–1960 after the deluge

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Jane Dowson has edited a timely collection of essays by both women and men *about* British women writers of the post-war period. Historically, the post-war period through to the mid-1960s has been viewed as a time when women retreated from public life, from the heady days of participation in the war effort on the home front. It is commonly assumed that women returned to the home and kitchen in an all-out effort to create a life of domestic bliss to which the heroes of the front lines could return. This cozy image of feminine domesticity was, of course, a creation of government and media, as Dowson explains in the Introduction. Contrary to popular belief, the period 1945–1960 saw a rise in female employment, in the spending power of women, and in the purchase of luxury goods and labour saving domestic appliances, which ostensibly allowed for shorter working days and more time on leisure pursuits. The militant feminism of the early 1900s was notably absent, although that is not to say that some women were not keenly aware of political, social, gender, class and racial inequalities and injustices – as many of the essays in this collection reveal.

The welcome chronology at the beginning of the collection helps the reader contextualize the lives and works of the women writers discussed. One of the earliest events that helps set the tone for the entire period is the 1945 introduction of the Family Allowance, which allowed state payments to mothers in the UK. This begins a period when it was presumed that the main concern of women was to be the fulfilled wife and mother and the sexually alluring domestic goddess, images propagated by the many popular magazines of the day. Women in the 1950s were presumed to enjoy this return to the nurturing and reproductive role (and indeed the 1950s baby boom goes some way to supporting this) after the gender-bending roles (soldier, spy, mechanic, agricultural labourer, factory worker) they played during the war years.

In this era, Britain was showing a brave face to the world – as witnessed by Bertrand Russell winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, the explosion of the first British nuclear bomb in 1952, the conquest of Everest by Edmund Hillary in 1953, or the first Hovercraft crossing the Channel in 1959. However, these singular (and in the case of the bomb, dubious) 'achievements' by men could not completely mask other, more troubling, developments. For example, there was growing unrest in many of Britain's colonies. And underlying racial, class and gender inequalities within British society were also coming to the fore. This collection demonstrates that women writers and readers were consciously dealing with some of these issues, and therefore that, contrary

to conventional wisdom, the 1950s was not a dull or reactionary period for feminism and women's writing.

The collection is divided into four thematic sections which deal with 'continuity and, change', 'the home, retreat and restraint', 'gender, love and marriage', and finally 'across the threshold, spirituality, colonization and subjectivity.' Memories of war, gender transformations, contestations of racism, and the decline of colonial power were themes often present in all the literary genres that women writers of this period pursued. These headings, Dowson says, indicate the predominant interests of the writers. These interests include interrogating the symbolism of 'home' as an area of both order and disorder, of advance and retreat – an issue that raises its head in Elizabeth Marsten's essay on the legacies of the past. Similarly, John Brannigan examines Elizabeth Taylor's book, *At Mrs. Lippincotes*, and suggests that Taylor, in common with many post-war women writers, explores 'the home as an ambivalent space of identity and alienation, of belonging and oppression' which Taylor 'figures... through gothic tropes of displacement... and through tropes of martial failure and domesticity' (p. 82). Julia Eriggs's essay on Elizabeth Bowen shows that the post-war period inspired in Bowen a complex mix of disillusionment, conservatism, nostalgia and hope for a more egalitarian world. Linden Peach's essay on Agatha Christie looks at the theme of challenging traditional notions of Englishness.

The essays in Dowson's collection explore the ability of these women writers in the period from 1945 to 1960, to destabilize prevalent ideologies, and to deal with issues of gender and gender performance (as in early examples of 'female masculinity' described by Iris Murdoch), sexuality, politics, colonization and war. Throughout these essays we find that, rather than settling for writing 'nice' stories of domesticity and simplicity, women writers of the post-war period were challenging notions of gender and race, of the central role of the family in society and the role of women within the family, and the engagement of women in 'public realms'.

The absences from this collection of essays are evident. As Dowson notes, the collection strengthens the perception that high- and middle-brow fiction was written for and by middle-class women, while mass culture such as cinema and pulp fiction were the preserve of the working class. Black writers, lesbian writers, working class women, and immigrant women are mostly absent here. While issues such as gender, (hetero)sexuality and femininity are all challenged, we find little on immigration, race and class issues. However, this collection is a welcome addition to the growing body of 20th-century women's literature and helps to dispel the assumption that the 1950s constituted a period of loss of confidence and ambition among British writers, especially women writers.

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