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Alan Munton

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Alan Munton

(Out of) Time in America: Louis MacNeice 1939–1943

Our aim is precisely to establish the human kingdom as a pattern of values in distinction from the material world.—Jean-Paul Sartre

In 1940 Louis MacNeice believed that a revolution might be imminent in Britain. He was very nearly right. Dissatisfaction with the way the war was being conducted, and high expectations for a changed society after it was won, meant that during 1940–41 there existed widespread revolutionary, or near-revolutionary, attitudes amongst a significant part of the population. The moment passed, and the actual political outcome was the Labour Government of 1945. For the poets of the 1930s, this should have been an opportunity—except that W. H. Auden was living in the United States, and Stephen Spender and C. Day Lewis lacked the poetic power to produce the writing demanded by the moment. That left MacNeice; and he spent 1940 in America. Yet it was there that he felt the revolutionary possibilities at home—a home that this poet from Northern Ireland termed ‘England.’

In London, in about 1943, he wrote a sequence of eight blank-verse poems under the title ‘The Kingdom.’ These poems show how a poet with a ‘1930s’ past could renew himself. ‘The Kingdom’ envisages ‘an underground movement’¹ of individuals that is quite distinct from the public mass-movements that were the preferred form for the politics of action during the 1930s. Yet this is not a poetry of individualism, of self. The poems are so scrupulous in democratizing the individual’s relationship to the group that *mutualist*, or even the related term *anarchist*, may be the most appropriate description of their political impulse. The politics of this poetry, worked out in relation to the forms taken by Communism, Trotskyism and anarchism at that time, are distinctive and unusual. In arguing this, I shall also propose that the formation of MacNeice’s early wartime politics was influenced by the fact that throughout 1940 he was passionately in love. It was

¹ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. E. R. Dodds (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), pp. 248–54. Hereafter *CP*.