

The Twentieth Century (up to the End of the Second World War)

The reign of **Edward VII** (1901-1910) is usually regarded as a period of opulent ease, during which a still aristocratic society enjoyed the fast flowering of elegance and grace before war, state control and egalitarianism completely upset their world. This picture does not, however, correspond to actual reality. Disillusionment over the war in South Africa and the widespread feeling of the urgency of social reform were among the main causes which led to the sweeping Liberal victory at the general election of 1906. Of considerable significance was the fact that the Labour Party first entered the House of Commons, with 50 members.

In 1909 *David Lloyd George*, as Chancellor of the Exchequer¹, prepared a revolutionary budget², which proposed new land taxes and moderately increased direct taxation of well-to-do³. The increase in revenue⁴ would be used to pay for Old Age Pensions (an important step to social reform) and to increase the Navy, which was most necessary since the German threat was becoming even more real. The House of Lords answered by rejecting the budget. The general election that followed was again won by the Liberals, who centered their campaign on the issue⁵: "Shall Peers⁶ or People rule the country?"

Under Edward's son **George V** (1910-1936), a second general election had the same result. Therefore the King forced the Lords to pass the *Parliament Bill*, which abolished their final veto-power. By the same act the period of time passing between two general election was reduced from seven to five years.

The abolition of the veto of the Lords enabled the Government to pass the *Health and Insurance Act* (1912), a contribution scheme to insure the working population against sickness, and partly, against unemployment. The spirit of the years preceding the First World War was in many respects a violent one. This is shown by a series of long industrial strikes, by renewed agitation in Ireland, and by the militant activities of the *suffragettes*, who advocated suffrage⁷ for women.

In 1914, however, all these conflicts were overtaken by Britain's involvement in the *First World War*. In the last decades of the nineteenth century England's foreign policy had been one of "splendid isolation". The Navy seemed a sufficient defence against any possible danger. Europe was then divided between France and Russia on one side; Germany, Austria and Italy on the other. After the turn of the century, however, Britain became concerned about the expansion of the German Empire and felt threatened by the increase of German fleet. Therefore the British Government settled the differences with France and Russia over colonial questions and a new policy of "entente cordiale" began. At the same time plans were made for an army of 150,000 men.

When war broke out and Germany invaded Belgium, Great Britain entered the war (4th August, 1914) as an ally to France and Russia. Soon half of the nations of the world became involved in the conflict, as well as the British Empire, which joined the British side. Three years later the United States also entered the war. After the Germans in their initial attack failed to capture the Channel ports and to take Paris, "trench warfare"⁸ began and went on for four years, until the Germans were finally exhausted and compelled to ask an armistice in November 1918. The "flower of a generation" was lost in the muddy ditches of France, where a series of indecisive attacks and counterattacks cost millions of lives and definitely destroyed any notion of the heroic glamour of war. The "War Poets", *Wilfred Owen*, *Siegfried Sassoon*, *Edmund Blunden*, did not sing of heroism and courage, but forthrightly denounced the unspeakable horror of endless and apparently purposeless slaughter.

¹ **Chancellor of the Exchequer**: Ministro delle Finanze

² **Budget**: bilancio

³ **well-to-do**: benestanti

⁴ **revenue**: introito fiscale

⁵ **issue**: questione

⁶ **Peers**: i nobili membri della Camera dei Lords

⁷ **suffrage**: diritto di voto

⁸ **trench warfare**: guerra di trincea

The total losses of Great Britain at the end of the war amounted to 764,000 and practically all reserves of accumulated wealth had been spent in the terrible effort.

The Peace-Treaty was signed at Versailles in June 1919. The excessively severe treatment of Germany was one of the main causes of Hitler's Nazi Movement, which, in its turn, led to the Second World War.

In order to settle international disputes a *League of Nations* was formed in Geneva, but Germany was excluded from it, and the United States and Russia – where a Communist Revolution had overthrown the old feudal rule of the Emperor – refused to join it.

The years following the end of the war were most difficult for Great Britain. In spite of Lloyd George's promise of "an England fit for heroes to live in", returning soldiers found difficulties in getting jobs and houses and there seemed little hope of any improvement. The main problem was that the old heavy industries were in decline. Iron and steel, shipbuilding, coalmining, which had formed the basis of England's prosperity in the nineteenth century, were all in difficulty. The situation was particularly difficult in coalmining, since coal suffered from the competition of oil as a source of energy. In an effort to deal with the problems of declining profits, mine owners reduce miner's wages and attempt to lengthen hours of work. Consequently, the miners went on strike in 1926. Other big unions, especially the railwaymen and the Transport and General Workers Union, soon supported them so that there was a General Strike (the only one in English history). It was over in ten days, because the Trade Union Congress leaders were afraid of an outright clash with troops. The miners themselves went on striking alone for six months, but in November they were forced to go back to work, and had to accept lower wages. Unemployment, especially in the North of England, remained a serious problem throughout the period between the two world wars.

The weakened position of Britain can be glimpsed in the Imperial Conference, which met in London in 1926. This recognized the changed situation in its definition of Great Britain and the dominions as "autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations". The legal consequence of this definition led to passing of the *Statute of Westminster* (1931), which gave complete legislative freedom to the Dominions even if their laws should conflict with British legislation. The Commonwealth nations were: Great Britain, South Africa, Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand and the Free State of Ireland.

The outbreak of the First World War had delayed trouble in Ireland only for a short time. In 1916, the Irish extremist movement of *Sinn Fein*⁹ had launched a rebellion in Dublin, which was soon suppressed and led to the execution of sixteen rebels. Any attempt to bring out a compromise broke down on the question of Protestant Ulster, which demanded self-determination. The 1918 General Election saw the success of 73 members of Sinn Fein. They refused to take their seats at Westminster and met in Dublin as the Parliament of Ireland. They had strong financial support from Irish Americans and constituted their own armed force, the *Irish Republican Army* (or I.R.A.). Violent conflict broke out between the I.R.A. and the British "auxiliary" police force known as "Black and Tans"¹⁰. The barbarous episodes of guerrilla warfare shocked British public opinion, which came to Irish independence as inevitable, on condition that suitable safeguards¹¹ could be provided for Ulster. At the end of 1921 the British Government and the Sinn Fein leaders agreed on a settlement, by which Great Britain recognized Ireland as a "Free State" within the British Commonwealth. The six counties of Ulster were excluded, so that they remained part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and went on sending their representatives to Westminster (even if they had their Parliament in Belfast for domestic affairs).

In the rest of the Empire (Asia and Africa) Britain began to move slowly toward a policy of limiting her responsibilities and encouraging the development of local autonomy. In India, however, Mahatma Gandhi

⁹ **Sinn Fein**: noi soli (celtico)

¹⁰ **Black and Tans**: perché indossavano uniformi Kaki con cinture nere

¹¹ **suitable safeguards**: opportune garanzie

launched a campaign for complete independence, which was to be achieved by no-violent “civil disobedience”.

A particular development in home politics was the disintegration of the Liberal Party after the war and its substitution by the Labour Party as the official Opposition Party. In 1918 general election saw the participation of all male population over 21 and – for the first time in European history – of women over 30. In fact women had been enfranchised¹² as an acknowledgement for their collaboration and the work they had performed during the war. In 1928 the voting age for women was lowered to 21. Lloyd George and the Coalition who had won the war had a large majority, but of its 474 M.P.s 338 were Conservatives and only 136 Liberals. Labour was present with 57 M.P.s. In 1922 the Coalition broke up and Lloyd George was forced to resign. From then on the Second World War the Conservatives were always in power, apart from two short periods of Labour minority governments with their leader *Ramsey MacDonald* as Prime Minister (1924 and 1929-1931).

The “twenties” saw a complete change in the attitudes and general appearance of English society. First of all, the war had emancipated women from many social limitation. It is significant that for the first time in history hair was cut and skirts were shortened. Relation with the male sex became freer, and in general complete equality with men became women’s aim. Traditional morality was shocked by *Sigmund Freud’s* works on psychology and psychoanalysis and by *David Hebert Lawrence’s* glorification of instinctive life.

Meanwhile James Joyce and other novelists were breaking away from realism and naturalism and were trying to reach a more subtle and complex vision of men and his world. The new narrative techniques was later defined with the words “stream of consciousness” because it aimed at rendering the inner workings of the mind and the continuous flow of thoughts, paying little or no attention to external “objective” reality. Poetry too was experimental and dealt with the general crisis of traditional values and of Western civilization, the “waste land”¹³ of one of the most famous of *Thomas Stearns Eliot’s* poems.

Abstract painting and sculpture, modern music wanted to express the breaking down of old society and the anguished search for some substitutes. They became however, too difficult to be appreciated by the general public, who found new means of entertainment in the cinema and the radio. In general, British cinema production was of a low standard. The market was dominated by Hollywood products. Charlie Chaplin, too, emigrated there to make his famous comics films.

The British Broadcasting Corporation was founded in 1922, and in 1926 it became a corporation with royal charter¹⁴. Though it weakened the political power of the press with its regular bulletins, it did not reduce the circulation of the most popular newspaper, as *The Times*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Telegraph*.

The economic depression of 1929 was deeply felt in Great Britain, owing to the large dependence on world trade. Prices fell, and unemployment rose. The gold standard¹⁵ was abandoned and the pound was devalued. Besides, protection against imports was established (with preferential agreements for the Dominions). The age of world free trade was definitely over. It was followed by a period of economic nationalism, with bilateral agreements between governments.

In spite of economic difficulties some social reform were carried out, which further improved the situation of the working class. The main social problem was unemployment; the situation of the out-of-work was improved by a system of allowances¹⁶(the “dole”) established in 1931 and supervised by the *Unemployment Assistance Board*. Poverty in general was dealt with by the reorganization of the Poor Law. In 1929 the whole service was renamed “Public Assistance” and took care of old people, sick people, widows and orphans. Besides, vigorous efforts were made in slum clearance¹⁷ and rehousing the inhabitants. Nearly a million of new house were built.

¹² **had been enfranchised**: avevano avuto il diritto di voto

¹³ **waste land**: terra desolata

¹⁴ **charter**: documento che riconosce un privilegio esclusivo

¹⁵ **gold standard**: parità aurea

¹⁶ **allowances**: sussidi

¹⁷ **slum clearance**: eliminazione dei quartieri poveri

In 1936, when Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister, foreign policy became the main concern. The economic difficulties of the post war years had caused the rise of totalitarian regimes in Italy and Germany, where the Nazi Party had won power with *Hitler* in 1933. Soon after, Hitler announced the withdrawal of Germany from the League of Nations (which Germany had entered in 1926). Besides, he re-established conscription¹⁸ and proceeded to rebuild the military power of Germany, which was against the Treaty of Versailles.

In 1935 *Mussolini* attacked *Abyssinia* and completed its annexation in 1936, in spite of the “sanctions” decided against Italy by the League of Nations. The threat to peace was clear, but in Britain little was done to cope with it. The still living memory of the sufferings of the First World War made British opinion generally opposed to military preparations. Both on the Right and on the Left many thought that Germany had been unjustly treated at the Treaty of Versailles. Besides, the Right was somewhat sympathetic towards the Nazi regime as a bulwark against Communism, while the Left still relied on the League of Nations as the best defence of collective security. Therefore, both the Government and the Opposition were against a firm policy of resistance to the aggressive policy of Germany, in spite of the warnings of the coming danger by independent critics, *Winston Churchill* above all.

When it became clear that the League of Nations was powerless to enforce peace, a policy of “appeasement”¹⁹ was thought to be the best to avoid war. Therefore, Great Britain did not intervene in the *Spanish Civil War* (1936-1939), even though Hitler and Mussolini greatly helped *General Francisco Franco*, in spite of the no-intervention agreement between the great powers. Many young Englishmen and intellectuals went to fight as volunteers in the *International Brigade* on the Republican side. Among them *Cecile Day Lewis*, *Louis Macneice*, *Wystan Hugh Auden* and *Stephen Spender*, who formed the group of “Oxford Poets” and were mainly concerned with social problems and Socialism ideas. Later some of them changed their ideas, partly as a consequence of their disillusionment with the Spanish war.

Another English intellectual who fought in Spain was *George Orwell*, the brilliant politically committed Socialist writer who recorded his experience in *Homage to Catalonia*. A few years later, he gave vent to all the horror he felt for all kinds of totalitarian dictatorship in 1984. This book – together with *Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World* – belongs to the tradition of the utopian novels. It is interesting to cite them here because both books – though looking at things from two different angles and therefore envisaging completely different visions of the nightmares awaiting mankind in the future – agree on one central point. According to them, contemporary society is developing in such a way that the individual is continuously losing ground to the ever-growing intrusion of state control in his life for the sake of political stability.

Nothing again was done when Hitler annexed Austria to the Reich in 1938. In the same year at Munich France and England accepted Hitler’s demands over Czechoslovakia. The *Munich Agreement* was generally greeted with sense of relief, because it seemed the peace had been saved, though independent critical voices – once again that of Winston Churchill – were raised in a more far-sighted warning of what was going to come out of it. The following year, however, it became evident to the most fervent pacifist that only armed resistance could stop the Nazi dictator, because he completely the invasion of Czechoslovakia and clearly threatened the independence of Poland. Attempts at forming an international coalition of states against Hitler failed because the United States still prefer isolation, and Russia signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler in the summer of 1939.

Preparation for the war became therefore Britain’s first priority: a *Ministry of Supply* was formed; and in April 1939 conscriptions were introduced for a period of six months service.

When Hitler began the invasion of Poland (1st September 1939), the Western Powers declared war on Germany (3rd September 1939). The Second World War had begun. After the collapse of Poland, there was a little fighting. Then in April 1940 Hitler invaded Norway and Denmark. An Anglo-French Force landed in Norway but was soon forced to withdraw. This failure precipitated the fall of the Chamberlain Government,

¹⁸ conscription: leva militare

¹⁹ appeasement: pacificazione

which was replaced by a Coalition Government under Winston Churchill. At this time Hitler conquered Holland, Belgium and France. Luckily the British Expeditionary Force were successfully evacuated at *Dunkirk* with the aid of innumerable little ships sent over from Britain.

About 335,000 troops were saved, though with heavy loss of equipment. Great Britain was left to face the threat of Nazi invasion alone. In the moment of greatest danger morale was high under the inspiration of Churchill's powerful speech, which the radio diffused all over the country. There was no panic, and the Local Defence Volunteer Bodies were formed to help the Army. To invade Great Britain, the Germans first had to destroy the Royal Air Force and its bases in Southern England. All through August and September German fighters²⁰ and bombers made raids²¹ in daylight. So many of them were shot down²² by the British Spitfires and Hurricanes (with the help of radar, a new invention) that by the beginning of October they no longer dare to attack daylight. When the weather worsened and winter approached, it was clear that no German invasion would take place and that the Battle of Britain had been won by Churchill and his people.

Although there wasn't any coherent body of war literature such as the "War Poetry" of the First World War, descriptions and commentaries of the London air raids were part of many works of the period, both in poetry and in prose. It is significant that even a poet like *Dylan Thomas*, in general unaffected by political or historical events, should have been inspired to write some of his best poetry by the new reality of mass-slaughter coming from the air.

The intervention of the United States after Pearl Harbour and the strong Russian resistance to German invasion, together with resistance movements especially in France and in Italy, made it clear that Hitler had lost any possibility of winning the war. Fighting went on to 1945, because of the determination of the Nazi dictator to pursue fighting to the last man and inch of his land to accept no agreement until the final destruction both of himself and of his country. Roosevelt, Staling and Churchill met at Yalta, in Crimea early in February 1945 to make final plans for the immediate post war occupation of Europe. In the same month the final offensive against Germany begun. The Allied Force advance into Germany where they eventually met the Russians advancing from the East. Germany surrendered unconditionally on 8th May 1945 after Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker.

²⁰ **fighters**: caccia

²¹ **raids**: incursioni

²² **shot down**: abbattuti

Votes for women

Whatever preparation the police department were making to prevent the demonstration, they failed because, while as unusual, we were be able to calculate exactly what the policy department were going to do, they were utterly²³ unable to calculate what we were going to do. We had planned a demonstration for March 4th, and this one we announced. We planned another demonstration for March 1st, but this one we did not announce. Late in the afternoon of Friday, March 1st, I drove in a taxicab, accompanied by the Hon. Secretary of the Union, Mrs Tuke and another of our members, to No. 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the Prime Minister. It was exactly half-past five when we alighted²⁴ from the cab and threw our stones, four of them, through the windowpanes²⁵. As we expected we were promptly arrested and taken to Cannon Row police station. The hour that followed will long be remembered in London. At intervals of fifteen minutes relays²⁶ of women who had volunteered for the demonstration did their work. The first smashing of glass occurred in the Haymarket and Piccadilly, and greatly startled²⁷ and alarmed both pedestrian and police. A large number of women were arrested, and everybody thought that this ended the affair. But therefore the excited populace and the frustrated shop owners' first exclamation had died down, before the police and people had reached the station with their prisoners, the ominous²⁸ crashing and splintering of plate glass²⁹ began again, this time along both sides of Regent Street and the Strand. A furious rush of police and people towards the second scene of action ensued. While their attention was being taken up with occurrences in this quarter, the third relay of women began breaking the windows in Oxford Circus and Bond Street. The demonstration ended for the day at half-past six with the breaking of many windows in the Strand.

(from: My Own Story, by E. Pankhurst, in: They say to happen, compiled by A. Briggs, Basil Blackweel, Oxford, 1960)

²³ **utterly**: del tutto

²⁴ **alighted**: scendemmo

²⁵ **panes**: vetri

²⁶ **relays**: squadre

²⁷ **startled**: spaventò

²⁸ **ominous**: sinistro

²⁹ **plate glass**: cristallo