V. THE WAR

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I arrived at the barracks in Trowbridge in much trepidation, not caring what happened to myself, but afraid of the consequences to Elza. (She soon in fact went voluntarily into a psychiatric home, and died of cancer.) I was ashamed to think that I was one of the many men who in one part of themselves welcomed a call-up if it took them away from a situation grown personally intolerable. The call-up paper had brutally and simply solved a relationship which had baffled me. I felt all the worse because I knew that despite (or because of) my ten years under such exacting conditions, in which I completely suppressed every impulse except those finding outlet in work and thought, I had been strengthened and had made what were for me great gains, while she had long stagnated and gone backward, jailed in her fears. But I found that by and large the mass of the men called up, to judge by those in the Special Operators Battalion, suffered in some degree from my own divided attitudes. While they often cursed the army and longed for Civvy street, they were all the while drawing sustenances from the communal way of living and felt in their controlled lives a sort of largeness and freedom that they did not feel in their civilian existence. The Two Pulls:

> They were reared to adore the snug limit –
> door closed on the world, and family-awe,
> kitchen-glow, bedroom's tepid climate,
> Father's word as Law.
>
> Through years of school or work they've striven
> to keep the burrowing fear entire.
> The world by the money-storm is driven;
> shelter of home is their deepest desire.
>
> And now the facade has fallen away
> maimed in a blitz; and the draggled fragments
> of that doomed life obtrude on the day
> pathetic shards of a privacy shamed.
>
> But they want to get back to that street, the same one,
> rebuilt perhaps with a few more conveniences:
> *Civvy Street* lights in their hearts that flame,
> moated parlour, no-trespassing fences.
>
> That is the dream which slumbers unstirred
> by ABCA postwar reconstructions,
> or the Platoon-Red's goading words.

One letter from home explodes all abstractions.

Yes, admit it. They are certainly shy-birds.
It's not that they're obstinate, not that only.
Not that they're stupid, cynical, tamed,
fed far too long on the fake and the phoney.

Great changes do not come as blueprints, though
blueprints are born of them; but first as fissures
they come, as turmoil dreamtangle, and slow
evacuation of untenable positions.

The basic conflict wrestles out of sight,
in terms long hid[1] from workaday consciousness.
"Bill's paper-shop's gone broke, it isn't right."
Small angers accumulate, and large distress.

So here. New ways of life beget new habits.
Not only resistance springs from army-ways.
In this communal life new potencies
are veining out, to bridge the abrupt gap.

Jokes weld it, jokes against it. In the laughter
new bonds are warmly struck. It first appears
in mess-room, sleeping-hut, in common fears
and hopes. It is completed some time after.

The sense of a different union at last coheres
in anger that can kill. Terror shakes it,
fails and finally forms it. Life is good
in that murderous circle of brotherhood.

I thoroughly enjoyed the life and got on well with the others. I who for ten years had spent most of my life as if I were a Trappist monk now passed without any sense of surprise, strain, or discontinuity into the noisy open helterskelter existence of a soldier. Our Battalion was a halfway-house between Signals and Intelligence, concerned with interception of enemy signals. The operators had to be able to read high morse-speeds; and this I found nerve-racking. Finally I was marched in for an "interview" with the Colonel, our commander, who read through my record, said, "Catterick," and I was marched out. That meant I was going to continue my morse-career, at somewhat less grueling speeds, at Catterick. I couldn't bear the thought of more morse at any speed whatever, and appealed to my company-commander, a decent old risen-from-the-ranks officer. I told him I was an author (to be verified in Who's

[1] Typo in typescript: 'hod'.

Who) and I couldn't bear to think of the safety of the British Army if I was to handle morse-signals for it. So next day I had a very different sort of interview. The Colonel said, actually looking at me, "Well, what can I [do] for you, Lindsay?" I asked to be given any sort of clerk-job. He told the adjutant to find me a place in the Battalion Orderly Room. "We don't need anyone else." "Find him a place." So I became a clerk in the Orderly Room. I found later that I owed my good treatment to the fact that the Colonel had two passions: troutfishing and Cleopatra – and he had read my novel on that queen.

For near a year and a half I worked in the Orderly Room, in Trowbridge and then Douglas, Isle of Man, doing all the jobs from keeping the files to making out daily orders. The major who was second-in-command was an intelligent man, who kept trying to push me into applications for some role as an officer. At his pressure I even went for an interview as a Staff Officer, secure in the fact that I had no idea whatever as to what a staff-officer even was. The head of the interviewing officers turned out to have been a director of Methuen's and we had a pleasant chat about publishing.

I had joined the communist party as soon as I was called-up and found many members in the battalion, though the only person whom I saw persecuted then was a Labour-party member, who had been an ardent trade-unionist. A communist who used to bring in reports from a near pocket of the Intelligence Corps told me that he had spent most of the war so far spying on T.U. premises. I soon found that unless the vetting section of Intelligence, located at Oxford, had some jail-sentence against his name, they never spotted a communist. All the army's fears seemed directed against active trade-unionists. After ABCA with its insistence on discussion got going, the Education and Rats Officer (who combined the two most despised roles at officer-level) got together a dozen soldiers whom he had picked out as unusually intelligent; I was one of them. Looking round cautiously and lowering his voice at our first meeting, held to consider what to do about ABCA, he remarked, "You know we've got to be careful about this sort of thing falling into the hands of communists." Eleven of his listeners were communists, and the other was a Trotskyite.

I held classes on Marxist dialectics for the Trowbridge branch and helped to organise the party-members in the battalion. Not that we did anything but hold political discussions. If any trouble was caused – for instance over food, the one explosive matter in army-life – it was always by some spontaneous and ribald rebel. But a fair amount of ABCA work came my way, as all the officers hated it. At the end of our square-bashing period, we had an empty afternoon in the class-room. "Let Lindsay tell us about Russia," the others suggested. And so I told them. Everyone was sure that the Red Army was doomed and that Hitler would take Moscow before Christmas. I asseverated that Hitler would never take Moscow. I had no superior source of knowledge; I merely had an entire faith in the Russians. But when the Germans were driven back, everyone thought I must know a lot about Russia and what was going on there. Later in the Isle of Man my old captain asked me to give the company a long address on the Beveridge Report. He knew nothing about it but had got the idea it would ensure that the men didn't get an unfair deal like the veterans of 1914. So, unable to make head or tail of what I was saying, he repeated now and then, "Listen, men, it's very important for your future." I hadn't realised that I was to give a second talk the next week, so prepared nothing. Suddenly called away from the Orderly Room to address the company, I didn't know what to say, so I gave them a summary of Lenin's Imperialism, which I had recently reread, while the captain, thinking it Beveridge, repeated his recommendations.

As soon as I had my settled position in the Orderly Room I tried to write – various poems (later collected as Second Front) and a long narrative poem on the Dieppe Raid, Into Action, which had large sales. I started a novel on Odessa in 1917-8, which was to have told of the fighting in catacombs; but as soon as I got on to politics it seemed to go dry and false. So, drawing on the stories of friends in the battalion who had been at Dunkirk, and using material from the army-publications in the Orderly Room, I wrote a novel, We Shall Return on the phoney-war and the fighting in France. The question of choice appeared in the memories of my chief character, memories of three girls of different social positions. Later, finding an intelligent chap who had gone through the campaign in Greece and Crete, and once more using army-records, I wrote Beyond Terror. Part of the theme here was the struggle

between those who seemed to me to have the right view of an antifascist war, and sectarians who wanted to impose rigid and narrow aims. As I had to submit the books to censorship before they could be issued, I was not afraid of using secret army-material – not that anything lying about the Orderly Room was likely to have any high priority as a secret document. Anything really secret was kept by the adjutant in a safe. (A soldier told me later that on the ship taking him over to Normandy for the Second Front the captain was reading a copy of We Shall Return.)

Anyone who knows what army-conditions are like, even in such comparatively easy settings such as I had at Trowbridge and Douglas, will realise that I had a difficult job of concentration to compose and type out these works. In Douglas I was beginning on a third novel, Hullo Stranger, dealing with the women-workers in munitions. I had a sort of orderly under me (though I remained a mere signalman till the end of my army-career) when I was in charge of letters and filing; he had got permission to live out with his wife, a likeable girl who had been first woman fitter in Handley Page (aircraft). From her I got the job's feeling and technical details. In the novel she finds her husband called up soon after marriage; at the works she grows in moral strength and independence, half-falling in love with a communist. Her husband, on his return from fighting in the Near East, seems a complete stranger; but after the shock they manage to cross the barriers and find that they have both matured. Here, as in the two army-novels and the poems, the theme was growth in moral stature despite inner conflicts, through antifascist understanding and activity.

However, before finishing this work, I was called to London. Passing through on leave I had met Mary Wren (daughter of the Australian millionaire, who is the hero-villain of Frank Hardy's Power without Glory – Mary had developed left ideas and rebelled against her family). She told me that they wanted a scriptwriter at the ABCA War Office. I said that I had done most literary jobs, but nothing like that. Still, she insisted on ringing up MacOwan (then Captain, later Major) who was trying to organise a documentary army-theatre. I went along to see him and had a pleasant chat, finding that he had known Will Dyson well; and thought no more of the matter. Then some six weeks later I was hauled out of bed at Douglas by the

duty-officer and told that I was to go off next morning to London and report at the War Office. To my astonishment I found that MacOwan had applied for me – but not as scriptwriter. The stupid army-council had refused to allow for such a necessary appointment; so I remained technically a signalman seconded to the War Office as an actor. For the rest of 1943, on into 1945, I worked at the ABCA War Office in Sloane Square, living out where I pleased.

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I found that MacOwan, with the aid of the actor Stephen Murray, had already made a good start, aided by Miles Tomalin as writer. Their chief success had been a play, What's Wrong with the Germans?. This opened with a pretence at actuality, which always took army-audiences in. A slightly gibbering second-lieutenant comes in to say that some show or other, he isn't clear what, has fallen through, so, since the men are there, they might as well have a discussion. Genuine groans from the audience. After all, we're fighting the Germans, says the second-lieutenant, we ought to know why, surely. More groans. Two actors, planted in the audience, start an argument. One says the only good German is a dead one. The other says he was in Germany before the war and he knows something about the people at first hand. The second-lieutenant calls him out. He starts telling about the family he was lodging with, and the play comes to life out of his remarks. We see a German family divided between Hitlerism and democracy. At one point the Hitlerite son turns the hall and its audience into a Hitlerite meeting, and so on.

Though slight in its script, this play was an excellent example of the sort of thing we set out to do. We wanted plays that provided a certain amount of information about the war and its aims, but which overcame the resistances that any audience, especially an army one, felt to a play with a message. So we thought out all kinds of dodges, on and off the stage, to implicate the audience and startle them into paying attention. For instance, in Lend-Lease, probably the best all-round play we achieved, we used various visual effects: a maimed veteran playing a hurdy-gurdy to represent what happened when the people let themselves be fobbed off with talk about a land fit for heroes, or a fussy clerk seated with a ledger at the side

of the stage to represent the purely financial side of Lend-Lease. Scenes were short and pointed; and verse was used for special effects or for a sudden heightening of emotion. Thus, when we switched from the directly political or economic aspects of Lend-Lease, on to the moral issues, I wrote the scenes in verse; we wanted to give the effect that in matters of life and death for a whole civilisation the money-aspect faded out and the ledgers simply could not be balanced. I recall the first performance of this play, for a very large audience in a hall at Aldershot. It was essential that the soldiers shouldn't recognise that verse was being used or that they were being emotionally got-at. During the play it was clear that the audience was genuinely gripped; and my chats with various members afterwards – they didn't know who I was – showed that the verse had the effect of heightened emotion without any awareness on their part of a change in style.

As the plays often had to be given in nissen-huts or the like, far away from any normal stage-facilities, we did without scenery or anything but the simplest of props. We carried our own lighting-system and relied almost wholly on effects of light and shadow to convey place and circumstance, and to contrast one scene with another. I recall for example how a railway-station was very effectively suggested by a dim suggestion of a barrier and low-hanging light. This extreme bareness of cunningly-varied settings had to be linked with a simplicity, conciseness, and compactness of speech and presentation of conflict.

I read and studied the documentary plays of the theatre of the New Deal in the U.S.A., but though I learned from them something of how to set out an economic or political argument in terms both abstract and yet theatrically effective, our method was essentially our own. From my point of view the great thing was the need to write or devise for a mass-audience, who had to be approached in the simplest terms, but without any condescension. The need to get down to the plainest bedrock of drama and use any device whatever that was likely to put over one's point, strong visual images, music-hall songs, realistic dialogue, allegorical figures, bursts of intense poetry, all strung together on a line of developing argument. Our themes and attitudes we took from the sort of thing set out by ABCA in its

Bulletins and so on; I put in much research to ensure that any facts we used were correct, presented in a true perspective, and related to our declared war-aims.

One episode is worth mentioning for the light it throws on those aims. Hitchcock had come over from the U.S.A. and wanted to do a documentary film; he saw a production of our Lend-Lease and said at once that was just what he wanted. I discussed the matter with him and drew up a film-script; he didn't want a single detail changed from the play-version. Then suddenly we heard that he wasn't going to do the film. Later we were told that he was overruled from somewhere high-up: the public in America knew practically nothing about Lend-Lease and the authorities thought it would be most unwise to enlighten them. As Hitchcock wanted a film for distribution in both Britain and the States, he had therefore dropped the idea. How correct the judgment from high-up had been we learned later, when after the liberation of Paris we staged several of our plays there for allied troops in general. Once American was so enraged by Lend-Lease that he forced his way behind the scenes and wanted to beat up the author. Luckily I wasn't available. Yet in the play we had been more than friendly to Roosevelt and to the contribution made by Lend-Lease to the war-effort. That was apparently what infuriated the American, who considered that his country was shown as a sucker, pouring out money and goods for the decadent allies who wanted to pay nothing in return.

And, when near the end of the war we put on several of our plays for civilian audiences at the Arts Theatre, the critic of the News Chronicle, in an effort to be helpful and to stress the strong impact of the plays, remarked that if they were given widely they would lose millions of votes for the Tories, the Army Council under Grigg seized the chance to jump on ABCA, which they had always distrusted. Williams, the director, was called on to appear before them on a charge of socialist propaganda. However the general elections had intervened before the date given and nothing happened.

MacOwan had made some efforts to change my rank, since the work I was doing should have been that of a captain or major; but there was such a lack officers in the Education Corps that if I had been made an officer I should at once have been posted off to

different work. If I had continued in the army proper, I should always have refused any promotion beyond the rank of lance-corporal – supposing anyone mad enough to promote me. (In Special Operators, in the months before my transfer, we had large intakes of ATS, so as to release men from interception work in England; if I had not been transferred, I should soon have gone abroad as clerk in a Signals section or at least taken part in the Normandy landing.) Until 1936 I had consistently taken a pacifist attitude and should have resisted any call-up whatever the consequences; but the rise of the antifascist front and my turn to Marxism had changed my attitudes to what I could consider now a just war. In ABCA it did not make any difference for me what my rank was, as I should not be commanding men; but I preferred the comedy of being the Only Private in the War Office, commanding a room all my own when colonels were herded together, and treated with respect by brigadiers as some sort of secret-weapon. In the last months I designed and superintended educational films, which at the end were described as the work of a Staff Officer. So in effect I ended with that rank, though without the pay!

Partly through my army-work, partly through my association with Unity Theatre, partly because it was a matter that deeply interested me, so that I went out of my way to collect material, I had become aware of the largescale cultural developments going on among the people: which had begun as soon as the war took on a serious antifascist colouring, and which had been intensified after the Soviet Union entered the war. It is amusing and instructive to note that the intellectuals, now with eyes averted from the people, were totally ignorant of all that was happening. We see the proof of that in a symposium published by the Society of Authors in the summer of 1944 on the subject of The State as Patron. Not one of the contributors showed an atom of knowledge of what was happening on a vast scale all round him. They all argued the case in a purely abstract way. When they did make a positive suggestion, they failed to note that it had already been put into action in a big way. Thus G.D.H. Cole demanded pictorial art for “a nationally organised system of loan collections, available to any reputable group of borrowers from a village hall to a provincial Art Gallery.” In fact the British Institute of Adult Education, working with C.E.M.A., had been doing just

that, with signal success, for a couple of years. The Pilot Press was issuing a series on British Achievement in Wartime; I suggested a book on what was going on in the Arts, and it was published, with many photos. I briefly described how from small beginnings, such as the efforts to distract the bombed-out folk of London in the shelters, a complex set of organisations had grown up, shaming E.N.S.A. with its notion of the cheapest and most vulgar entertainments as the stuff to give the troops, and bringing the best music, drama, and music to the war-factories, the big cities, and even the villages. For instance, Cornish villagers enthusiastically greeted Samson Agonistes as the first play they had ever seen. At each stage of the war the interest widened and deepened; and amateur activities of all sorts were stimulated.

I think I am correct in saying that my little work still remains the only record of what was happening, in bookform – though there must be a large amount of material to be dug out in C.E.M.A. reports, in the files of the magazine Our Time (see later), and such sources. I am not going to tell the story here; but I must claim that, despite many limitations and gaps, there was the basis laid for a genuine popular culture of a high quality. The whole thing seemed to me the perfect verification of the belief that once people began to feel themselves at all playing an active social role, masters of their own fate, in a great shared enterprise to which they gave a deep spiritual assent, a true national culture began to stir. And, looking back, I still firmly believe that the evidence warranted that conclusion.

Inevitably at the same time I overvalued the developments, feeling sure that the potentialities would be at least in part stably realised, and not foreseeing the return of the old destructive forces in the postwar years. I declared:

> It would be easy, no doubt, to exaggerate the extent to which the developments have created a settled demand or stirred an enduring activity among the people. Culture, like freedom, is never something which once gained can be taken for granted; it is a matter of ceaseless effort. What is certain is that under the extremely difficult conditions of war with all its rigours and rationings we have been able to do much more than maintain cultural standards. We have made an incalculable leap ahead, creating for the first time in England since folkdays a genuine mass-audience for drama, song, music.

> It is clear that the almost total breakdown of cultural activities early in the war was an advantage in the long run. It meant that the problem had become so vast that makeshift and local efforts would be of no avail. Yet the situation could not be left where it was or the effects on national morale would have been serious. And so a centralised organisation of culture was made inevitable, the first largescale tackling of the issues that our country has seen. C.E.M.A. has the key-position in this development, though the full story involves much more than the work of any single central organisation. When we find is a continual diffusion from the centre (C.E.M.A. and other national or semi-national organisations) with continual spontaneous growth of local or regional activities. The two streams meet and enrich one another…
>
> The creation of a mass-audience, hungry for a share in the enjoyment and aspirations of culture, has inevitably meant a continual breaking-down of the old barriers -- the barriers between people and artist, audience and performer, amateur and professional… Considerable activity has been developing along the lines of contact, but in these primary stages creative utterance is sure to be indecisive and even crude. There is no harm in that. It none the less portends the day when the upper and lower levels will be coming closer into effective fusion.

I should have added that the "breakdown of cultural activities", which led to the new situation, had its beneficial results because it eliminated almost all commercialised entertainments and thus enabled people to find "what they wanted" in a life-and-death world. Incidentally we may note that it was the way in which the Old Vic and the Sadlers Wells Ballet had to go out into the provinces and adapt themselves to new and popular audiences, such as those in the mining towns, that revitalised them and enabled them to play an enlarged part in the postwar years.

I was not satisfied with using only the chances that the ABCA play-units gave me. I wrote for Martin Brown a poetic documentary on the Christian Resistance to Hitler on the Continent (including also the Jews of Warsaw), The Whole Armour of God, which he played first at Ealing and then took on tour with his Pilgrim Players, performing in village and other churches, and ending in Newcastle Cathedral. I also wrote several declamations which were performed e.g. the Death of Vatutin, given in Regents Park and elsewhere, or Elas Partisan (for Unity), and a documentary play, using song and verse, Convoy to Murmansk, for the People's Theatre at Newcastle. Finally, I wrote a play on Robin Hood, Robin of England, for Unity Theatre, in which I used the device of a wandering singer to open the play and link the

scenes. This play I wrote at the suggestion of Ted Willis, who was then running Unity, and I meant it as an epithalamion for Ann and myself. (Willis had collaborated at ABCA, taking part in discussions and contributing a few scenes to the plays.) The theme of Robin was the problem of disciplining the rebel band to a serious purpose without the loss of their spontaneous spirit of revolt.