

THE LOVE-CHARM
OF BOMBS

Restless Lives in the Second World War

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B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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Introduction

It is six o'clock on the evening of 26 September 1940, at the end of the first month of London air raids. This is the final hour of daylight on one of the last days of an Indian summer. Soon it will be time to black out windows and to retreat indoors. Any light will be eliminated, leaving people to stumble along gloomy streets. And then the sirens will start wailing, as they have wailed every evening for the last two and a half weeks, and another night of bombing will begin.

Across London, people are making the most of this final interlude of peace before the bombers arrive. 'War had made them idolise day and summer,' the narrator observes in Elizabeth Bowen's wartime novel *The Heat of the Day*; 'night and autumn were enemies.' Between the dark and fearful nights, the days offer a brief holiday from fear. 'Out of mists of morning charred by smoke from ruins each day rose to a height of unmisty glitter.' In Marylebone, Bowen herself must shortly go on duty as an ARP (Air Raid Protection) warden. From the balcony of her terraced Regency house at the edge of Regent's Park she can see the empty boating lake where trees have started to shed their first autumnal leaves. The park is shut because of an unexploded bomb and the white terraces bordering the park look to her like scenery in an empty theatre.

Standing on her balcony surveying the park, Elizabeth Bowen presents an imposing figure. She is strong-backed and long-necked;

her face with its high cheekbones and tall forehead seems to many of her friends to have become more beautiful now that she has entered her forties. The narrator of Bowen's first novel *The Hotel* observes that everyone has an age at which they are most themselves. The Second World War is Bowen's own. As an Anglo-Irishwoman she has always had torn loyalties; in her childhood she was half at home in the Cork countryside and half at home on the Kent coast. Now she has found a home in wartime London and she paces the blacked-out streets with a vigorous certainty. She is a successful and popular writer who has already published ten books and is confident of her own powers. And literary success has brought social and romantic success. Since her early twenties Bowen has been married to Alan Cameron, an English civil servant. The marriage is contented but celibate and for two years before the war Bowen was engaged in a passionate affair with the Irish writer and one-time IRA gunman Sean O'Faolain. In the summer of 1941 she will fall in love with the Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie, the man who will centre her world for the next thirty years.

A few streets south in Marylebone, Bowen's friend Rose Macaulay is in her flat in Luxborough Street, completing the day's writing before fear and noise make it impossible to concentrate. She is exhausted by the weeks of bombing, and is unlikely to have much sleep tonight. Later, she will go on duty as an ambulance driver, rescuing people trapped by debris or scalded by fire. Unlike Bowen, Macaulay is finding the intensity of wartime London more sad than exhilarating. She is almost sixty and is a frail though wiry and redoubtable woman. The arduous physical labour of her work as an ambulance driver distracts her both from her dismay at the war going on around her and from personal sorrow. For the last twenty years she has been in a secret but idyllic love affair with the married Irish novelist and former priest, Gerald O'Donovan. Ten years older than Macaulay, he is now dying and Macaulay can confide in very few people about the loss that she is preparing herself to face.

Macaulay's ambulance may well cross paths with the fire engine of Henry Yorke (better known by his pseudonym Henry Green). He is

working as an auxiliary fireman just around the corner from Macaulay in Davies Street and has been constantly fighting fires since the bombing began. The duality of Yorke's names reflects a division between two identities. Henry Yorke is an upper-class socialite who works in his father's business, Pontifex, and spends most of his evenings at extravagant parties. Henry Green is an experimental novelist who writes strange and lyrical tales of factory life and bright young things. Unlike Macaulay, Yorke is enjoying the Blitz, which has come as a relief after months of sterile waiting during the so-called 'phoney war'. He is pleased to be a hero at last and to see his heroism reflected back by girls who look him 'straight, long in the eye as never before, complicity in theirs, blue, and blue, and blue'. And between shifts at the fire station he can make the most of this adoration, enjoying the absence of his wife and son whom he has evacuated to the countryside.

But Yorke is frightened as well as excited by fire and he does not look forward to the raids as much as Graham Greene. For Greene the real action of the day begins when he can leave his desk at the Ministry of Information in Bloomsbury and start his night-time duties as an ARP warden, often accompanied by his lover Dorothy Glover. Greene's wife and children, like Yorke's, are out of London and he is enjoying his independence. Emerging unscathed from the bombs each morning, Greene has conquered his lifelong boredom and found a way to feel urgently alive. Meanwhile for the Austrian writer Hilde Spiel, serving supper to her husband, parents and child in Wimbledon, the fading light heralds the tedium and fear of another wakeful night at home. Once the raid begins the family will pile their mattresses against the windows and listen to music on the gramophone, trying to drown out the noise of the bombs which they hope will land elsewhere.

These writers, firefighting, ambulance-driving, patrolling the streets, were the successors of the soldier poets of the First World War, and their story remains to be told. Like the poets in the trenches, Bowen, Greene, Macaulay and Yorke were participants rather than witnesses, risking death, night after night, in defence of their city. The Second

World War was a Total War. No one escaped the danger and every Londoner was vulnerable. While the fighting in the First World War took place far away, the bombing of the Second World War was superimposed onto a relatively normal London life. Books were written, parties hosted, love affairs initiated and broken off. But the books, parties and love affairs were infused with the danger of death; every aspect of life was refracted through the lens of war.

Looking back on the Blitz, Elizabeth Bowen described this as a period of 'lucid abnormality'; a moment outside time when she and her friends were 'afloat on the tideless, hypnotic, futureless to-day'. When a bomb exploded, nearby clocks ceased to function, remaining stuck at the time of the detonation. London was a city of shock-stopped clocks and for its inhabitants, the suspended present created a climate where intense emotions could flourish. 'It came to be rumoured,' Bowen recalled, 'that everybody in London was in love.'

Bowen, Greene, Macaulay, Spiel and Yorke floated dangerously on that futureless present. All experienced the war as an abnormal pocket of time. As writers, they observed the strangeness of war imaginatively. London became a city of restless dreams and hallucinogenic madness; a place in which fear itself could transmute into addictive euphoria. To stay in London was to gamble nightly with death. And so each day was unexpected; each moment had the exhilarating but unreal intensity of the last moment on earth. Their public war work became the backdrop for volatile individual private lives. For Bowen, 'war time, with its makeshifts, shelvings, deferrings, could not have been kinder to romantic love'. Bowen, Greene and Yorke spent the war in the kind of love that blazed with the raging intensity of the fires igniting their city.

Often separated, necessarily or wilfully, from their spouses, they immersed themselves in a makeshift present in which pre-war morality seemed less relevant. As the bombs fell outside, lovers huddled together in basements and shelters, or defiantly outfaced the raids in blacked-out bedrooms or torch-lit streets. The passionate love affairs in Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1948), Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951) and Yorke's *Caught* (1943) all had their basis in the wartime lives of their creators.

The stories told here do not always concur with the official propaganda, which portrayed the Blitz as a scene of cheerful togetherness and courage, making the most of the 'London can take it' spirit that developed among Londoners. Documentary films from the period show cheerful groups of civilians resiliently flouting danger with communal singing and cups of tea. For the writers in this book, the reality was less wholesome and more reckless. To defy the nightly threat of death took more than staunch morale and national pride. They were too selfish to 'take it' for the sake of their city and too snobbish to sing together; they were more likely to be found drinking cocktails than tea.

Bowen, Greene, Macaulay, Spiel and Yorke all had moments of enthusing about the 'People's War', especially during the first months of the Blitz. They all felt briefly united with their neighbours and their colleagues in the civil defence services, and would all look back on this as a time of unusual community spirit. In 1969 Bowen reviewed *The People's War* by the historian Angus Calder, a book which challenged the commonplace image of national unity against a common enemy. She insisted that in fact the 'exuberance, during the early London Blitzes, was not a fake'. For her the myth of collective harmony, 'though bedraggled', persisted throughout the war; 'How else should we have gone on?'

But the exuberance referred to by Bowen was not quite the community spirit encouraged by government propaganda. Greene or Yorke, enjoying the sexual freedom enabled by war, indulged in a licentiousness that would not be officially encouraged; Greene's exuberance during the raids was symptomatic of a rather frightening glory in destruction for its own sake. So, too, it was a luxury to find the war exciting; a luxury enabled by class privilege (Bowen and Yorke had access to private shelters and to far more enticing food than rationing alone allowed) and also by the imaginative possibilities open to writers. Bowen later described her wartime writing as a 'saving resort', suggesting that writing allowed her to experience actual events on two planes at once. Writers and artists tended to be peculiarly receptive to the temporal and erotic freedom offered by the war in part because they could switch off from the danger and enjoy the raids as aesthetic events.

According to the fireman and short story writer William Sansom, the city bereft of electric and neon light took on a new beauty: 'By moonlight the great buildings assumed a remote and classic magnificence, cold, ancient, lunar palaces carved in bone from the moon.' In September 1940 Rose Macaulay recounted her experience of watching an air battle over London which she found 'most beautiful': 'the searchlights, and parachute flares, the fiery balls . . . and the sky lit up into gun-flashes, like sheet-lightning, and a wonderful background of stars.' Painters such as John Piper and Graham Sutherland depicted the raids in London as scenes of incandescent splendour, making the most of the surreal juxtapositions and the pinks, reds and yellows of the fires, glowing against the darkness of the blacked-out city.

For Bowen, in her review of Calder's book, the historian is in danger of falling into the same tendency to over-generalise as the government propagandists fell into at the time. 'We at least,' she writes, 'knew that we only half knew what we were doing.' She suggests that a picture of the war should be presented not just in terms of the actualities, but in terms of the 'mood, temper and climate' of the time. This is a climate best accessed through individual stories and through the intense, often strange war-writing of individual writers. Describing her own wartime short stories, Bowen wrote that 'through the particular, in wartime, I felt the high-voltage current of the general pass'.

Taken together, Bowen's statements can be seen as the impetus behind this book, which focuses on the lucidly abnormal particular stories of five writers in wartime London and post-war London, Ireland, Vienna and Berlin. In the process it attempts to tap into the high-voltage current of war, illuminating a ten-year period through the lives of five extraordinary individuals. The five writers are chosen for their own experiences and for their confluence in London in the Blitz. They were of different ages and nationalities and did not form a clear coterie in the manner of the First World War poets or of 1920s Bloomsbury. In a 1958 letter to her friend William Plomer, Elizabeth Bowen looked back on her contemporaries in the 1930s and 1940s as 'the only

non-groupy generation'. Nonetheless, she did acknowledge a shared social world. 'What an agreeable life we all had, seeing each other *without* being a group,' she wrote.

By seeing each other without being a group, Bowen, Greene, Macaulay and Yorke were often in the same place at the same time, and shared friends, experiences and, at one remove, lovers. Before the war, Bowen had been the theatre critic for *Night and Day*, the short-lived magazine edited by Graham Greene; in 1949 she would correspond publicly with Greene in a series of letters called 'Why do I Write?' Bowen and Macaulay were close friends and were linked by their mutual friendship with Virginia Woolf. Bowen always attributed her initial success as a writer to Macaulay's help in finding a publisher for her first stories. And Bowen and Yorke were linked by the incestuous love triangles which tessellated in literary London. After Bowen's lover Goronwy Rees jilted her for the beautiful novelist Rosamond Lehmann in 1936, Lehmann herself found solace from Rees's callous waywardness in Yorke's arms.

In his autobiography, Rosamond's brother, the publisher John Lehmann (who at this stage was working with Virginia and Leonard Woolf at the Hogarth Press), described an 'imaginary but nevertheless imaginable' party, drawing together some of the people who drank pre-dinner cocktails in his flat during the war. He hoped in the process to produce 'a composite picture that would illuminate the anatomy of our wartime society in the most truthful detail'. In this scene there are partygoers from the Ministry of Information, notably Graham Greene, 'full of sardonic stories about muddle and maze-like confusion of action'; there are guests from the fire service – Stephen Spender, William Sansom and Henry Yorke, who tells 'extraordinary stories of his fellow firemen'; at the other end of the room is Elizabeth Bowen, 'in high spirits, radiating charm and vitality'; and then there is Rose Macaulay, 'symbol of some dauntless, indomitable quality of moral and intellectual integrity in the pre-1914 generation'.

Hilde Spiel is notably absent from this party. She did encounter Macaulay during the war, but this tended to be at gatherings organised by the PEN club rather than at more decadent parties. She was an

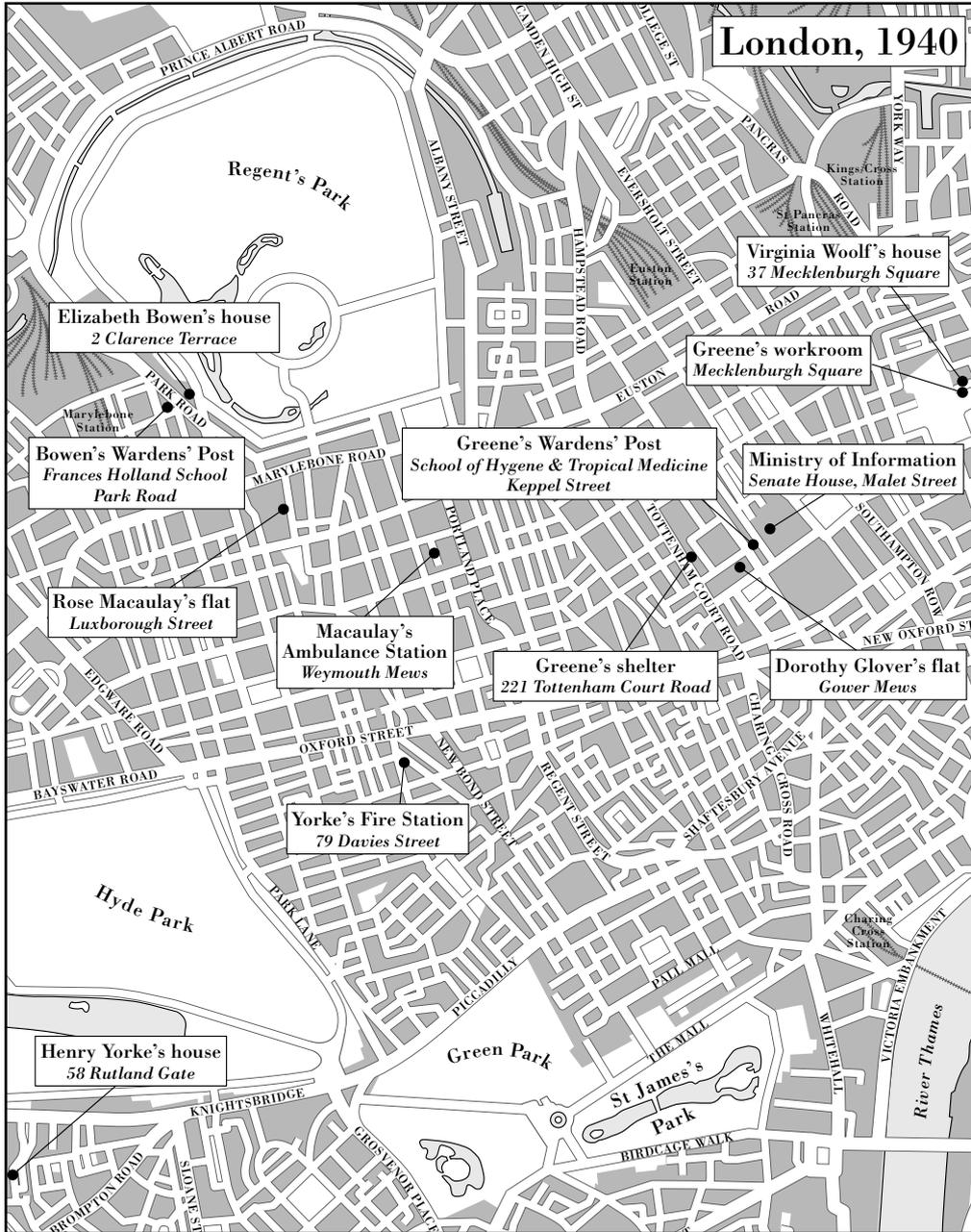
enthusiastic reader of Bowen and Greene and would later translate both novelists into German. However she herself remained unknown to both of them in the 1940s, although the three almost crossed paths in Vienna in 1948. Spiel's presence here acts as a counterpoint to the more exalted lives of the other four protagonists; a reminder of the gloomy and often horrific reality of the war years and of the fact that the main events of the war took place outside London. Exiled from her native Austria, Spiel was in the strange position of attempting to avoid bombs dropped by her former compatriots. Both she and her German husband Peter de Mendelssohn were attempting to resist their position as exiles, starting to publish fiction in English and insisting on their allegiance to Britain. But it was still hard to read about the gradual destruction of their homelands without ambivalence; and there were continual indications from the British that they did not quite belong. The sense of displacement was compounded by financial anxiety and by Spiel's resentment that she had left behind a successful literary career in Vienna to become a housewife in suburban Wimbledon.

It was only after the war that Spiel came into her own and that the roles of the five writers were reversed. Bowen, Greene and Yorke all had a good war but a bad peace. Spiel, on the other hand, had the most exciting time of her life in post-war Berlin and Vienna, where she was sent as an Allied press officer. The ruined European cities provided the setting for a new kind of ecstatic vitality. But, as she blacked out her windows on 26 September 1940, Spiel found it hard to be hopeful that life would ever dramatically improve or that she would feel fully at home anywhere again. For now it was Bowen, Greene, Macaulay and Yorke who could claim the territory of the blacked-out city as their own.

PART I

One Night in the Lives of Five Writers

26 September 1940



Newsreel

By 26 September 1940 Londoners were gradually becoming accustomed to air raids. It was now clear that the war in Britain had finally begun after a year of false starts.

When war was declared the previous September, the government and public prepared for the immediate bombing of London. Graham Greene and Henry Yorke were not unusual in hastily evacuating their wives and children to the countryside. Both men readied themselves for the deaths they thought could not be long in coming, with Greene drafting his will and Yorke writing his autobiography. Greene prepared for the raids by finding a builder to put plywood under his skylight to prevent broken glass falling inside; throughout London people queued up to have gas masks fitted and attempted to build shelters in their gardens. But these precautions proved premature. The first year of war came to be known as the 'phoney war' because the expected invasion and aerial bombardment failed to materialise. Away from home, the Battle of the Atlantic was playing out at sea, but in London it was a period characterised by anticlimactic waiting. By the late autumn of 1939, people had stopped carrying gas masks and there was a ban on recruiting any more ARP wardens.

The war in Europe began in earnest in the spring of 1940. Germany invaded Norway and Denmark in April and the Low Countries and

France in May. Allied forces were quickly cut off in Belgium and then evacuated from Dunkirk. The Germans next pushed further into France, occupying Paris by 14 June. This was an unexpectedly dramatic victory which isolated Britain and gave the Germans and other Axis powers an immediate advantage in Europe. On 18 June Winston Churchill, who had now succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister, predicted the beginning of the Battle of Britain. Two weeks earlier he had vowed never to surrender, fighting on the beaches, landing grounds, fields, streets and hills. Now he repeated that Britain would fight on, 'if necessary for years, if necessary alone', assuring the populace that they would look back on this as their finest hour. At this stage, people were expecting a full invasion. 'The prospect of invasion of England no longer absurd,' Hilde Spiel lamented in her diary after the Germans were victorious in Norway; 'This would mean death.' Official warnings blended with unofficial rumours suggesting that hundreds of German parachutists were about to land in Britain disguised as monks or nuns, with collapsible bicycles concealed beneath their habits.

The Battle of Britain did materialise that summer, but at first London remained unharmed. There were small daylight raids on coastal towns in the south and east in June and July and then, when the British Foreign Secretary rejected a final offer of peace from Germany on 22 July, the Germans embarked on an air battle, intending to wipe out Britain's air defences. Initially the Luftwaffe engaged RAF fighter planes in aerial combat. Then in August they attempted to destroy Britain's fighter defences, attacking airfields and radar stations. By the end of the month 1,333 people had been killed in raids. Nonetheless, these summer attacks were colloquially known as 'nuisance raids' and the British remained dismissive of their effects. 'There are two corrections I want to make to current Nazi propaganda,' the playwright J. B. Priestley informed the nation in a broadcast on 9 July:

First air raids. There has been a great deal of German raiding lately, but the results, so far from being effective, either as regards military

objectives or civilian morale, have been so negligible that the general opinion here has been that these raids can only have been feelers, attempts to discover where the best defences are located.

The Nazis, he implied tauntingly, were not really trying.

However, during the second half of August the German bombers moved progressively inland and began to incorporate the suburbs of London in their attacks. On the night of 18 August bombs fell in Croydon and in Wimbledon, where Hilde Spiel was living. On 22 August the first bombs fell in central London, giving Churchill an excuse to order an air attack on Berlin, which materialised on 25 August. Hitler in his turn used the bombing of Berlin as a pretext to command a more sustained attack on London. On 4 September he announced to the citizens of Germany that in England they were asking scornfully, 'Why doesn't he come?' They would not have to wait much longer. 'He's coming! He's coming!' When the RAF dropped three or four thousand kilograms of bombs on Germany, Hitler boasted that the Luftwaffe would respond with several hundred thousand kilograms. 'When they declare that they will increase their attacks on our cities, then we will *raze* their cities to the ground!' Still defiant, Priestley boasted the next day that Londoners were going on as normal, despite the sirens. There were searchlights at night, making rapidly changing patterns in the sky, and 'many-coloured flares blazing like sudden comets'. But it was surprising, on the whole, what little difference it made.

He spoke too soon. On 7 September Göring declared that as a result of the provocative British attacks on Berlin 'the Führer has decided to order a mighty blow to be struck in revenge against the capital of the British Empire'. That night London suffered its first major attack. At five in the afternoon a swarm of planes flew in from Kent towards the London docks. By 6.30 much of the East End was on fire and the streets were strewn with fallen bricks and broken glass. Later on, heavy bombs landed in Chelsea and Victoria while others continued to destroy the East End. Looking back on that night, William Sansom recalled that:

when the western skies had grown already dark the fierce red glow in the East stuck harshly fast and there was seen for the first time that black London roofscape silhouetted against what was to become a monotonously copper-orange sky.

As a full-time auxiliary fireman, Henry Yorke was engaged in defending London from the start of the raids, risking his life night after night at the docks. 'I've fought fires every night since Saturday,' he wrote to Rosamond Lehmann on 11 September,

have had three in one day and the two longest, Surrey Commercial Docks and St Paul's, lasted 12 hours without a relief. The Docks one was the worst, bombed continuously from 9pm to 3am in the middle of a timber yard alight and completely out of control. I was lucky to get out.

Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and Rose Macaulay had longer to wait before they were directly involved, but by the third day of the Blitz the bombs were falling indiscriminately across London and no area seemed safe. 'I hear little by little of the various bomb-damages in London,' Macaulay told her sister on 8 September; 'Hoxton again was badly hit, even streets in Kensington and round Paddington.'

On 9 September, just around the corner from the area Greene was patrolling as an ARP warden, Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury home in Mecklenburgh Square was hit by a high explosive (HE) and an unexploded bomb. Woolf went to London to survey the damage and found that the square was roped off to the public but she could peer in from behind. A house thirty yards away from theirs was completely ruined. 'Scraps of cloth hanging to the bare walls at the side still standing,' she reported; 'A looking glass I think swinging. Like a tooth knocked out – a clean cut.' The Woolfs started making urgent plans to move the Hogarth Press and all its equipment out of the house, but a week later the unexploded bomb exploded and the house and with it the Press was destroyed. "We have need of all our courage" are the words that come to the surface this morning; on hearing that all our windows are broken, ceilings down, and most of our china smashed,' Woolf observed in her

diary. Bowen and Macaulay, both close friends of Woolf's, wrote to console her, terrified that their own homes would be next. 'When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too?' Bowen asked. 'All my life I have said, "Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs" – and what a mistake.'

Churchill urged Londoners to remain resilient. 'Hitler expects to terrorise and cow the people of this mighty city,' he announced on the radio on 11 September. 'Little does he know the spirit of the British nation, or the tough fibre of the Londoners.' But the heavy raids continued throughout September. Several stations and major buildings in London were hit in the first week of attacks: Somerset House, Whitehall, Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace had all been struck by 15 September, though none of these was seriously damaged. Meanwhile houses and flats throughout London were destroyed by explosion and fire. Gradually people learnt to tell the difference between the sounds of HEs, incendiary bombs, parachute mines (dropped from aeroplanes to detonate at roof level) and defensive guns. Initially, the anti-aircraft guns in London were non-existent but by 10 September guns had been brought in from throughout Britain. Only one shell in 2,000 reached its target but morale improved now that London was heard to defend itself so noisily. William Sansom described how on 11 September guns started up from every side as soon as the enemy bombers came droning down, creating a 'momentous sound that sent a chattering, smashing, blinding thrill through the London heart'. There had been gunfire before, but nothing like this. 'A violent medley of angry sounds, urgently accumulating like the barking of a pack of dogs, a rattling of pompoms and a booming of great naval guns.' At this stage there were raids by both day and night but on 15 September the Germans started concentrating their attacks on the night-time, deterred from daytime sorties by heavy Luftwaffe losses.

Politicians and journalists praised the resilience of Londoners engaged in defending their city. All the civil defence services were learning from experience and improving in efficiency and efficacy. Firemen now knew to keep the stirrup pump unlashd and to have water ready drawn. They had also become less fearful in dealing with fire. In a broadcast on

10 September, J. B. Priestley lauded the ARP services both for their organisation and for 'the quality of service given by the men and women acting as air wardens, fire fighters, and as members of emergency squads'; this service could not be bought with money and sprang instead 'out of a deep devotion to and love of this great city and its people'.

But despite a widespread determination to resist the Germans and keep going, Londoners were becoming cumulatively exhausted by the succession of all-night raids. 'To work or think was to ache,' Bowen wrote in *The Heat of the Day*. 'In offices, factories, ministries, shops, kitchens the hot yellow sands of each afternoon ran out slowly; fatigue was the one reality. You dared not envisage sleep.' Sleeplessness compounded anxiety. No one had any idea where the bombing would lead, or if London would end up flattened. 'How fantastic life has become,' Rose Macaulay wrote to her sister on 11 September. 'I wonder if London will soon lie in ruins, like Warsaw and Rotterdam.'

Increasingly involved in their local battle, Londoners became isolated from the war as it progressed in the outside world. William Sansom recalled how in this period 'out in the wide world of the war' Quisling had assumed power in Norway, Germany was extending its power in Romania, and ominously Hitler met Mussolini on the Brenner. Britain itself was involved in raids on western Germany and naval engagements in the Atlantic. 'But every night in the dark small world of London's intimate streets these matters receded, and under the urging drone of the bombers, the weaving searchlights, the thunder of bombs and the crack of guns the moments became vivid and active.' These were

hot, cold, sharp, slow moments of intense being; moments that then extended themselves into hours, that brought with them the exhaustion of cold and sleeplessness, so that the total experience is most remembered as a curious double exposure of tensity and dullness.

Each night of the Blitz was a self-contained moment in itself. And as darkness fell on the evening of 26 September, Bowen, Greene, Macaulay, Spiel and Yorke waited anxiously to see what this particular moment would involve.

I

7 p.m.: Blackout

The blackout on 26 September began officially at 7.26 p.m. It had been a cloudy day after weeks of unreal autumnal sunshine. When the sun did break through in the middle of the afternoon, the trees and lawns in the London parks appeared to Elizabeth Bowen to freeze in the horizontal light. For Bowen, the scene below her white stucco house seemed especially still because Regent's Park itself was closed. She and her husband Alan Cameron were among only a few residents who had returned since the time bomb fell two weeks earlier. 'Through the railings I watch dahlias blaze out their colour,' she wrote in an article entitled 'London, 1940'. 'Leaves fill the empty deck-chairs; in the sunshine water-fowl, used to so much attention, mope round the unpeopled rim of the lake.'

Now the clouds had faded into darkness. Throughout London people pulled down black screens, tucking curtains into the corners of windows. The thick layers of cloth offered a sense of protection against the bombs, even if they would do nothing to impede the blast. Gradually, the streets began to empty and civilians waited uneasily inside their houses, prepared to make their way to the shelters if necessary. But for those in the Air Raid Protection services, the ghostly blacked-out streets were a terrain to be paced, surveyed and known. When darkness fell it was time for the ARP wardens to go on duty; for Elizabeth Bowen in Marylebone and Graham Greene in Bloomsbury to patrol their districts, making sure that there were no chinks in the blackout along the way. Both were rendered official by their attire. Greene had a Civil Defence armband over his own clothes and Bowen was wearing a dark

blue ARP uniform coat, although that July the local authorities had decided to save money by discontinuing these. Like all wardens, they were equipped with tin hats, whistles and respirators.

Bowen later described how in

walking in the darkness of the nights for six years (darkness which transformed a capital city into a network of inscrutable canyons), one developed new bare alert senses, with their own savage warnings and notations.

The buses and cars in the street were almost invisible except for a tiny point of light at each side. Lenses on traffic lights were permanently covered by a black metal plate pierced by a single cross. Passing human figures had been reduced to shadows. It was hard not to trip over the kerb or the sandbags piled high on the pavements. Indeed, in the first month of the war casualties due to the blackout had exceeded British military casualties. But wardens were learning to feel their way around familiar pavements and to recognise each other's outlines as they passed, developing a new sense somewhere between the sense of touch and the sense of smell.

The districts were small enough for wardens to get to know a large proportion of the local residents, as well as learning the layout of the streets and the location of any potential hazards. Bowen was probably based at her nearest post, which was situated in the basement of Francis Holland School on Park Road, just behind her own street, Clarence Terrace. The wardens at this post patrolled a patch that went as far as Marylebone Station in the west, the Marylebone Road in the south and the Outer Circle of Regent's Park in the east. Greene was based at a post about a mile and a half south-east of the park, underneath the School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in Gower Street. He and his colleagues looked after an area bounded by New Oxford Street in the south, the Euston Road in the north, Gordon Square in the east and Gower Street in the west.

Tonight, Elizabeth Bowen was pleased to be back in London after two weeks away. She and Alan had been home since Monday. Clarence

Terrace, like all the streets off the park, was still officially ‘closed’; there were barriers and bomb-notices at every entrance. Elizabeth reported to her cousin Noreen in neutral Ireland that it looked ‘like a street in a city of the dead, with dead leaves and bits of paper blowing about’. Going to bed, she felt as if she was sleeping in the corner of a deserted palace. Each day, the postman took a flying run down the terrace, and Elizabeth left to buy loaves and bottles of milk, largely to feed Lawrence the cat. ‘I had always placed this Park among the most civilised scenes on earth,’ she wrote in ‘London 1940’;

the Nash pillars look as brittle as sugar – actually, which is wonderful, they have not cracked; though several of the terraces are gutted – blown-in shutters swing loose, ceilings lie on floors and a premature decay-smell comes from the rooms. A pediment has fallen on a lawn.

On the night of the time bomb, Elizabeth had only had the chance to rush back into the house and pick up a box of 200 cigarettes, which seemed briefly more precious than anything else she could take with her. Away from home, she worried about her typewriter left uncovered as the dust blew through their suddenly emptied house. Elizabeth and Alan spent their first few days away from Clarence Terrace at the Mount Royal Hotel off Oxford Street, but after two days they were bombed out of Oxford Street as well. This raid, Elizabeth told Noreen, was ‘as appalling a night as I ever wish to see’, although as a member of the Home Guard Alan had relished being in charge, taking command of the hotel and issuing orders in a military voice as he directed the early morning traffic. Alan had enjoyed his adventure and now, returning after a week at the home of friends in the countryside, it was time for Elizabeth to enjoy hers.

Elizabeth Bowen described these September evenings as a time when ‘after black-out we keep that date with fear. The howling ramping over the darkness, the lurch of the barrage opening, the obscure throb in the air.’ In fact, though, she herself was more often exhilarated than afraid. On nights when Bowen was not on ARP duty, visitors to Clarence Terrace were expected to remain on the balcony to watch the display. ‘I



Bond Street following the 17 September raid

do ap-p-pologise for the noise,' Stephen Spender recalled Bowen announcing dryly as she led her guests inside after a raid. 'The sound of the Boche bomber overhead is exactly like the enlarged sound of a wasp,' she informed Noreen dismissively; 'it makes the same priggish and consequential noise.'

In a section of her novel *The Heat of the Day* written during the war, Bowen pays testament to the strength of London itself in September 1940:

The very soil of the city at this time seemed to generate more strength: in parks the outsize dahlias, velvet and wine, and the trees on which each vein in each yellow leaf stretched out perfect against the sun blazoned out the idea of the finest hour.

As an Anglo-Irishwoman, Bowen had always had an ambivalent identity, feeling neither fully British nor fully Irish. Now she was embarrassed

by Ireland's decision to remain neutral during the war and had identified completely as a Londoner, defiantly protecting her city. And if it was London's finest hour, then it was also Bowen's own. She believed herself to be invincible, partly because she prided herself on being the same age as her century.

In her 1960 account of *A Time in Rome*, Bowen observed that 'twinship with one's century' brings 'the feeling of being hand-in-glove with it, which may make for unavowed confidence'. She attributed this feeling to Stella in *The Heat of the Day*, who finds that 'the fateful course of her fatalistic century' seems 'more and more her own'. Both Stella and her creator had been too young to be actively involved in the First World War, though Bowen had spent some time as 'a pink, rattled, inexpert VAD' (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse in an Irish hospital for shell-shocked soldiers after leaving school in 1918. Looking back, she saw herself at this age as resembling a rabbit in the middle of the road. Now, as she and her century entered their forties together, Bowen was determined to take responsibility for her age. She, like Stella, would not die in the Blitz because the century itself had more in store for her.

According to Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen gave in this period 'an impression of abounding health and vitality'. The admiring younger writer May Sarton recalled her friend as looking in this period like a drawing by Holbein.

Hers was a handsome face, handsome rather than beautiful, with its bold nose, high cheekbones, and tall forehead; but the colouring was as delicate as the structure was strong – fine red-gold hair pulled straight back into a loose knot at her neck, faint eyebrows over pale-blue eyes.

For May, Elizabeth was rendered human and approachable by her slight stammer and her rippling laughter, which was rather like a purr.

Bowen was currently writing a family history in which she described her grandmother, Elizabeth Clarke, in a passage that reads as an accurate self-portrait:

It is possible that Elizabeth's *manner* was part of her physical personality. As a girl in her early twenties she was (to judge by successive pictures) less nearly beautiful than in her later life. But her way of holding herself and her smiling candid calmness must always have been distinctive and beautiful. In girlhood, the fine open moulding of her face, her eyes set in like eyes in a Holbein portrait, her rather large mobile mouth must have been distinctive and strange. She always moved with deliberation; her voice was low-pitched; she must have been a mixture of aliveness and repose.

By 1940 Elizabeth Bowen herself was both distinctive and beautiful. She was alive and ready to pounce; to walk out fearlessly into the darkness of the blackout; to fall, as she would six months later, precipitously and consumingly in love.

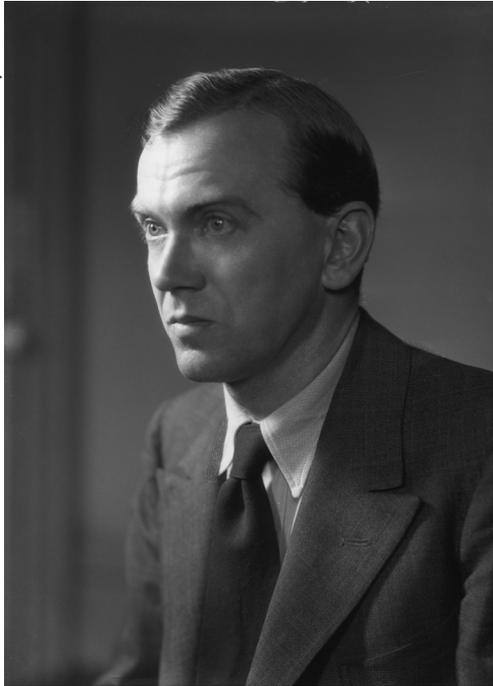


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Elizabeth Bowen, photographed by Howard Coster, 1942

Meanwhile Graham Greene was already in love. At thirty-six, he, like Bowen, was growing into himself. He was the author of ten novels

© National Portrait Gallery, London



Graham Greene, photographed by Bassano, 1939

– most recently *The Power and the Glory*, which had been published in March. Tall, with grey-blue eyes, he had always been austere handsome, and now his youthful shyness had begun to dissipate as a result of literary success and sexual experience. He was often accompanied during the raids by his feisty and beguiling comrade-at-arms, Dorothy Glover. In general, Greene was more elated by the bombing than Bowen. Since childhood he had yearned, both romantically and depressively, for death. And, with Dorothy, the heady combination of danger and sex was especially alluring. Greene's friend the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge recollected the Blitz as

a kind of protracted debauch, with the shape of orderly living shattered, all restraints removed, barriers non-existent. It gave one the same feeling a debauch did, of, as it were, floating loose; of having slipped one's moorings.

Greene himself looked back on this as a manic-depressive period: 'depressive when the bombs were at their worst and manic when one woke up in the morning to the sound of the glass being swept up and one was alive.'

When he had first joined the ARP training course, Greene was nervous that he would faint, as he had done as a young man hearing descriptions of accidents, or even once as an adult cutting his own finger. But like many other wardens he found that once he was equipped with a job to do he stopped being afraid of his emotions. John Strachey, another literary warden who wrote a war memoir which Greene admired, recalled his relief on beginning his duties that he was no longer at liberty to worry about his own safety. He observed that

the instant that an individual is given even the simplest objective function, and becomes a member of an organised (and uniformed, this is notoriously important) group, the whole burden of deciding whether or not on any particular occasion to seek his or her safety is automatically removed.

A few years after the war, Bowen recollected that she had signed up as a warden because 'air raids were much less trying if one had something to do'. She described how a warden in an air raid stumped up and down the streets, 'making a clatter with the boots you are wearing, knowing you can't prevent a bomb falling, but thinking "At any rate I'm taking part in this, I may be doing some good."'

Where Bowen gained solace from a belief in her own invincibility, Greene was more bizarrely reassured by the certainty that he would not survive the Blitz at all. He later recalled that he was scared to begin with, but that soon he gave up the idea that he was going to survive and ceased to be frightened. As a warden, Greene could enjoy the cleansing moment of apocalypse that he had been longing for since his childhood. 'We were,' he wrote, 'a generation brought up on adventure stories who had missed the enormous disillusionment of the First World War, so we went looking for adventure.' Indeed, his sense of the First World War was so vivid that years later he dreamed that he was Wilfred Owen, waiting for battle in a dugout and writing Owen's own poems.

Greene was right in attributing this feeling to other members of his generation. In his 1938 autobiography, Christopher Isherwood described how 'we young writers of the middle twenties were all suffering, more or less subconsciously, from a feeling of shame that we hadn't been old enough to take part in the European War'. However, Greene was unusual among writers of his circle in enjoying the danger unequivocally. 'I can't help wishing sometimes,' he had written aged twenty-one to his future wife Vivien, 'that something would happen to solve all problems once and for all. Something like war with Turkey and Russia and Germany, which would destroy all thought of the future, and leave only a certain present.' As a teenager, he had staved off boredom and depression by playing Russian roulette with a loaded gun, enjoying the feeling that life contained an infinite number of possibilities until even playing with death became boring. In the 1930s, a restlessness set in, which he later interpreted as a desire to be a spectator of history. He looked forward to war as an entry into history and as a necessary awakening.

Once war was declared, Greene was initially disappointed by the lack of danger. During the summer of 1940, he often spent Saturday nights in Southend, which was an obvious entry point for German planes coming in from the sea. In an October 1940 article entitled 'At Home', Greene described the relief he had experienced once the Blitz started. The British, he wrote, had got used to violence so quickly because the violence itself had been expected for so long. Indeed, 'the world we lived in could not have ended any other way'. The squalor of England in the 1930s – 'the curious waste lands one sometimes saw from trains . . . the dingy fortune-teller's on the first-floor above the cheap permanent waves in a Brighton back street,' the landmarks, indeed, of the 'Greenland' in which he set his own fiction – had called out for violence, like the rooms in a dream where you know that something is about to happen. In 1936, many writers had gone to meet the violence halfway in Spain; less ideological, perhaps less courageous writers such as Greene himself had chosen destinations like Africa where the violence was more moderate.

But, armed with a two-way ticket, these writers had an escape route;

according to Greene they were simply tickling their own moral sense. Those journeys were a mere 'useful rehearsal' which now helped them to adapt to a strange home, 'lying on one's stomach while a bomb whines across'. Now, it was easy to feel at home in London or the other bombed cities because life there was 'what it ought to be'. Like a cracked cup placed in boiling water, civilisation was breaking up at last.

The nightly routine of sirens, barrage, the probing raider, the unmistakable engine ('Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?'), the bomb-bursts moving nearer and then moving away, hold one like a love-charm.

Greene was unhappy when he spent just a few days away from the city during the Blitz; he found safe areas 'unsavoury' in their evasion of the general condition of danger. Even the victims failed to evoke his sympathy. He too expected death in his turn and often envied the casualties of the bombing. As a Catholic, he believed that the dead were treated justly and that war could therefore bestow peace.

The innocent will be given their peace, and the unhappy will know more happiness than they have ever dreamt about, and poor muddled people will be given an answer they have to accept.

Unlike many of the writers in his circle, Greene had never advocated pacifism. 'If war,' he wrote in the *Spectator* in December 1940, 'were only as pacifists describe it – violent, unjust, horrible, useless – it would have fallen out of favour long ago.' For him, the desire for war was a longing both for catharsis and for tribulation. By night, the Second World War provided both.

During the day, Greene was pen-pushing in the Ministry of Information. If it were not for his nights as an ARP warden, he would have been embarrassed to play so small a part in the violence that he saw as the real business of war. At the start of the conflict, Greene wrote to his wife describing the 'faint susurrus of the intellectuals dashing for ministry posts', dismissing Stephen Spender who had 'feathered his young

nest in the Ministry of Information', though in fact Spender worked as a schoolteacher before he signed up as a fireman in 1941. Greene himself initially refrained from accepting a desk job. Called for his interview with the Emergency Reserve in the winter of 1939, he was asked what role he envisaged himself undertaking in wartime by officials who clearly expected to hear the word 'Intelligence'. As the interviewers leaned forward in their chairs, Greene had the impression that they were holding out to him, 'in the desperation of their boredom, a deck of cards with one card marked'. He helped them by taking the marked card and announcing 'the Infantry', asking only for six months to finish *The Power and the Glory*, which was actually already completed.

In fact in April 1940, two months before he was due to be called up into the army, Greene accepted a post at the Ministry of Information. He wanted to stay where he was, with time to write, even if working as a wartime civil servant would be boring. Greene was responsible for looking after the authors' section and had a tiny office carved out within one of the Ministry's rambling corridors, incongruously housed within the clean art deco lines of Senate House, normally the province of the University of London. According to Malcolm Muggeridge (now a colleague of Greene's), there were still intimations of the academic function of the building: 'scientific formulae scrawled on blackboards, the whiff of chemicals and dead dog-fish in one of the lavatories'. But now, like all Ministry buildings, this one teemed with people, moving about energetically. In a 1940 story called 'Men at Work', Greene described the 'high heartless building with complicated lifts and long passages like those of a liner and lavatories where the water never ran hot and the nail-brushes were chained like Bibles'. The building even had the stuffy smell of the mid-Atlantic, except in the corridors, where the windows were open for fear of blast and he expected to see people wrapped in rugs lying in deckchairs. Here, 'work was not done for its usefulness but for its own sake – simply as an occupation'. Propaganda, as far as Greene was concerned, was a mere means of passing the time.

Meanwhile, determined to get to the front one way or another, Greene was proposing a scheme for official writers to the Forces, equivalent to the war artists. When Evelyn Waugh visited him at the Ministry

of Information in May 1940, Greene tried to persuade Waugh to support the idea, announcing that he himself wanted to become a marine. While trapped in the soulless safety of Senate House, he and Muggeridge entertained themselves by reading the file of letters from writers offering their services to the Ministry and by dreaming up imaginatively ludicrous schemes to throw the enemy off course. Muggeridge later remembered Greene coolly exploring the possibility of throwing stigmata and other miraculous occurrences into the battle for the mind in Latin America.

The excitement and the danger of wartime came at night. When Greene was not on duty as a warden, he would wander around anyway, sometimes with Dorothy Glover and sometimes with Muggeridge, who found that

there was something rather wonderful about London in the Blitz, with no street lights, no traffic and no pedestrians to speak of; just an empty, dark city, torn with great explosions, racked with ack-ack fire, lit with lurid flames, acrid smoke, its air full of the dust of fallen buildings.

Muggeridge observed Greene's longing on these evenings for a bomb to fall on him.

On nights like 26 September when he was on duty, Greene could legitimately feel that he was actively involved in the war. The autumn of 1940 was an especially satisfying moment for ARP wardens. From the start of the war, official civil defence manuals had insisted on the wardens' importance, stating that there would be a great need in air raids for 'persons of courage and personality' with sound local knowledge to serve as a link between the public and the authorities. But Violet Bonham Carter, President of the Women's Liberal Federation and a close friend of Winston Churchill, reported in the *Spectator* in November 1940 that during the phoney war wardens like herself had been regarded as 'a quite unnecessary and rather expensive nuisance'. They appeared to spend their days in basements, listening to gas lectures in the intervals of playing darts, emerging at nightfall only to worry innocent people about their lights or perform strange charades with the

traffic. Now that the raids had started, the wardens had their reward for months of training and waiting. 'We are conscious, as never before in our lives, of fulfilling a definite, direct and essential function.'

Bonham Carter was particularly proud that this new service was self-created and democratic; the wardens' posts were run by local authorities and staffed by volunteers. As civilians, the wardens were not subject to military discipline and were unfettered by red tape and rigid regulations; 'in an essentially human task we are allowed to behave like human beings.' Many of them did not even have uniforms; the only pre-requisite for the job was a tin hat. This kind of war work was especially satisfying for women like Bonham Carter who were determined to play an equivalent role in society to men. John Strachey considered that women who were sharing the danger of the war by engaging in civil defence work were undergoing some of the most satisfying and valuable experiences they had ever been offered. As far as he was concerned, a woman's life was no higher or more sacred than a man's, and it was 'mere cant' to pretend that it was.

Bowen, like Bonham Carter, was proud that she was risking her life alongside her male counterparts. In a longer draft of 'London, 1940' she outlined the liberating effects of war for women, who were no longer having to dress according to the expectations of male society.

Those who don't like scratchy stockings go bare-legged. You see everywhere the trouser that comforts the ankle, the flat-heeled shoe for long pavement walks.

Both Bowen and Greene appreciated the opportunity the war gave them to become acquainted with their fellow wardens, with Bowen later describing the warden's post as a fascinating focus of life. 'We wardens,' she wrote, 'were of all types – so different that, but for the war, we would not have met at all. As it was, in spite of periodic rows or arguments on non-raid evenings, most of us became excellent friends.'

Bowen provided a tribute to these wartime friends through the character of Connie in *The Heat of the Day*. As tired as everyone else, Connie

may occasionally slumber beside the telephone but she can, at any moment, 'instantly pop open both eyes and cope'. She also maintains standards, despite the privations of war, clipping on her earrings, even though they hurt, because 'going on night duty you had all the same to keep up a certain style'.

Working alongside women like Connie, Bowen was coming to believe in this as a democratic 'People's War'. In the earlier draft of the 'London, 1940' article, she stated that in the previous six months British class-consciousness had faced a severe challenge. The spell of the Old School Tie had lost its power; people walked the streets shabby, with grooming now limited to the effort to clean the brick dust from their faces and hair. Liberated from checking for signs of status, Londoners looked straight into each other's eyes. All over the place there was an 'exchange of searching, speechless, intimate looks between strangers'. Indeed, there were no strangers now; everyone was part of a collective community. 'We have almost stopped talking about Democracy,' Bowen went on, 'because, for the first time, we *are* a democracy. We are more, we are almost a commune.' Now that everyone faced the same risks as their neighbours, they were levelled by danger. 'All destructions make the same grey mess; rich homes, poor homes, the big store, the one-man shop make the same slipping rubble.' Identifying herself collectively with 'the people', she announced that this '*is* the people's war, for the people's land, and what we save we rule'.

Although Greene was dismissive of cantish propaganda, he, like Bowen, was sold on the idea of the democratic spirit of wartime London. 'This is a people's war,' he had declared in a review of British newsreels at the end of the first month of the war, suggesting that the American public should learn about the war in Britain through 'the rough unprepared words of a Mrs Jarvis, of Penge, faced with evacuation, black-outs, a broken home'. He was impressed by the courage of the civilians he saw every night, hurrying to the shelter, making do amid bombed buildings. Reviewing a theatrical revue-satire two months into the Blitz, he commended Edith Evans's portrait of a hop-picker returning to the fields from her bombed home. The 'unembittered humour', the 'Cockney repetitions that move one like the refrain of a

ballad' and the 'silly simple smile' came 'very close to the heroic truth at which the world is beginning to wonder'.

For Greene, the camaraderie in the warden's post transposed wartime London onto the comic world of his own stories. This was largely the result of a colleague called Charlie Wix, the 'heroic raconteur' of the post, whose chief occupation before the war had been giving evidence in divorce cases. Anecdotes with punchlines like 'Mr Wix . . . what 'ave you done with the bodies?' gave Greene entertaining material for his war diary. Later, he realised that his most humorous stories all dated from the Second World War, as though the proximity of death provoked an irresistible urge to laugh. Together, the wardens united in the face of the surprising nervousness of the police, who disappeared from the streets during bad raids, with one mistaking a new heavy gun for a landmine. And Greene found similar material for humour in the shelter at 221 Tottenham Court Road, which was on the edge of his patch and was frequented chiefly by good-natured prostitutes from the bar



A London air-raid shelter, autumn 1940

opposite. ‘Molly Hawthorn,’ he reported in his diary, ‘is a whore and likes it.’ A former pillion girl, she became a prostitute when she discovered ‘that people would actually pay her’. Before the war, she had married, but then her husband was called up and sent to Ireland ‘and back she went to whoring’. Greene had wandered once again into Greeneland.

At 8.30 p.m. on 26 September the sirens in both Bloomsbury and Marylebone began to wail. The main sirens sounded for two minutes: a mournful and ominous howl, gliding slowly up and down between two notes. John Lehmann compared this to the noise of a dog in the extremities of agony. The warning was then taken up by the wardens, who sounded sharp blasts on their whistles, urging local residents to retreat into shelters. Once they had blown their whistles, Bowen and Greene had to visit the shelters in their district, making sure that people were settling for the night and that the paraffin lamps were still working. Now, with the sky lit up by searchlights, pedestrians watched as the battle played itself out high up in the sky, with the planes too far away to hear. The raiding bombers, arriving from the coast, were met by defending fighters, diving and curling, with both leaving white trails across the sky. Gradually the enemy aeroplanes approached the city, as they do in *The Heat of the Day*, ‘dragging, drumming, slowly round in the pool of night, drawing up bursts of gunfire – nosing, pausing, turning’.

From now on the hum of aircraft overhead was punctuated by the noise of bombs dropping, mingled with the persistent sound of the pelting shells of the ack-ack guns, which were stationed near Bowen in Regent’s Park. In his wartime diary Harold Nicolson, who was currently heading the Ministry of Information, tried to distinguish between the different layers of sound:

There is the distant drumfire of the outer batteries. There is the nearer crum-crum of the Regent’s Park guns. Then there is the drone of aeroplanes and the sharp impertinent notes of some nearer batteries.