Devonshire Street (not yet renamed Boswell Street), 1912–1926. The oldest part of Bloomsbury, early eighteenth-century but no longer fashionable, the plain Queen Anne houses converted into cheap shops, lodgings and workshops, where tailors, gold-beaters and coffin-makers labour long hours to keep alive. Women stand in doorways, grubby children play in the gutters, and a reek of frying onions advertises the so-called ‘dining-rooms’ halfway up the street. But one house is unlike all the others: 35 Devonshire Street is an outpost of Utopia. The hanging sign shows a torch flaming in a night sky, the pedimented front gleams with fresh paint, and the window boxes are bright with flowers. Bold lettering announces THE POETRY BOOKSHOP. The local tradesmen have for years sold chickens, cabbages, rope, saddles, violins, stained glass, guns and gold leaf, but never poetry. Now the oddest people come to buy it. The children shriek ‘Buffalo Bill’ at Rupert Brooke in his wide-brimmed hat, or hurl insults and worse at Osbert Sitwell, elegant in bowler and canary-yellow waistcoat; the women gape speechless at Lady Ottoline Morrell, dressed, as Osbert once described her, in a masterly combination of early Russian ballet and late Bank Holiday.

All sorts of people come to the shop in Devonshire Street: readers from the British Museum; teachers, soldiers, clerks; large Amy Lowell and larger Chesterton; Edith Sitwell like an exotic bird; Aleister Crowley, cloaked and sinister; Robert Bridges the Poet Laureate, or old Edward Carpenter, bearded like prophets; W. B. Yeats in search of the latest publications; Wyndham Lewis the Vorticist, Christopher Nevinson the Futurist, Paul Nash, Jacob Epstein; Richard Aldington and Frank Flint; Arnold Bennett, Ford Madox Ford, E. M. Forster; Wilfred Owen in his new uniform; Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas; civil servants, librarians, actors, society ladies; W. H. Davies the Super-Tramp, stumping along on his wooden leg; Australians, Japanese, French, Italians; young Americans, Robert Frost, Conrad Aiken, Ezra Pound with his mane of red hair; and sometimes, rare but welcome, a local urchin asking for ‘a penn’urth of poitry’.

Introduction

Harold Monro 1879–1932
The Poetry Bookshop, 35 Devonshire Street: drawing by Charles Ginner (The Chapbook, Oct. 1925)