Introduction: The Mobile Woman and the Migrant Voice

Women’s Writing, Englishness and National and Cultural Identity: The Mobile Woman and the Migrant Voice, 1938–1962 is primarily a work of literary history which provides a scholarly account of women’s writing during the 1940s and the 1950s, making some attempt to contribute to wider debates and cultural narratives. The book offers an alternative to the usual period demarcations of twentieth-century literary history which take 1945 as a watershed in addressing the writing of the 1950s in tandem with the 1940s: a time-span that makes it possible to look closely at the ramifications of the war which were felt by women long afterwards. I use a synthesis of historical retrieval, literary theory and textual analysis to provide culturally situated and historically specific readings of a wide range of texts addressing issues that relate to the changing experience of women at this time. Examples are the displacements of war, women’s radically altered understandings of their own sexuality, the retreat from empire, the relationship of women to the idea of nation, the migrant experience, the literary representation of Welsh, Scottish and English identity, and the meanings of home.

The overview of the literary-historical period in this book is analogous to that offered in my remapping of two other 20-year literary periods in ‘Ladies, Please Don’t Smash These Windows’: Women’s Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change, 1918–38 (1995) and Contemporary Women’s Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple (2000), and links the two previous books chronologically. I am concerned with the retrieval of work by neglected and forgotten writers like Kamala Markandaya, Jessie Kesson and Attia Hosain, whom I place alongside others like Doris Lessing, Muriel Spark, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, whose status is more secure. One of my objectives is to address a key problem in many of the recent discussions of Englishness: the lack
of attention to questions of gender, and to show how a different literary cartography emerges if we look at the war and the postwar settlement by concentration on the figure of the Englishwoman and not the more usual Englishman.

My starting premise is that mobility is a metaphor for the times: ‘In September 1939 a third of all Britons changed address and in the course of the war sixty million changes of address in a population of thirty-five million were registered.’ Mobility on this unprecedented scale radically shaped and transformed the subjectivities of women. My approach to all my writers acknowledges the importance of a series of (often involuntary) geographical displacements which I see as crucial to an informed discussion of their work. Such displacements include the move from County Cork to Dublin and from Dublin ‘across the water’ to England for Edna O’Brien, from monolingual North Wales across the valleys and back again for Kate Roberts, from Argentina to rural Wales via London for Lynette Roberts, from the south of England to Yorkshire for Elizabeth Taylor. To these life-changing journeys can be added the move from London to rural Sussex for Virginia Woolf, the journey from Africa to England for Doris Lessing, the reverse journey from Edinburgh to Africa for Muriel Spark, and the relocation from India to England for Kamala Markandaya and Attia Hosain. Barbara Pym joined the Women’s Royal Naval Service in the war and was posted to Naples, and Dodie Smith spent it in the United States. At one level these are journeys of momentous personal significance, but their resonances in writing must be situated in the historical context of war, political upheavals and postwar migration in which the mobility of women is a sign of the times.

In 1941 unmarried women without dependants were required to register for war work under the provisions of the Essential Persons Act that stipulated that ‘mobile women’ could be conscripted into the war effort and directed to serve in any part of the country. The legislation was deeply resented by many of the women to whom it applied. In a letter to Nancy Cunard, Sylvia Townsend Warner complained that ‘being kept by a husband is of national importance enough. But be femme sole, and self supporting, that hands you over, no more claim to consideration than a biscuit.’ Scottish and Welsh women were required to work outside Scotland and Wales if called upon, a policy that was highly contentious; regarded by some in the Principality as a particularly distasteful instance of English insensitivity.

In addition to its specific war-related meanings, the term ‘mobile woman’ carried pre-existing connotations of fickleness (la donna e mobile),