

**Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London**, by Sara Wasson. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, xii + 209pp, ISBN: 9780230577534, £50 (hardback)

War is a topic of central importance to urban geography, but it is one that has, until recently, been somewhat marginalised within the discipline. Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes' (1986) important work on war and urbanism in Vietnam is one early example, but in the past few years there have been a number of important studies on the topic, from Stephen Graham's (2010) work on 'military urbanism' to Derek Gregory's explorations of aerial bombing. Urban historical geographers have paid less attention to the themes and time period covered by *Urban Gothic of the Second World War*, although David Matless' (1998) landmark text *Landscape and Englishness* is a notable exception. Although not generally read as a work of urban historical geography, *Landscape and Englishness* contains a series of important chapters on 'landscapes of war' and 'geographies of reconstruction, including discussions of the Blitz on Britain's towns and cities. While Matless' study provides a broad discussion of discourses of landscape in war-time Britain, Wasson's study is much more specific in its focus: Gothic representations of London during the Second World War. Whilst Wasson does not claim to be a geographer (Lecturer in Literature and Culture at Edinburgh Napier University), the book provides a continual engagement with geographic themes and an intermittent engagement with geographic literatures on space and place. What's more, the text very effectively conjures up the Gothic

spaces and places which became associated with representations of events in 'home-front' Britain.

In chapter one of the book, Wasson outlines why she is interested in exploring how the Gothic mode is deployed in wartime narratives, especially when many literary critics have focussed on Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century. She examines how scholars have traced the changing face of the Gothic throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, arguing that the literatures of World War Two have not been examined in relation to Gothic themes. Indeed, while there is a fairly well-developed body of scholarship on the neo-romantic imaginations of artists, film-makers and writers in the late 1930s and 1940s, Gothic sensibilities from this period have been largely ignored. Chapter one provides an extensive, contextual discussion of what Wasson calls 'London's urban gothic' during the war, before examining intersections between narratives of home-front Britain and accounts of national identity. Discussion of literatures on national identity sets the context for later sections of the book, and it is suggested that the Gothic mode in war-time literature fractures or subverts some of the more singular narratives of the nation and 'home-front' during war (p.15). Wasson taps into established literatures in history, as well as on nations and nationalism, which emphasise the fracturing and plural performance of nations, articulating the very different experiences people could have of wartime Britain, whilst also pointing out that Gothic literatures are not always subversive or counter-cultural, and it is wrong to necessarily position them this way (p.23). The remainder of the book

examines how Gothic tropes are present within the writings of a range of more-or-less famous writers, poets and artists, from Graham Greene, Henry Green, Elizabeth Bowen, John Piper and Graham Sutherland, to Mervyn Peake, Anna Kavan, Roy Fuller, Inez Holden, Anne Ridler and Diana Murray Hill. In chapter two, 'Nightmare city: Gothic Flânerie and wartime spectacle in Henry Green and Roy Fuller', the figure of the *flâneur* is utilised and reconstructed to examine how the spectacle of war and London's streets were depicted by two writers wandering the streets of this ruined city: Henry Green and Roy Fuller. In chapter three, 'Carceral city, cryptic signs: wartime fiction by Anna Kavan and Graham Greene', we are presented with an analysis of how 'two traditional tropes of the Gothic' – 'the struggle to escape a confining space and the effort to decode mysterious signs' (p.26) – are evident in wartime literature, while in chapter four, 'Gothic mechanised ghosts: wartime industry in Inez Holden, Anne Ridler and Diana Murray Hill', we are presented with a discussion of Gothic representations of wartime industrial work, particularly women's war work. Chapter five, 'Elizabeth Bowen's uncanny houses', shifts the attention from the gendered spaces of the factory to the gendered spaces of the wartime home, and chapter six, "'The rubbish pile and the grave": nation and the abject in John Piper, Graham Sutherland and Mervyn Peake', examines the role of the corpse in the writings of two notable war artists (John Piper and Graham Sutherland) and the poet Mervyn Peake.

*Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* is a carefully researched and well-written research monograph on an interesting and

important period of Britain's urban and literary history. While it may be of primary interest to scholars of Gothic studies, literary studies and historians of wartime London, it is a book which is clearly attuned to writers' experiences of London during the war, and urban historians, cultural geographers, and historical geographers interested in literary representations of London will get a lot out of this scholarly text. Indeed, as the author herself states at the end of the introduction, the book focuses on a range of distinctive spaces and environments, moving 'from city streets (chapter 2), to hospitals and prisons (chapter 3), to factories (chapters 4), to houses (chapter 5) and finally to morgues (chapter 6)' (p.28). This is a monograph of historical geography; an urban cultural geography of the Gothic in wartime London, and it will be a welcome addition to many bookshelves, reading lists and libraries.

**References:**

Graham, S. (2010) *Cities Under Siege: the New Military Urbanism*. London: Verso.

Matless, D. (1998) *Landscape and Englishness*, London: Reaktion Press.

Thrift, N. and Forbes, D. (1986) *The Price of War: Urbanisation in Vietnam 1954-1985*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

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