

Literary London:  
Imagining the City

Drs. Christopher and Hope Hodgkins

Wednesday, April 26

**Wartime London**

## Queen Victoria, 1887 (Bassano)

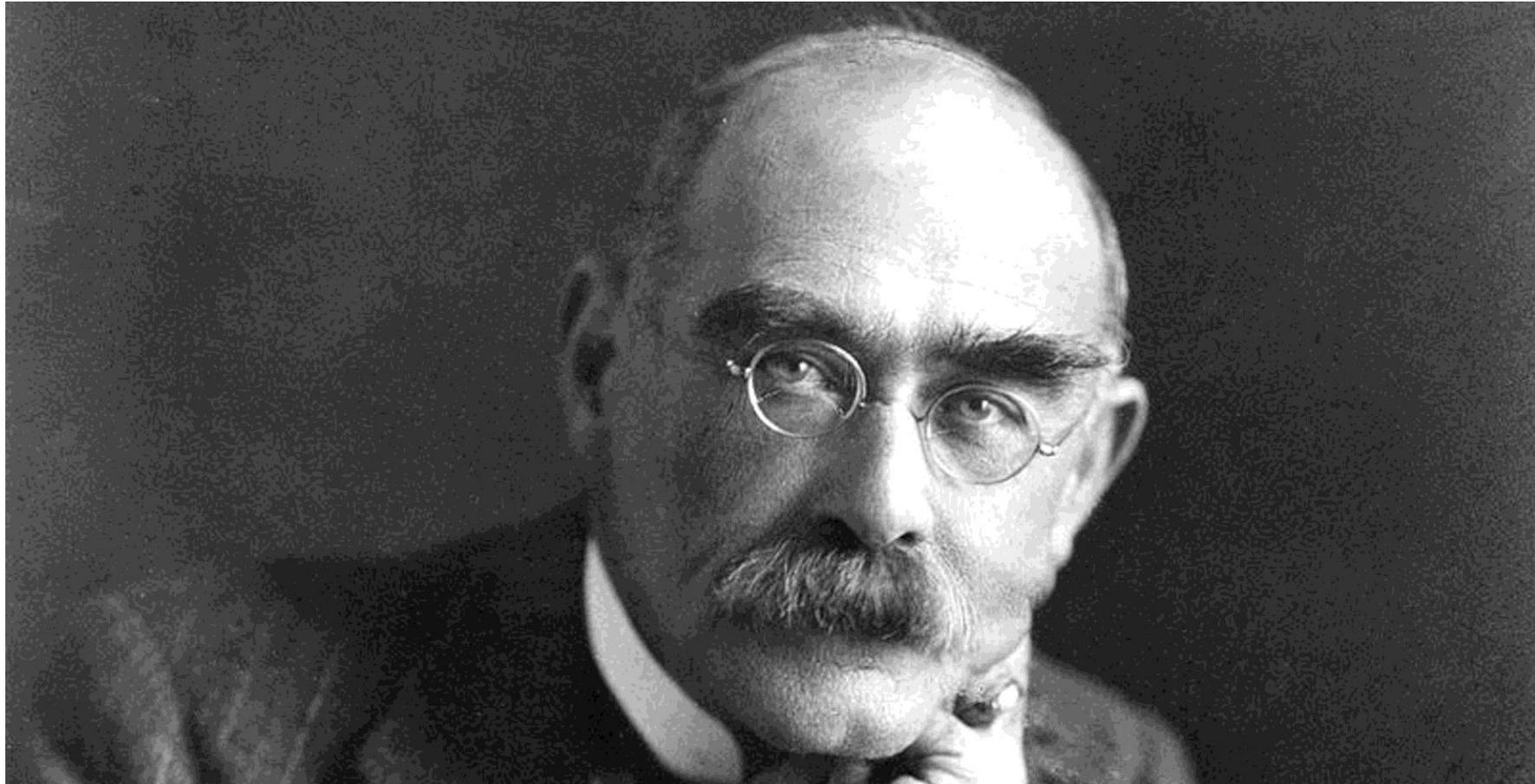
'Ave you 'eard o' the Widow at Windsor  
With a hairy gold crown on 'er 'ead?  
She 'as ships on the foam -- she 'as millions at 'ome,  
An' she pays us poor beggars in red.  
(Ow, poor beggars in red!)  
There's 'er nick on the cavalry 'orses,  
There's 'er mark on the medical stores --  
An' 'er troopers you'll find with a fair wind be'ind  
That takes us to various wars.  
(Poor beggars! -- barbarious wars!)

Kipling (1892)



We 'ave 'eard o' the Widow at Windsor,  
It's safest to let 'er alone:  
For 'er sentries we stand by the sea an' the land  
Wherever the bugles are blown.  
(Poor beggars! -- an' don't we get blown!)  
Take 'old o' the Wings o' the Mornin',  
An' flop round the earth till you're dead;  
But you won't get away from the tune that they play  
To the bloomin' old rag over'ead.  
(Poor beggars! -- it's 'ot over'ead!)  
Then 'ere's to the sons o' the Widow,  
Wherever, 'owever they roam.  
'Ere's all they desire, an' if they require  
A speedy return to their 'ome.  
(Poor beggars! -- they'll never see 'ome!)

If any question why we died,  
Tell them, because our fathers lied.



# “London, My Beautiful”

F. S. Flint (1914)



London, my beautiful,  
it is not the sunset  
nor the pale green sky  
shimmering through the curtain  
of the silver birch,  
nor the quietness;  
it is not the hopping  
of birds  
upon the lawn,  
nor the darkness  
stealing over all things  
that moves me.  
But as the moon creeps slowly  
over the tree-tops  
among the stars,  
I think of her  
and the glow her passing  
sheds on the men.  
London, my beautiful,  
I will climb  
into the branches  
to the moonlit tree-tops,  
that my blood may be cooled  
by the wind.



## Early Great War poems (1914)

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England. . . .

Rupert Brooke

O meet it is and passing sweet  
To live in peace with others,  
But sweeter still and far more meet,  
To die in war for brothers.

Wilfred Owen



**Wilfred Owen: My poems are about “War and the pity of war.  
The poetry is in the pity.”**



“The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘**objective correlative**’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion. . .” (T. S. Eliot, 1888-1965).



### *I. The Burial of the Dead*

April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

Unreal City,  
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

## II. A Game of Chess

“My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

“Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

“What are you thinking of? What thinking?

What?

“I never know what you are thinking. Think.”

I think we are in rats' alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.

“What is that noise?”

The wind under the door.

“What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?”

Nothing again nothing.

“Do

“You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you  
remember

“Nothing?”

\* \* \*

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—

I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit  
smart.

He'll want to know what you done with that money  
he gave you

To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.

You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,

He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.

And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,  
He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.

Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.

Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a  
straight look.

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said.

Others can pick and choose if you can't.

But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.

(And her only thirty-one.)

I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,

It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.

(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)

The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been  
the same.

You *are* a proper fool, I said.

Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,

What you get married for if you don't want children?

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot  
gammon,

And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it  
hot—

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.

Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.

Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night,  
good night.

### *III. The Fire Sermon*

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are  
departed.

Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.

\* \* \*

Unreal City

Under the brown fog of a winter noon

\* \* \*

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights  
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.

Out of the window perilously spread

Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last  
rays,

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)

Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.

\* \* \*

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,

A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare. . .

Elizabeth and Leicester

Beating oars

The stern was formed

A gilded shell

Red and gold

The brisk swell

Rippled both shores

Southwest wind

Carried down stream

The peal of bells

White towers

Weialala leia

Wallala leialala

\* \* \*

To Carthage then I came

Burning burning burning burning

O Lord Thou pluckest me out

O Lord Thou pluckest

burning

## *IV. Death by Water*

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell  
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea  
Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew  
O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

## V. *What the Thunder Said*

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces  
After the frosty silence in the gardens  
After the agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and palace and reverberation  
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience

\* \* \*

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains  
Which are mountains of rock without water

Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you

\* \* \*

Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal

# Conclusion



I sat upon the shore  
Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
Shall I at least set my lands in order?  
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down  
*Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina*  
*Quando fiam uti chelidon*—O swallow swallow  
*Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie*  
These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

# Virginia Woolf, 1882-1941



In Charleston Farmhouse, Sussex (Vanessa Bell & Duncan Grant)





## *Mrs. Dalloway* (post-Great War London)

**The War was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace.**



**Septimus Warren Smith, aged about thirty, pale-faced, beak-nosed, wearing brown shoes and a shabby overcoat, with hazel eyes which had that look of apprehension in them which makes complete strangers apprehensive too. The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?**





Imperial War Museum



In 1933, the Oxford Union debating society had resolved by a wide margin “that this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country.”



Neville  
Chamberlain  
Seeks “Peace  
in Our Time”  
with Adolph  
Hitler,  
Munich 1938

But ivory towers  
seldom survive  
concerted aerial  
bombing, and just  
because you have  
closed your eyes and  
stopped your ears it  
does not mean that  
your enemy cannot  
find you out.



So eleven months after Munich, “in a faraway country ... of whom we know little,” Hitler’s Wehrmacht crossed the Polish border...



## ... bringing London's greatest war

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

W. H. Auden,  
"In Memory of W. B. Yeats," 1939



World War II posed the greatest existential challenge and threat in British history, paralleled only by the Spanish Armada, the English Civil Wars, and Napoleon's Empire.



...Yet through the Fall and Winter of 1939-1940, it was called "The Bore War" and "The Phony War," as London prepared, the U.S. watched, and nothing seemed to happen...



# Until it did...

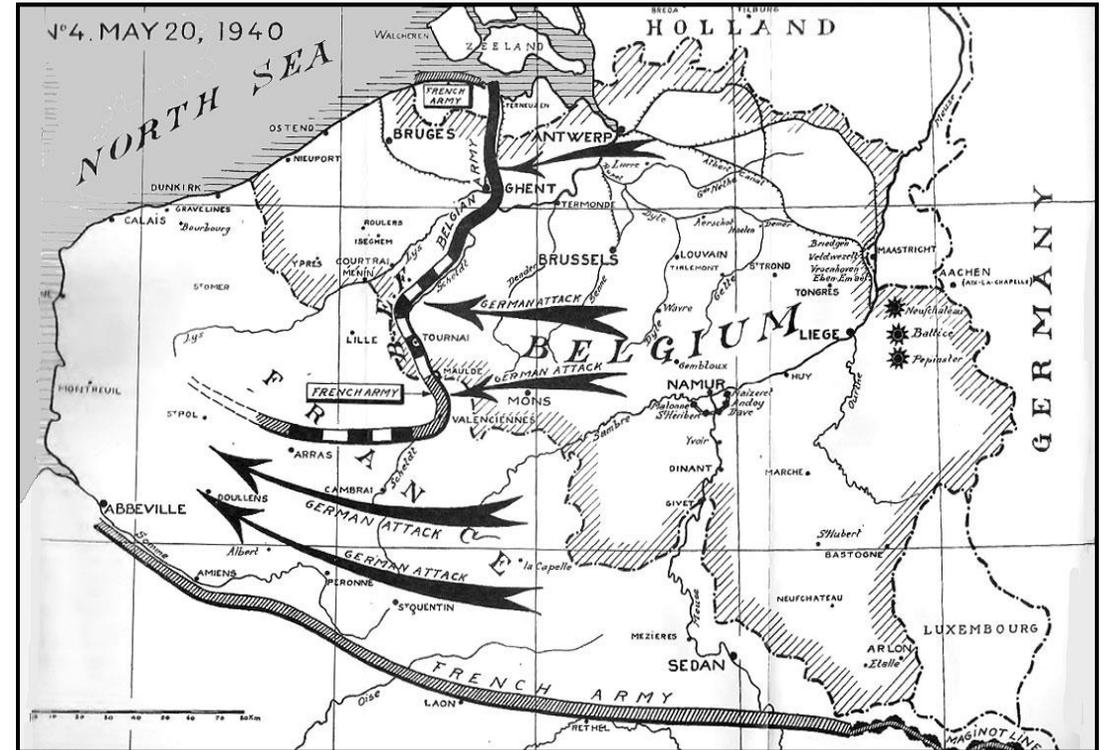
- Suddenly, beginning on May 10, 1940—the day that Neville Chamberlain’s government collapsed and King George VI invited Winston Churchill to form a government—the German Blitzkrieg against Holland, Belgium, and France began with perfect timing...

...quickly finishing Holland (May 17),  
Belgium (May 28)...

Rotterdam, Laurenskerk, 14 May,  
1940



German invasion routes through  
Belgium



...stranding  
the British  
Expeditionary  
Force at  
Dunkirk from  
May 27 to  
June 4

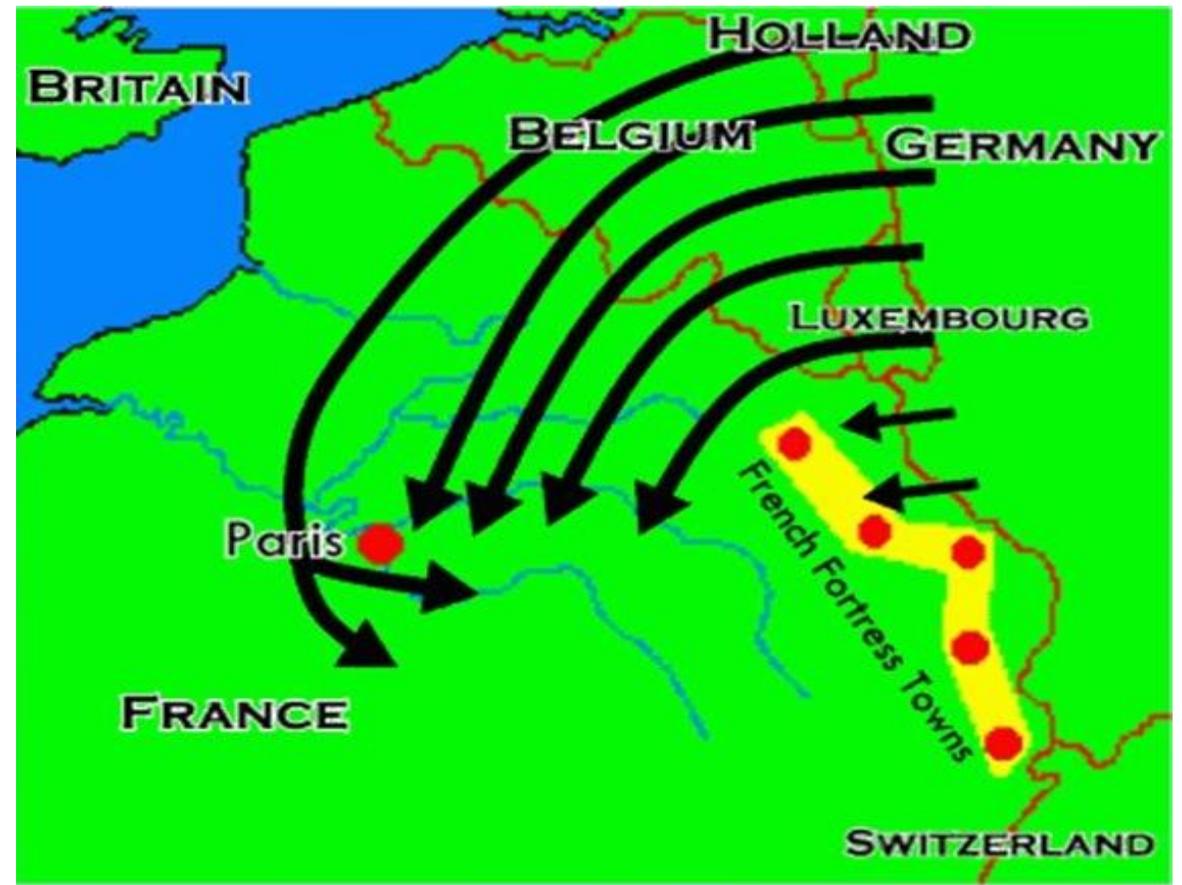


... and outflanking the French (*incroyable!*)  
at the Maginot Line.

November, 1939...



...June, 1940





So as Winston Churchill became “the King’s First Minister” ...

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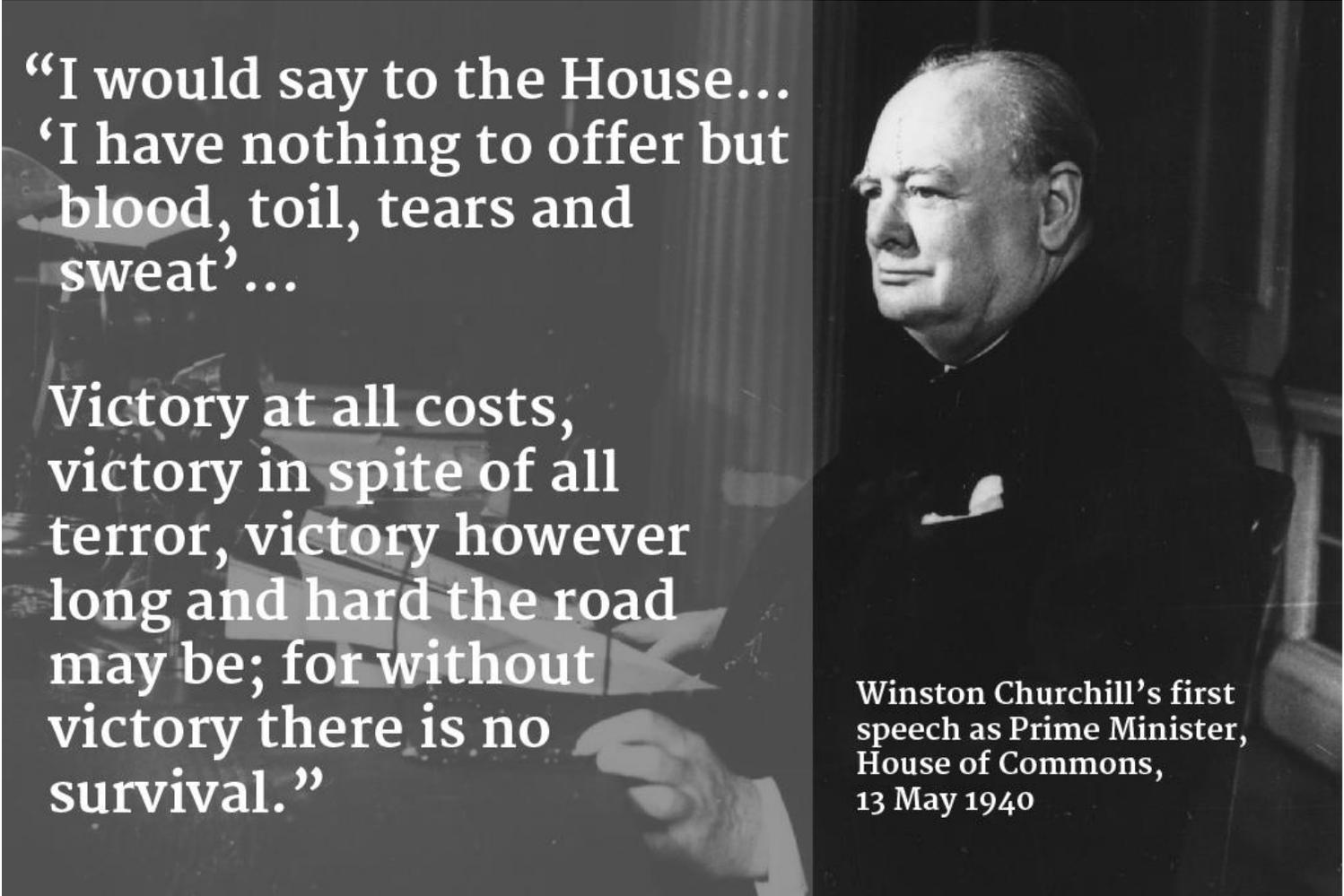
...Britain and London  
faced imminent  
invasion—and  
Churchill faced  
pressure from  
Foreign Secretary  
Lord Halifax and from  
Chamberlain to  
negotiate with Hitler.



Instead,  
Churchill  
called the  
English  
language to  
war...

**“I would say to the House...  
‘I have nothing to offer but  
blood, toil, tears and  
sweat’...**

**Victory at all costs,  
victory in spite of all  
terror, victory however  
long and hard the road  
may be; for without  
victory there is no  
survival.”**

A black and white photograph of Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, speaking at a podium in the House of Commons. He is wearing a dark suit and a white pocket square. The background is dark, and the lighting is focused on him.

**Winston Churchill's first  
speech as Prime Minister,  
House of Commons,  
13 May 1940**





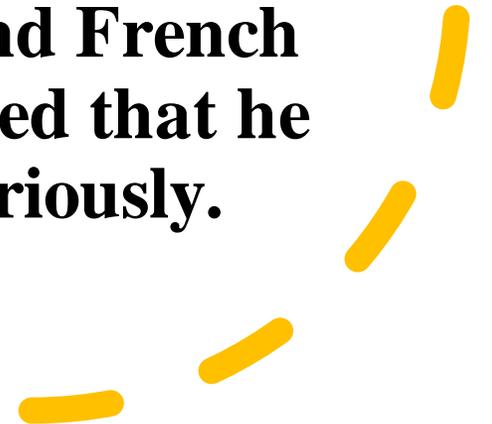
...in a series of speeches  
whose astonishing  
eloquence is matched  
only by their bluntness.

Here he is on June 4, 1940, announcing to the Commons both the disaster and deliverance of Dunkirk, with a frankness that could peel paint:

**When, a week ago today, I asked the House to fix this afternoon as the occasion for a statement, I feared it would be my hard lot to announce the greatest military disaster in our long history. I thought—and some good judges agreed with me—that perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 men might be re-embarked. But it certainly seemed that the whole of the French First Army and the whole of the British Expeditionary Force north of the Amiens-Abbeville gap would be broken up in the open field or else would have to capitulate for lack of food and ammunition.**

**These were the hard and heavy tidings for which I called upon the House and the nation to prepare themselves a week ago. The whole root and core and brain of the British Army, on which and around which we were to build, and are to build, the great British Armies in the later years of the war, seemed about to perish upon the field or to be led into an ignominious and starving captivity....**

**This struggle was protracted and fierce. Suddenly the scene [at Dunkirk] has cleared, the crash and thunder has for the moment—but only for the moment—died away. A miracle of deliverance, achieved by valor, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all. The enemy was hurled back by the retreating British and French troops. He was so roughly handled that he did not hurry their departure seriously.**



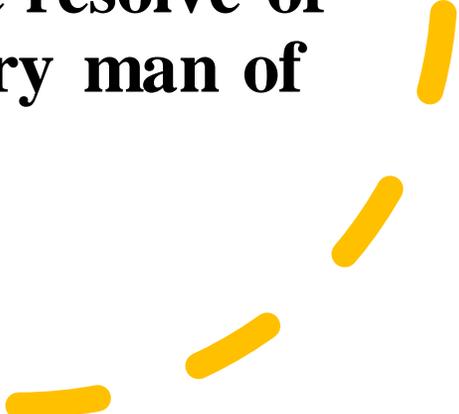
The Royal Air Force engaged the main strength of the German Air Force, and inflicted upon them losses of at least four to one; and the Navy, using **nearly 1,000 ships of all kinds**, carried over **335,000 men, French and British**, out of the jaws of death and shame, to their native land and to the tasks which lie immediately ahead.

**We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the Air Force. Many of our soldiers coming back have not seen the Air Force at work; they saw only the bombers which escaped its protective attack. They underrate its achievements. I have heard much talk of this; that is why I go out of my way to say this.**

**May it not also be that the cause of civilization itself will be defended by the skill and devotion of a few thousand airmen? There never has been, I suppose, in all the world, in all the history of war, such an opportunity for youth.**



**I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone. At any rate, that is what we are going to try to do. That is the resolve of His Majesty's Government—every man of them.**



**Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be...**



# Westminster Abbey Bombed



The House of  
Commons  
Bombed

# Buckingham Palace Bombed



## Farringdon Road



## Tea in the Ruins





Firebombing at Night



Firebombing by Day



Yet life went on...

**...we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.**

Supposedly, Churchill then said, off-side: "And we'll fight them with the butt ends of broken beer bottles because that's bloody well all we've got!"

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Churchill planned the defense and attack underground, in the secret concrete and steel bunker beneath Whitehall Stairs now called The Cabinet War Rooms...



...and occasionally slept there too..

On June 18, 1940, Churchill had even worse news to deliver: France had fallen.

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war.

**If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their finest hour.”**

And it was.

A white, torn paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the image, starting from the left and extending towards the right, with a jagged, irregular edge that suggests it was torn from a sheet of paper. The rest of the image is a solid black background.

# London's home front: the Royals and everyone else



## Over 40,000 Londoners, gone

Then the inside made outside faces the street.  
Rubble decently buries the human meat.  
Piled above it, a bath, cupboards, books, telephone,  
Though all who could answer its ringing have gone.

Stephen Spender, "Air Raid" (1941)



# Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973); 1-7 Clarence Terrace



## Wartime revenants

### **The miracle of Mons (“angels of Mons”)**



### **Vs. “a rising tide of hallucination”**

Against the next batch of clouds, already piling up inkdark, broken chimneys and parapets stood out. In her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queerness had silted up; a cat wove itself in and out of railings, but no human eye watched Mrs. Dover’s return.

## “The Demon Lover” (1944-45)

Dear Kathleen: You will not have forgotten that today is our anniversary, and the day we said. The years have gone by at once slowly and fast. In view of the fact that nothing has changed, I shall rely upon you to keep your promise. I was sorry to see you leave London, but was satisfied that you would be back in time. You may expect me, therefore, at the hour arranged. Until then . . .  
K.



## All London's finest hour

**London's Farringdon Road, March 8,  
1945, after a V-2 attack**



**Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"  
(1939)**

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding" (1941-42)



Midwinter spring is its own season  
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,  
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.  
When the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,  
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,  
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,  
Reflecting in a watery mirror  
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.  
And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,  
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire

\* \* \*

In the dark time of the year  
Where is the summer, the unimaginable  
Zero summer?

The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.  
The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.