Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986)

Christopher Isherwood was a British-American novelist, memoirist, and playwright best known for *The Berlin Diaries*, a fictionalized portrayal of his experiences with the urban demimonde and the rise of Nazism in pre-WWII Berlin. A close friend of W.H. Auden and other modernist writers, Isherwood used modernist aesthetic technique to present the destructive effects of fascism on the ethical behaviour of ordinary Germans (Spiro 17). Isherwood's work had considerable influence on British and, after his 1939 move to Los Angeles, American literature. The quasi-documentary approach of *The Berlin Diaries*, announced by the famous statement “I am a camera” on the first page of *Goodbye to Berlin,* was an influence on Truman Capote's work and on New Journalism. A pacifist, a follower of Vedanta Hinduism, and an advocate for homosexual rights, Isherwood had complex ethical and political affiliations which were a source of critical contention during his life and have remained so since his death in 1986.

Isherwood was born on August 26, 1904 to a military family. He studied at Cambridge, but left without a degree in 1925. That same year, he met and formed a long-term friendship/collaboration with W. H. Auden. Isherwood also befriended other members of what would come to be called the Auden Group, such as Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. An admirer of German literature (Monnickendam 126), Isherwood followed Auden to Berlin in 1929 in search of that city's famous sexual and artistic freedom. In 1931, Isherwood was introduced to E.M. Forster, who became a mentor for the younger writer. In 1933, Isherwood left Berlin with his then-partner Heinz Neddermeyer. In 1937 Neddermeyer was arrested and imprisoned in Germany, and later impressed into the army. In 1939, Isherwood and Auden emigrated to New York. A few months later, Isherwood moved to Los Angeles. While working as a screenwriter in Hollywood, Isherwood befriended Truman Capote and Aldous Huxley. Isherwood's 1945 novel, *Prater Violet,* was based on his earlier experience making the film *Little Friend.* In 1946, he became an American citizen. In 1953, he met artist Don Bachardy, who would remain his partner for the rest of his life.

Isherwood's move to the United States on the eve of World War Two was widely criticized in Britain, although the writer offered to return if necessary for the war effort. Isherwood's commitment to homosexual rights is less contested, and his novel *A Single Man* (1964) has in recent years been recognized for its portrayal of a bereaved gay man's awareness. Autobiographical material and the fictionalized self were foundational to Isherwood's modernist technique. He was to return to the material of *The Berlin Diaries* repeatedly in both fiction and memoir, attempting to capture more accurately the charged ethos of a lost time and place. Isherwood died of prostate cancer in 1986.

Major Works:

*Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), republished together *as The Berlin Stories* (1945)

*Prater Violet* (1945)

*Journey to a War* (with W.H. Auden) (1939)

*The World in the Evening* (1954)

*A Single Man* (1964)

*Christopher and His Kind* (1974)

Further Reading:

Berg, J. and C. Freeman. Eds. *The Isherwood Century.* Madison, WI : U of Wisconsin P, 2000. Print.

Monnickendam, Andrew. “Goodbye to Isherwood: The Rise and Fall of a Literary Reputation.” *Atlantis* 30.2 (December 2008). 125-137. Web. Accessed February 15, 2014.

Spiro, Mia. *Anti-Nazi Modernism: The Challenges of Resistance in 1930s Fiction.* Northwestern UP, 2013. Print.

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