

An Outcast of the Island



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出版者:Harvard University Press

出版时间:2020-10-1

装帧:Hardcover

isbn:9780674025226

For many W. H. Auden is the indispensable modern poet, and in this centenary year of his birth, the influential Auden scholar Nicholas Jenkins asks, how did Auden begin?

Jenkins's young Auden is a war-shadowed poet of No Man's Land-like moors and crumbling houses where, in the 1920s, a struggle for survival rages through the English psyche. This crisis led the country to a search for a closed-off, internally reintegrated culture, an "island" life. Correspondingly, Auden celebrated rural enclaves where a spiritual regeneration might begin. Jenkins controversially claims that in this period Auden was no socialist but a poetic Little Englander who admitted a "tendency to National Socialism."

An Outcast of the Island is an erudite, imaginative account of how a great poet's career opened. It is also a parable about the afterlife of modernism and a portrait of an entre deux guerres society "where nobody is well." Informed by analyses of the influence of figures such as the psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers, and by new, revelatory archival material by and about Auden, his milieux, and his love life, this book offers highly original, accessible readings of Auden's extraordinary poetry.

Jenkins's book ends in 1937 in Buckingham Palace, where George VI gave Auden a medal. It was a laying-on of hands as English culture accepted him as the voice of the insular national spirit. The first phase of Auden's career ended at that moment--in a blaze of ignominious success.

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