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Digs and Lodging Houses: Literature, Ruins, and Survival in Postwar Britain

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Digs and Lodging Houses: Literature, Ruins, and Survival in Postwar Britain

Clair Wills (bio)

Long ago in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions. The streets of the cities were lined with buildings in bad repair or in no repair at all, bomb-sites piled with stony rubble, houses like giant teeth in which decay had been drilled out, leaving only the cavity. Some bomb-ripped buildings looked like the ruins of ancient castles until, at a closer view, the wallpapers of various quite normal rooms would be visible, room above room, exposed, as on a stage, with one wall missing; sometimes a lavatory chain would dangle over nothing from a fourth- or fifth-floor ceiling; most of all the staircases survived, like a new art-form, leading up and up to an unspecified destination that made unusual demands on the mind's eye. All the nice people were poor; at least, that was a general axiom, the best of the rich being poor in spirit.

MURIEL SPARK, *THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS* (1963)¹

MURIEL SPARK evokes the London of 1945 with a backward look, as she tells us, to "long ago," and it is a look that appears colored by a curious nostalgia. The ruins of British cities in the late 1940s and early 1950s were remembered with something like affection by those who had survived the war to see them. The experience was described by the painter Frank Auerbach in terms that echo Spark's description of nice people's poverty, and the often deceptively communitarian nature of postwar city life. Auerbach left Germany in 1939 as a seven-year-old child on a scheme associated with the Kindertransport. (Both of his parents were to die in the camps.) He moved to London in 1947 to attend art college, where among other things he began a series of paintings of the bomb sites, craters, and ruins of the postwar city. In interviews he has described the atmosphere of London in the 1940s as engendering "a curious feeling of camaraderie" among "the survivors [End Page 57] scurrying about the ruined city." "One felt much closer to what was going on in the street, there wasn't any particular indoor life . . . , so this [the sites and the streets] was really the fabric of one's life."²

In what follows I explore the manner in which the fabric of the blitzed

city, what Spark calls a new art form, worked its way through the fabric of people's lives, and how we might begin to read the texture of postwar experience through those new urban art forms. A substantial body of postwar British fiction is set among the ruins, digs, and lodging houses of the inner cities. Alongside novels associated with postcolonial experience and written by colonial and commonwealth migrants—such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Colin MacInnes, Buchi Emecheta, and perhaps also Doris Lessing—we can place novels and memoirs by Irish writers (Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, Anthony Cronin, Edna O'Brien) as well as works by English-born writers, such as Lynne Reid Banks, Alexander Baron, James Hanley, and Harold Pinter. Many of these works explore the milieu of the multicultural immigrant lodgings that opened up in twilight inner-city areas, housing not only people from the Caribbean and South Asia but also Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Italians, Maltese, and Cypriots, plus the largest immigrant group, the Irish, who alone arrived in Britain at a rate of approximately 40,000 every year during the 1950s.

In their focus on displacement, migration, and multicultural encounters in postwar Britain, these works raise questions about racial and ethnic stereotyping and the manner in which "ethnicity" survives. As the economic boom and consensus politics of the 1950s appeared to break down distinctions between middle-class and working-class culture, to the dismay of critics as different as Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart, the digs and slum lodging houses became uncomfortable reminders of the persistence of a social underclass. Anachronistic in terms of Britain's upwardly mobile postwar journey, the inner-city slums and overcrowded lodging houses became arenas for representing encounters...

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1. Muriel Spark, *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963; London: Penguin, 1966), 7.



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