



Edgell
Rickword
1898-1982

War Poet, Literary Editor, Critic and
Man of Letters

Early Years

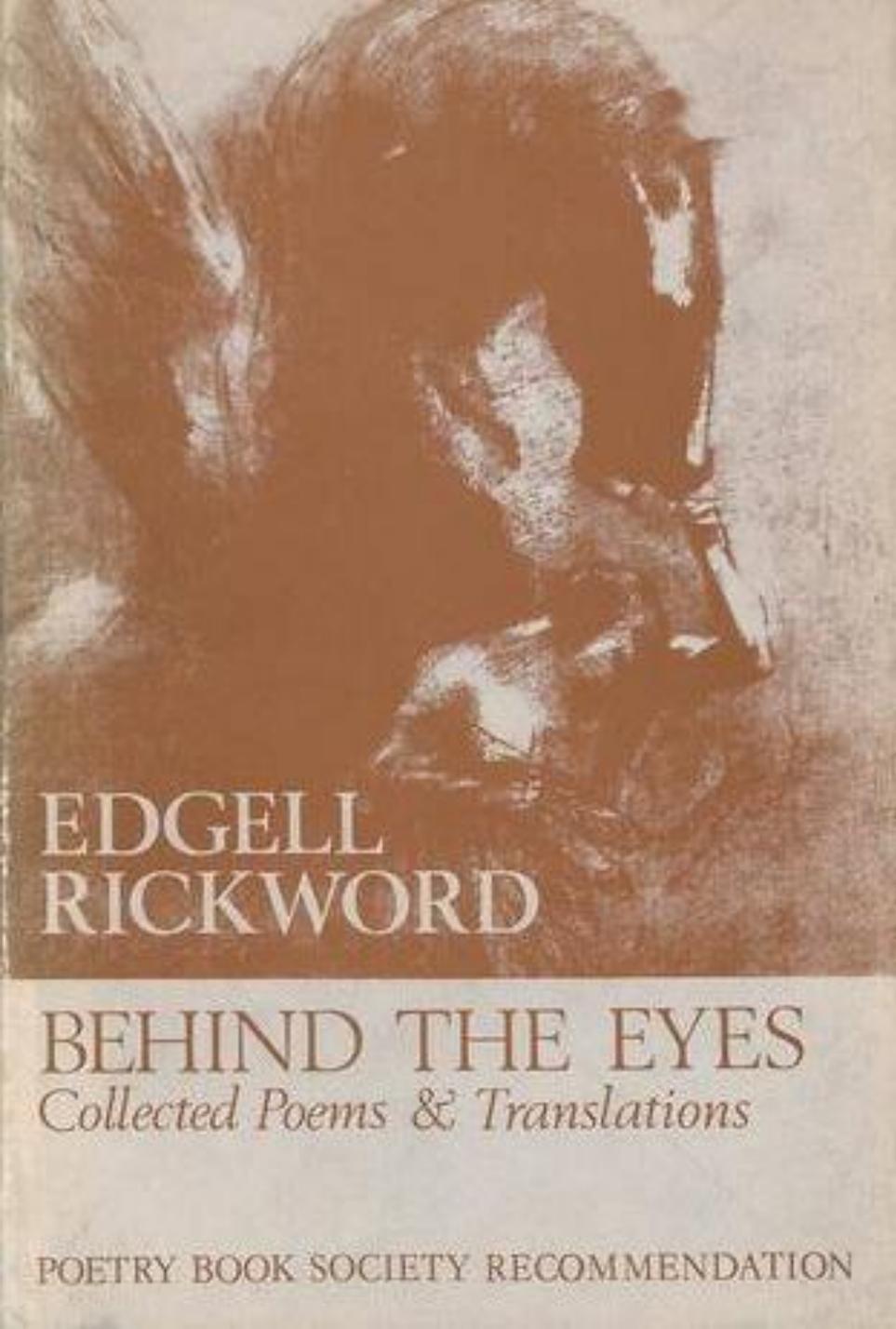
- John Edgell Rickword was born in Colchester, Essex.
- His father was the county librarian.
- Rickword was educated at Colchester Royal Grammar School.
- Early reading of William Morris, H. G. Wells, Blatchford and others awakened Rickword's socialist sympathies.
- His wartime service radicalised him.
- He was injured twice on the Western Front, losing one eye, and was awarded the **Military Cross**.
- In 1919, Rickword went up to Oxford and made many literary contacts with the likes of Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon.

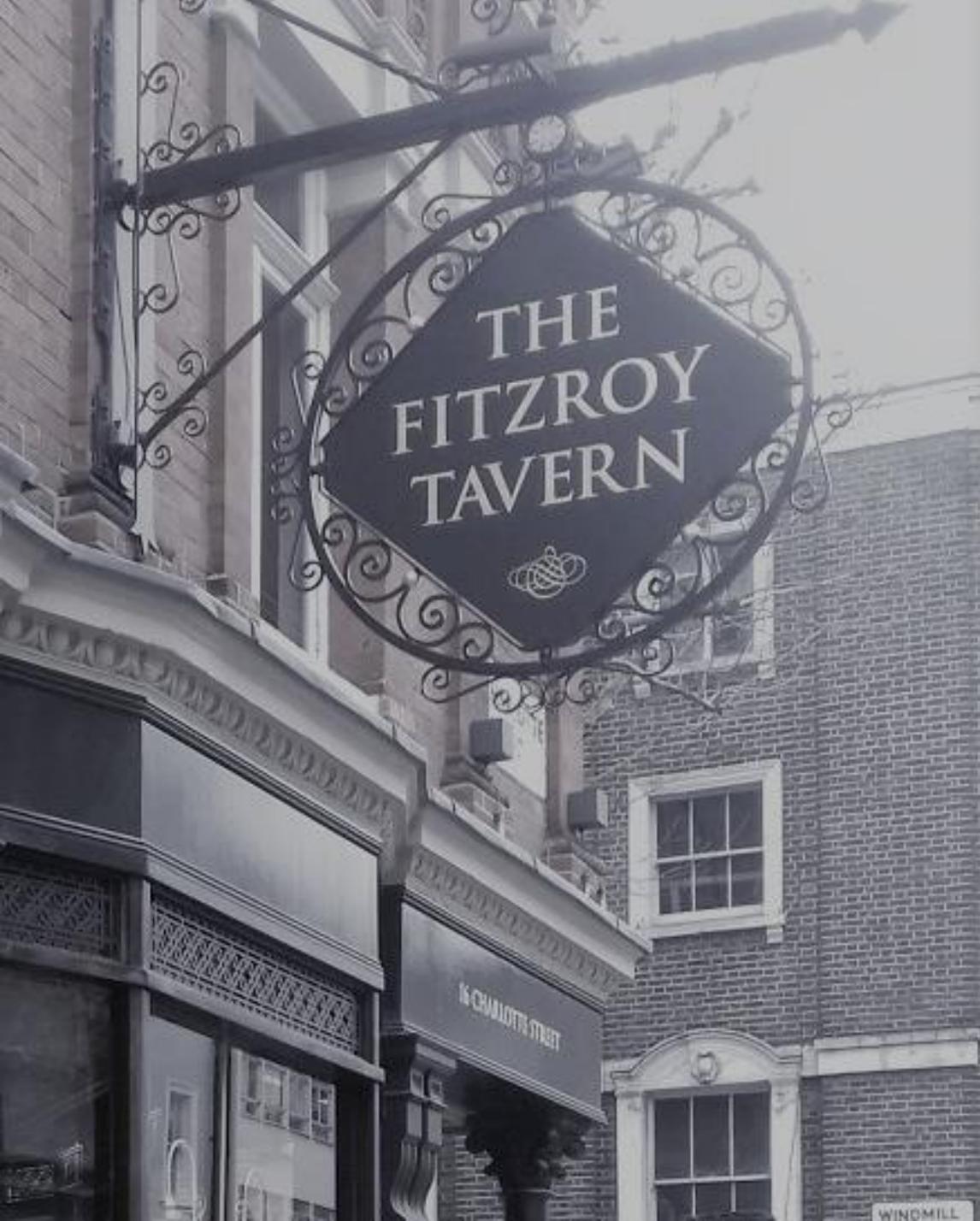
Embarking on a literary career

- Rickword embarked on his literary career in the immediate post-war period, at a time when, according to critic John Lucas, there was a “widely accepted view that in the aftermath of the Great War and faced with what seemed to be a wrecked Europe, poets saw themselves as required to take on the task of saving civilisation.”

- John Lucas, *Poetry and Politics in the 1920s*, in *Starting to Explain: Essays in 20th Century British and Irish Poetry*, Trent Books, (2003)

- Reprint of Rickword’s first collection of verse.





1920s

- This decade sees Rickword at his most productive, making his mark as a poet, critic and literary editor.
- The literary journal, *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, is founded in March 1925 running until July 1927. Rickword is co-editor and co-founder with Douglas Garman and Bertram Higgins. Ernest Wishart establishes the publishing firm, Wishart & Co.
- His biography of the French poet Rimbaud appears as *Rimbaud: The Boy and the Poet* (1924)
- He publishes a volume of short stories, *Love One Another* (1929)
- He publishes two volumes of poetry: *Behind the Eyes* (1921) and *Invocation to Angels* (1928)
- *Scrutinies By Various Writers*, edited by Rickword, is published; the first of two volumes. These are critical, debunking profiles, of leading literary figures, first published in *The Calendar of Modern Letters*.
- Rickword's well known meeting place was The Fitzroy Tavern, Charlotte Street, London, a haunt of poets like Dylan Thomas.

Influence of Siegfried Sassoon

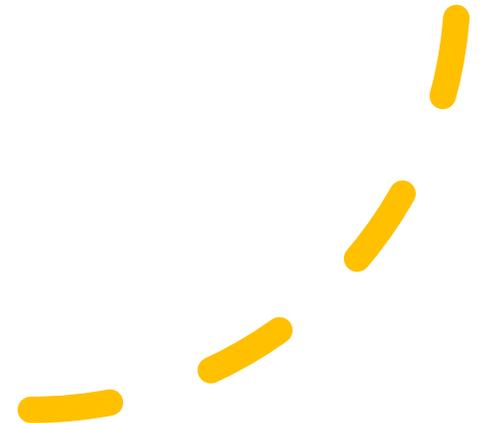
- In a BBC Radio interview broadcast in 1977, Rickword explains how the war poetry of Siegfried Sassoon had first showed him how the language of ordinary speech might be employed to communicate the terrifying experiences of trench warfare:
- “As I was going off leave back to France [in 1918] I picked up Sassoon’s *Counter-Attack* which was devastating because he was the first poet I knew of who dealt with war in the vocabulary of war. And, of course, his satires were tremendous. This gave me a start towards writing more colloquially, and not in a second-hand literary fashion.”
- Rickword later became friends with Sassoon who gave him some of his first work as a freelance critic and reviewer when Sassoon became literary editor of *The Daily Herald* in the early 1920s.

Extracts from Rickword's Poetry

Trench Poets

I knew a man, he was my chum,
but he grew blacker every day,
and would not brush the flies away,
nor blanch however fierce the hum
of passing shells; I used to read,
to rouse him, random things from Donne—
like “Get with child a mandrake-root.”

But you can tell he was far gone,
for he lay gaping, mackerel-eyed,
and stiff, and senseless as a post
even when that old poet cried
“I long to talk with some old lover’s ghost.”



Rickword's poetry

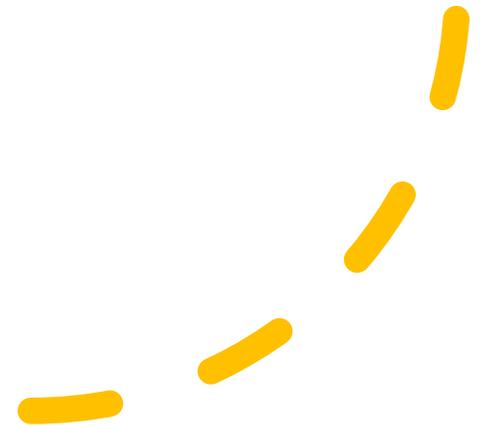
War and Peace

In sodden trenches I have heard men speak,
Though numb and wretched, wise and witty things;
And loved them for the stubbornness that clings
Longest to laughter when Death's pulleys creak

The Soldier Addresses his Body

I shall be mad if you get smashed about,
we've had good times together, you and I;
although you grouched a bit when luck was out,
say a girl turned us down, or we went dry.

But there's a world of things we haven't done,
countries not seen, where people do strange things;
eat fish alive, and mimic in the sun
the solemn gestures of their stone-grey kings.



Circle of Friends

- From the top: Jack Lindsay, Lorna Wishart, Peggy Guggenheim, Douglas Garman and Roy Campbell.



The Calendar of Modern Letters

TOWARDS STANDARDS OF CRITICISM

Selections from
THE CALENDAR OF MODERN LETTERS
1925-7

Chosen and with an introduction by
F. R. LEAVIS

WISHART & CO.
1933

THE CALENDAR

Art and Morality

By D. H. LAWRENCE.

It is part of the common clap-trap that "art is immoral." Behold everywhere artists running to put on jazz underwear, to demoralise themselves; or to at least débougeoiser themselves.

For the bourgeois is supposed to be the fount of morality. Myself, I have found artists far more morally finicky.

Anyhow, what has a water-pitcher and six insecure apples on a crumpled tablecloth got to do with bourgeois morality? Yet I notice that most people, who have not learnt the trick of being arty, feel a real moral repugnance for a Cézanne still-life. They think it is not right.

For them, it isn't. Yet how can they feel, as they do, that it is subtly immoral?

The very same design, if it was humanised, and the tablecloth was a draped nude and the water-pitcher a nude semi-draped, weeping over the draped one, would instantly become highly moral. Why?

Perhaps from painting better than from any other art we can realise the subtlety of the distinction between what is dumbly felt to be moral, and what is felt to be immoral. The moral instinct in the man in the street.

But instinct is largely habit. The moral instinct of the man in the street is largely an emotional defence of an old habit.

Yet what can there be, in a Cézanne still-life, to rouse the aggressive moral instinct of the man in the street? What ancient habit in man do these six apples and a water-pitcher succeed in hindering?

A water-pitcher that isn't so very much like a water-pitcher, apples that aren't very apple, and a tablecloth that's not particularly much of a tablecloth. I could do better myself!

Probably! But then, why not dismiss the picture as a poor attempt? Whence this anger, this hostility? The derivative resentment?

Vol. II. No. 1.

JUNE, 1933

SCRUTINY

A Quarterly Review

A Cure for Amnesia DENYS THOMPSON
Revaluations (1): John Webster W. A. EDWARDS
Festivals of Fire, II. RONALD BOTTRALL
Evaluations (2): Croce JAMES SMITH
English Tradition and Idiom ADRIAN BELL
The French Novel of To-day HENRI FLUCHERE
'Hero and Leander' M. C. BRADBROOK
'This Poetical Renaissance' F. R. LEAVIS

REVIEWS

by Douglas Garman, John Speirs, T. R. Barnes,
Donald Culver, Michael Oakeshott, L. C. Knights, etc.

At Deighton, Bell & Co., Ltd., Trinity Street, Cambridge

10/6d. a year post free

2/6d.

The CALENDAR Of Modern Letters

NOVEMBER 1925

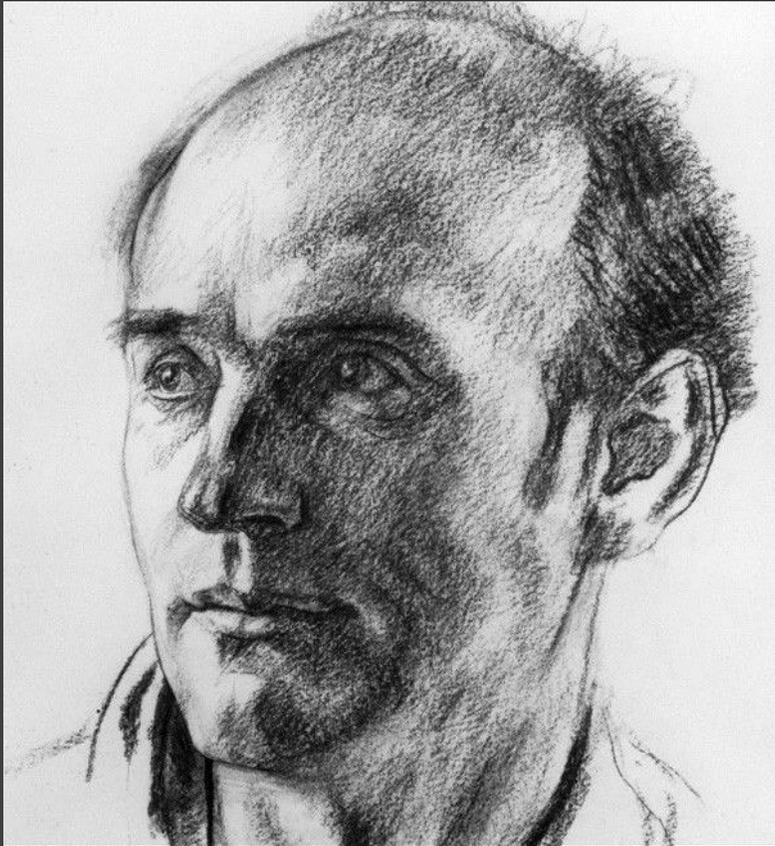
Anonymity: An Enquiry E. M. FORSTER.
Poetry W. J. TURNER.
The Red Book PIRANDELLO.
Art and Morality D. H. LAWRENCE.
Andron, the Good-for-Nothing (i) A. NIEVIEROV.
Reminiscences of Mme. Dostoevsky S. S. KOTELIANSKY.

NOTES AND REVIEWS

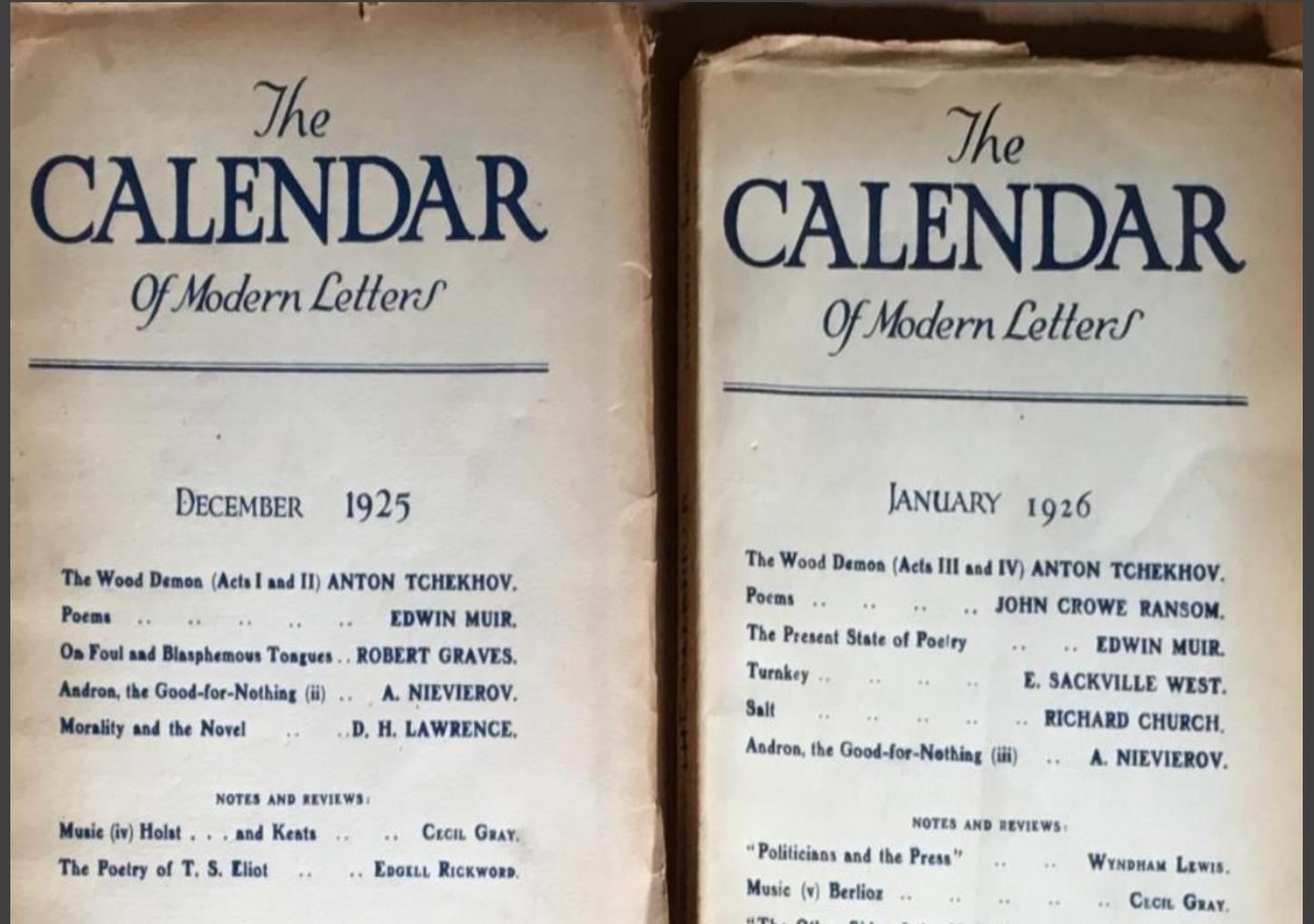
Music (iii) The Promenades CECIL GRAY.
H. G. Wells RICHARD CHURCH.

VOLUME 2
NUMBER 9

MONTHLY 1/6
50 ca.



The Calendar and Scrutiny



- The young F R Leavis (left), who spent a lifetime reminding people of the importance of *The Calendar of Modern Letters*.

1930s

- Rickword publishes his final volume of poetry, *Twittingpan, and some others* (1931), mostly social satire, distinct from his earlier war poems.
- *Scrutinies Volume II* (1931) edited by Rickword.
- **Rickword joins the Communist Party in 1934**
- His final published poem, “To the Wife of any Non-Interventionist Statesman”, a political satire about the Spanish Civil War, appears in *Left Review* in 1938.

Rickword and Marxism

'I am a Marxist in the sense that I try to relate public happenings to the tissue of cause and effect which he divined in the interplay of material and economic forces... But one does not think that a sympathy with Marxism makes anyone an oracle.'

- Edgell Rickword, 1973 from the *Poetry Nation* interview.

LEFT REVIEW

January, 1936

G. Bernard Shaw
Speech on the U.S.S.R.

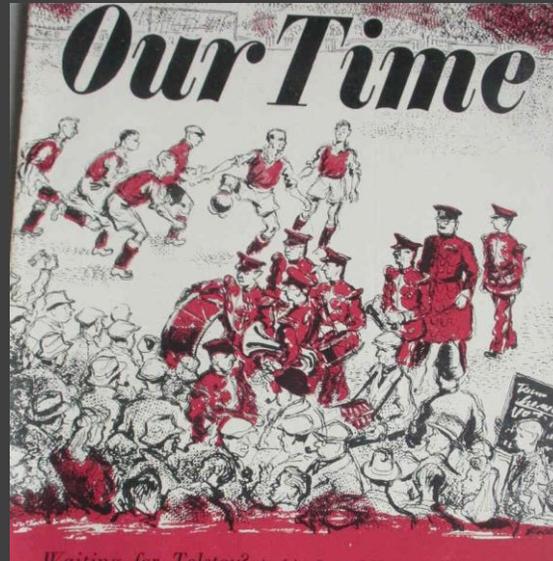
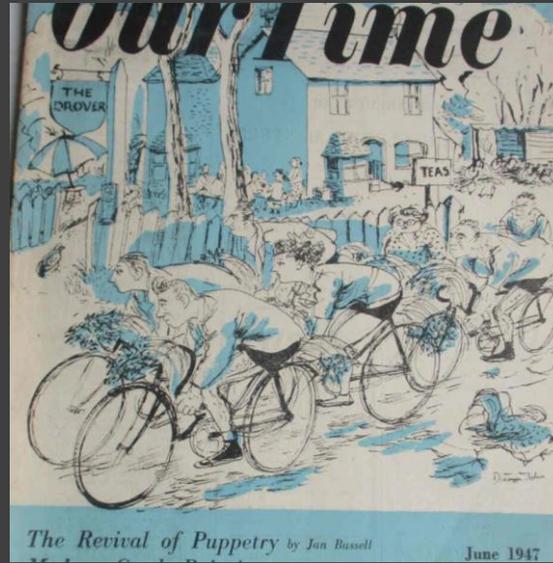
Storm Jameson
England in 1942

Montagu Slater
Artists' International 1935

F. D. Klingender
The Crucifix

ILLUSTRATED

4



*Left Review and
Our Time* edited by
Rickword in the
'30s and '40s.

Rickword and Spain

His last major published poem, *To the Wife of a Non-Intervention Statesman*, 1938, shows his scathing response to the inaction of the Western powers,

“Traitor and fool’s a combination
To lower wifely estimation,
Although there’s not an Act in force
Making it grounds for a divorce:
But canon law forbids at least
Co-habitation with a beast.”

The victims of the air bombing on civilian targets are depicted thus,

“Five hundred dead in ninety seconds
Is the world record so far reckoned;
A hundred children in one street,
Their little hands and guts and feet,
Like offal round a butcher’s stall,
Scattered where they’d been playing ball –
Because our ruling clique’s pretences
Robbed loyal Spain of her defences”



Rickword and Nancy Cunard – a productive relationship

- Rickword cooperates with shipping heiress, political activist and poet, Nancy Cunard.
- They work together on the famous pamphlet on Spain which brought together declarations from numerous writers worldwide who mostly pledged their support. Samuel Beckett's statement was simply, "Up the Republic!"
- Rickword and Cunard also worked on the huge literary and historical anthology of black writing, *Negro*, an ambitious pioneering work.
- *Nancy Cunard* left

Authors take sides

on the Spanish War

148 CONTRIBUTIONS

10,000 WORDS

PRICE SIX

★ George Bernard Shaw
H. G. Wells
Aldous Huxley
Ethel Mannin
Liam O'Flaherty
Evelyn Waugh
Ruby M. Ayres
Harold Ellis
Louis Golding
Lady Eleanor Smith
Lawrence Weaver
Sir P. Chalmers Mitchell
A. J. Cummings
Rose Macaulay
C. Day Lewis
Noel Bayde Smith
Helen Waddell
Stephen Spender
A. E. Coppard
Storn Jansson
John Strachey
Olef Stapledon
W. H. Auden
Arthur Calder-Marshall
Lancelot Hogben
Rebecca West
H. M. Townsend
Hamilton Fyfe
V. Sackville-West
Norman Douglas
Ezra Pound
T. S. Eliot
Rosamund Lehmann
Arthur Machen
H. W. Nevinson
J. W. Robertson-Scott
Eric Linklater
E. Ibbetson James
Harold Laski
Charles Morgan
and over 100

Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War

- *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* adopts a similar polemical approach. The pamphlet, which Rickword edited, collected responses from 148 writers to a political questionnaire that had been devised and circulated by Nancy Cunard. The question in the form of a declaration was addressed to “the writers and poets of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales”, and was signed by Cunard, along with Louis Aragon, Heinrich Mann, Tristan Tzara, Pablo Neruda, Auden, Spender and others. It invited fellow writers to state their position on the war in Spain, which was seen as a vital battleground where the threat of fascism could be stopped in its tracks before Europe became overwhelmed.
- Cunard, one of the period’s most well-known socialites and activists, acquired a mass of contacts from the literary and Bohemian world of which she had long been a part. Accordingly, she received replies from George Bernard Shaw, H G Wells, Aldous Huxley, T S Eliot, Ezra Pound, Roy Campbell, W H Auden, C Day Lewis, Vita Sackville West, Rebecca West, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Arthur Machen, Samuel Beckett and many other authors whom Cunard knew personally, including Rickword himself. The contributors also included non-fiction writers such as Harold Laski, John Strachey and Lancelot Hogben. Bringing together such a substantial and varied list of names amounted to an effective political initiative.



The English Revolution 1640

Historian Christopher Hill recalls collaboration with Rickword on the volume, **The English Revolution 1640**, published in 1940:

“In 1939 I was asked to edit a volume of essays, *The English Revolution 1640*, to celebrate the tercentenary of that revolution. One essay, '**Milton: the revolutionary intellectual**', was by Edgell Rickword. I thought at the time it was very good indeed, and reviewers confirmed this view. But I did not appreciate quite how superlative it was until I came to write a book of my own on **Milton and the English Revolution**, published in 1977.

“Edgell Rickword's essay of 1940 must have sunk deep into my consciousness, but I did not re-read it until I had finished the first draft of my book. I then realized that though I had expanded some factual points, and had dealt more fully with Milton's last great poems than Edgell Rickword did, in all essentials I had merely elaborated arguments which he had stated with beautiful brevity and clarity in 1940.

“His achievement was all the more remarkable if we recall the date. In 1940 the campaign against Milton was at its height, led by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, then two of the most respected names in English letters. Rickword must have been tempted to answer their denigrations. Instead, much more effectively, he ignored them and stated the case for Milton the revolutionary intellectual. There was then no need to argue that there might be non-literary reasons for attacking Milton.”

C Hill, PN Review 9, Volume 6 Number 1, September - October 1979.

John Milton left

Spokesmen for Liberty

EDITED BY

**JACK LINDSAY and
EDGELL RICKWORD**

First published as A HANDBOOK OF FREEDOM

A WORKERS' LIBRARY

*Spokesmen for Liberty: a Record
of English Democracy Through
Twelve Centuries*

An important anthology of political writing compiled by Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, published by Lawrence & Wishart in 1941. It includes an introduction by Rickword about the English radical political tradition. The book was also published as *A Handbook of Freedom*.

Bookseller

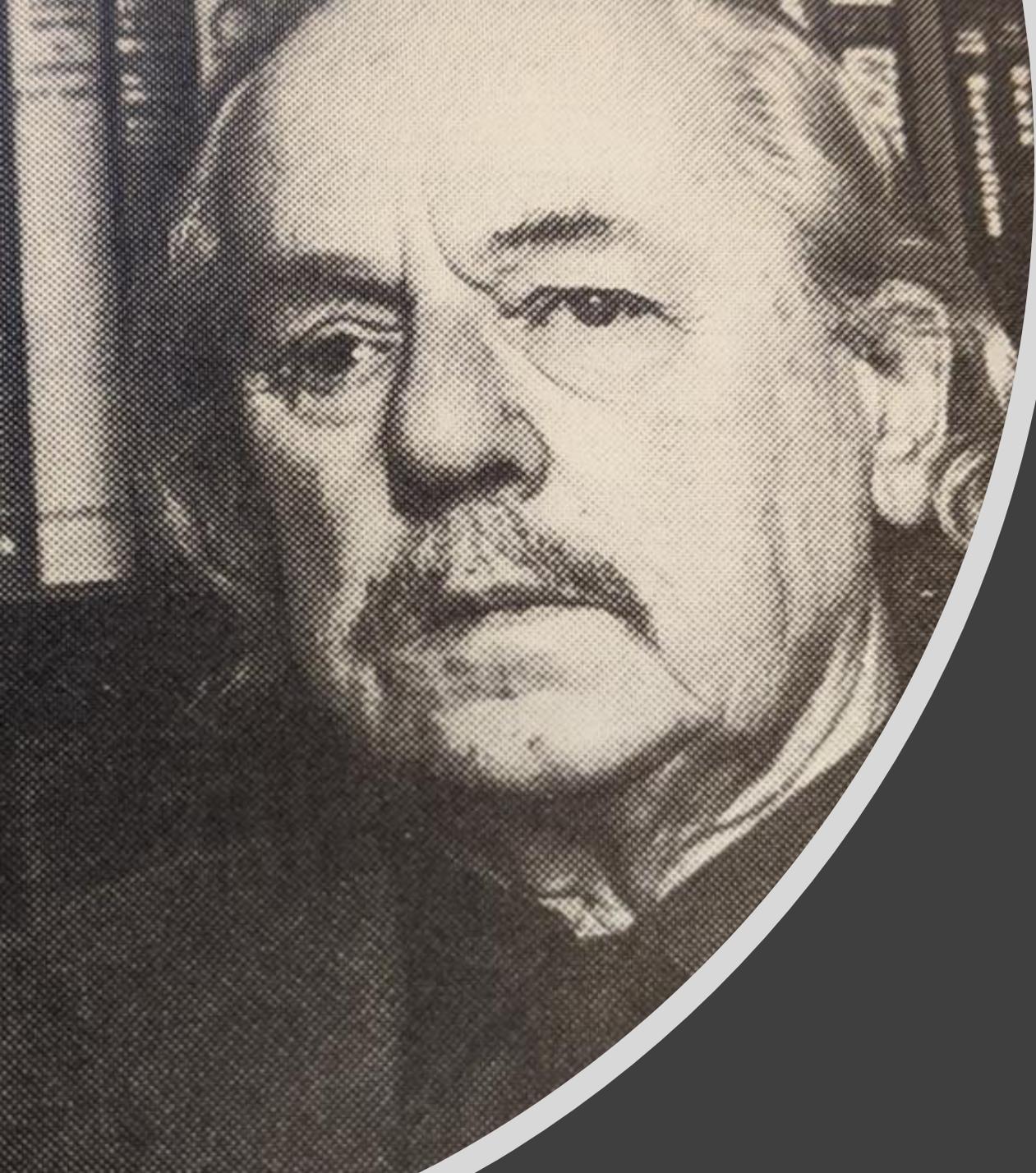
- Rickword earns his living as a bookseller supplementing his income from literary journalism and translation.
- Image of Collets Bookshop logo. Rickword was manager of the second hand department in Collets on the Charing Cross Road.





Public Intellectual

Edgell Rickword (left) meeting Jennie Lee, Labour Arts Minister, with other authors, in 1966.



1970s

- In 1978, Rickword contributed his essay, *William Cobbett's Twopenny Trash*, to a volume produced in honour of historian A L Morton, titled *Rebels and Their Causes* (Lawrence & Wishart).
- Fellow contributors were some of the leading Communist and ex-Communist intellectuals: Maurice Cornforth, Margot Heinemann, Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Arnold Kettle, Victor Kiernan, A L Lloyd, Jack Lindsay, John Saville and Willie Thompson.

by ARISTOPHANES
done into English by Jack Lindsay
with illustrations by Norman Lindsay
and a foreword by Edgell Rickword



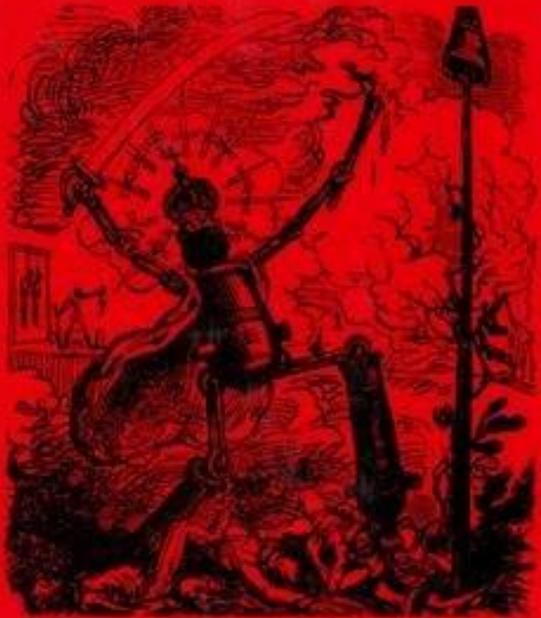
Edgell
Rickword
ESSAYS
& OPINIONS
1921-31

edited by Alan Young

SCIMITRES
Critical Essays
by
VARIOUS
WRITERS

WISHART

EDGELL RICKWORD
Literature in Society



A Selection of Rickword's Books

The Pelican
Guide to
English
Literature

5 from
Blake
to

A Summary of Rickword's Achievements

- Edgell Rickword was an accomplished war poet who published three collections of poems before 1931.
- Several of his outstanding poems have been much anthologised.
- His writings on literature influenced historian Christopher Hill and the Cambridge based literary critic, F R Leavis, who was a lifelong admirer.
- Rickword was an innovative editor responsible for the influential literary journal, *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, which directly inspired Leavis and his own journal *Scrutiny*.
- Rickword first employed the term “scrutiny” in his critical reviews and edited two collections of essays under the title, *Scrutinies*. This inspired Leavis to adopt the title for his own journal.
- Rickword's style of literary criticism pioneered the close attention to the literary text and was a technique emulated by Leavis.
- His abilities as an editor helped stamp the identity of *Left Review* and *Our Time*.
- In 1940, Rickword became the first to write an extended study of the poet John Milton from a Marxist perspective. The essay on “Milton the revolutionary intellectual” was acknowledged by Christopher Hill as an influence on his own approach to the poet in *Milton and the English Revolution*.
- Rickword contributed to the well-known collection of essays, *The Mind in Chains*, edited by C Day Lewis, along with Anthony Blunt, Alan Bush, Charles Madge, T A Jackson, Alistair Browne and J D Bernal.
- Rickword was a passionate advocate for the value of literature to life and literary awareness.

Summary Continued

- Rickword worked closely with Nancy Cunard on two landmark literary interventions in politics: the pioneering anthology of black writing, *Negro*, and *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War*.
- He played a key role in the early years of the Communist publisher, Lawrence & Wishart, where he served as a director and was close friends with Ernest Wishart, who established Wishart & Co and published *The Calendar of Modern Letters*.
- He was an editor of Christopher Caudwell's work.
- He was one of the first writers in English to produce a book-length study of the French poet, Rimbaud.
- Rickword was never an academic and failed to complete his degree at Oxford, but his literary reviews and studies achieved the highest standards and recognition.
- He produced original revaluations of Wordsworth, William Cobbett and other English radical writers of the 18th and 19th centuries.
- While he did not produce one landmark book that made his name, Rickword's numerous articles and reviews constitute a considerably original body of creative writing and his approach as a critic was widely admired and emulated.

Further Reading - online

Selections from *The Calendar of Modern Letters*

<https://archive.org/details/towardsstandards0000leav>

Full contents of every issue of *The Calendar*

http://modmags.dmu.ac.uk/magazine_homec09a.htm?id=calendar

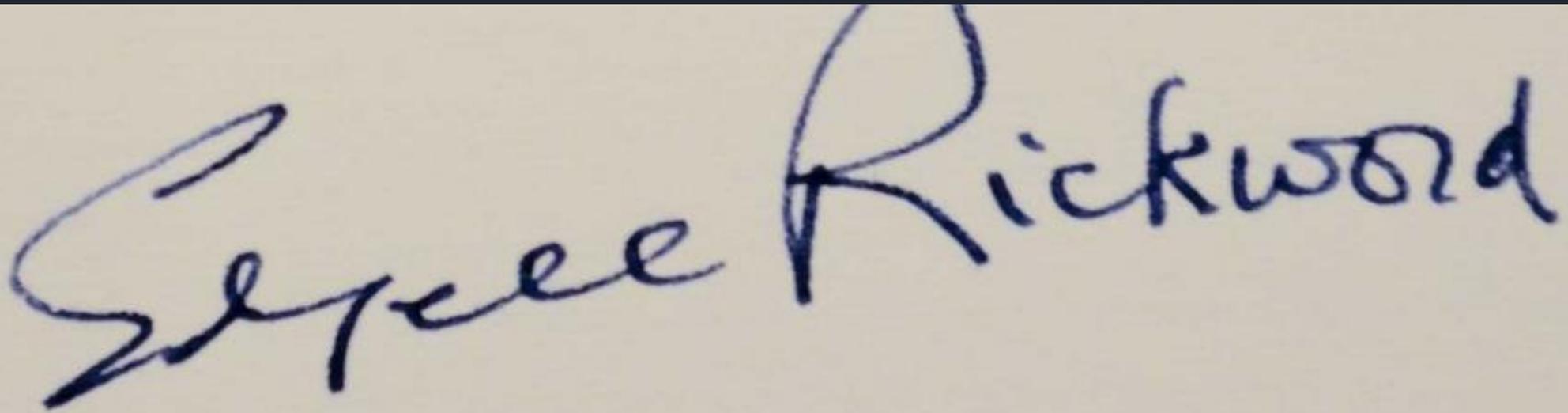
Rickword's Poems

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgell-rickword>

<https://poetryarchive.org/poet/edgell-rickword/>

A Conversation with Edgell Rickword

<http://poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/recordd434.html>

A photograph of a handwritten signature in blue ink on a light-colored, slightly textured paper. The signature reads "Sybil Rickword". The first name "Sybil" is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'S'. The last name "Rickword" is written in a more upright, blocky cursive style. The background of the slide is dark blue with decorative dotted lines in the corners and faint circular patterns.

Rickword's
signature