



# Olivia Manning: A Woman at War

*Deirdre David*

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## **Olivia Manning: A Woman at War** Deirdre David

*Olivia Manning: A Woman at War* is the first literary biography of the twentieth-century novelist Olivia Manning. It tells the story of a writer whose life and work were shaped by her own fierce ambition, and, like many of her generation, the events and aftermath of the Second World War. From the time she left Portsmouth for London in the mid-1930s determined to become a famous writer, through her wartime years in the Balkans and the Middle East, and until her death in London in 1980, Olivia Manning was a dedicated and hard-working author. Married to a British Council lecturer stationed in Bucharest, Olivia Manning arrived in Romania on the 3rd September 1939, the fateful day when Allied forces declared war on Germany. For the duration of World War Two, she kept one step ahead of invading German forces as she and her husband fled Romania for Greece, and then Greece for the Middle East, where they stayed until the end of the war. These tumultuous wartime years are the subject of her best-known and most transparently autobiographical novels, *The Balkan Trilogy* and *The Levant Trilogy*.

Olivia Manning refused to be labelled a 'feminist,' but her novels depict with cutting insight and sardonic wit the marginal position of women striving for independent identity in arenas frequently controlled by men, whether on the frontlines of war or in the publishing world of the 1950s. However, she did not just write about World War Two and women's lives. Amongst other things, Manning published fiction about making do in Britain's post-war Age of Austerity, about desecration of the environment through uncontrolled development, and about the painful adjustment to post-war British life for young men. As the author of thirteen published novels, two volumes of short stories, several works of non-fiction, and a regular reviewer of contemporary fiction, she was a visible presence on the British literary scene throughout her life and her work provides a detailed insight into the period.

Grounded in thorough research and enriched by discussion of previously unexamined manuscripts and letters, *Olivia Manning: A Woman at War* is a timely study of Olivia Manning's remarkable life. Deirdre David integrates incisive critical analysis of Manning's writing with extensive discussion of the historical contexts of her fiction.

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