

Street scenes 1938-1940, from the journals of William Townsend

On Radio 3, Andrew Forge introduced some extracts from 'The Townsend Journals: An Artist's Record of His Times, 1928-1951', which has just been published by the Tate Gallery at £3.50.

ANDREW FORGE: William Townsend was a student at the Slade School during the last years of the régime of Professor Tonks. He was at the Slade again, as a teacher, from 1949 until his death. The friends he had made there as a student were the most important connections he made in his life, and William Coldstream, Claude Rogers, Rodrigo Moynihan, Elinor Bellingham Smith, Geoffrey Tibble, Anthony Devas and others reappear, time after time, in the pages of his journals. Later in the Thirties, he began to see more of Graham Bell and Victor Gollancz. He was one of my teachers at Camberwell after the war.

During the Thirties, Townsend lived in Canterbury with his parents. There was no hope at that time for a young painter to make a living at painting. His father was a dentist by profession, but he had many literary friends, and Willy had formed connections with publishers and had hoped to make a living as an illustrator and book designer. Things did not work out, and he ended up as his father's secretary, at home. Whenever he could, he made visits to London, seeing exhibitions and keeping in touch with his friends.

The journals cover every aspect of his life—the minutiae of provincial life, with all its gossipy boredom, reflections on his own inner experience, reflections on the news of the day—written from a clear-cut, left-wing point of view. Through all this, there is an extraordinary and vivid descriptive attention to things seen—buildings, plants and animals and landscapes, scenes between people. And, of course, many meetings with his friends.

1 May 1938. Went out for an early lunch and then down to the Embankment to see the marchers collecting. Groups of men standing beside their banners, leaning up against the railings, and others all the time coming in from side streets with rolled flags under their arms and red favours marked 'Unity' or the Spanish colours in their coats—and drawn up along the street were decorated vans and lorries of the Co-op Society beribboned and plastered with slogans. Soon after I got there, the contingent from the East End began to march in, with a great showing of red flags and Communist Party banners. In this march, whatever Labour leaders may have wanted, all the opposition parties were marching together: trade unions, Labour and Communist Parties, a crowd of Christian Socialists, Co-op guilds—in fact, the United Front, with many memorial banners to comrades lost in Spain.

Gradually, the other groups collected around their banners on the Embankment: groups of teachers, of scientists, of Left Book Club members, Chinamen and Indians; in fact, every possible dissection and association was there, and we artists numbered about a couple of hundred. The Surrealists were immediately ahead of us, led by Roland Penrose, Julian Trevelyan and two others who, in morning coats and top-hats, with masks of Chamberlain covering their faces, marched along giving the fascist salute, followed by a loudspeaker van from which issued the tunes of the 'Internationale' and the United Front tune, enormously amplified, and on top of which perched a great, gilded birdcage with a whitened skeleton inside—a present from the dictators. Very coherent for the Surrealists, and they must have thought so, for they followed it up with a strange construction, a tall tent on a tradesman's tricycle, with a wicker cage full of coloured balloons at the top.

So we moved off, an immense file, the red-and-white banners gleaming far away behind and before us; so long was the procession that, looking back from Westminster just as we were turning into Parliament Square, one could see the banners advancing far across the bend of the river, away by Blackfriars Bridge, a mile or more behind us . . . Up Victoria Square, through Eaton Square, where old ladies sitting well back in their dim drawing-rooms watched the ghosts framed in the windows—pointing out to children the 'wicked reds' no doubt—as we marched on into immense crowds in Hyde Park.

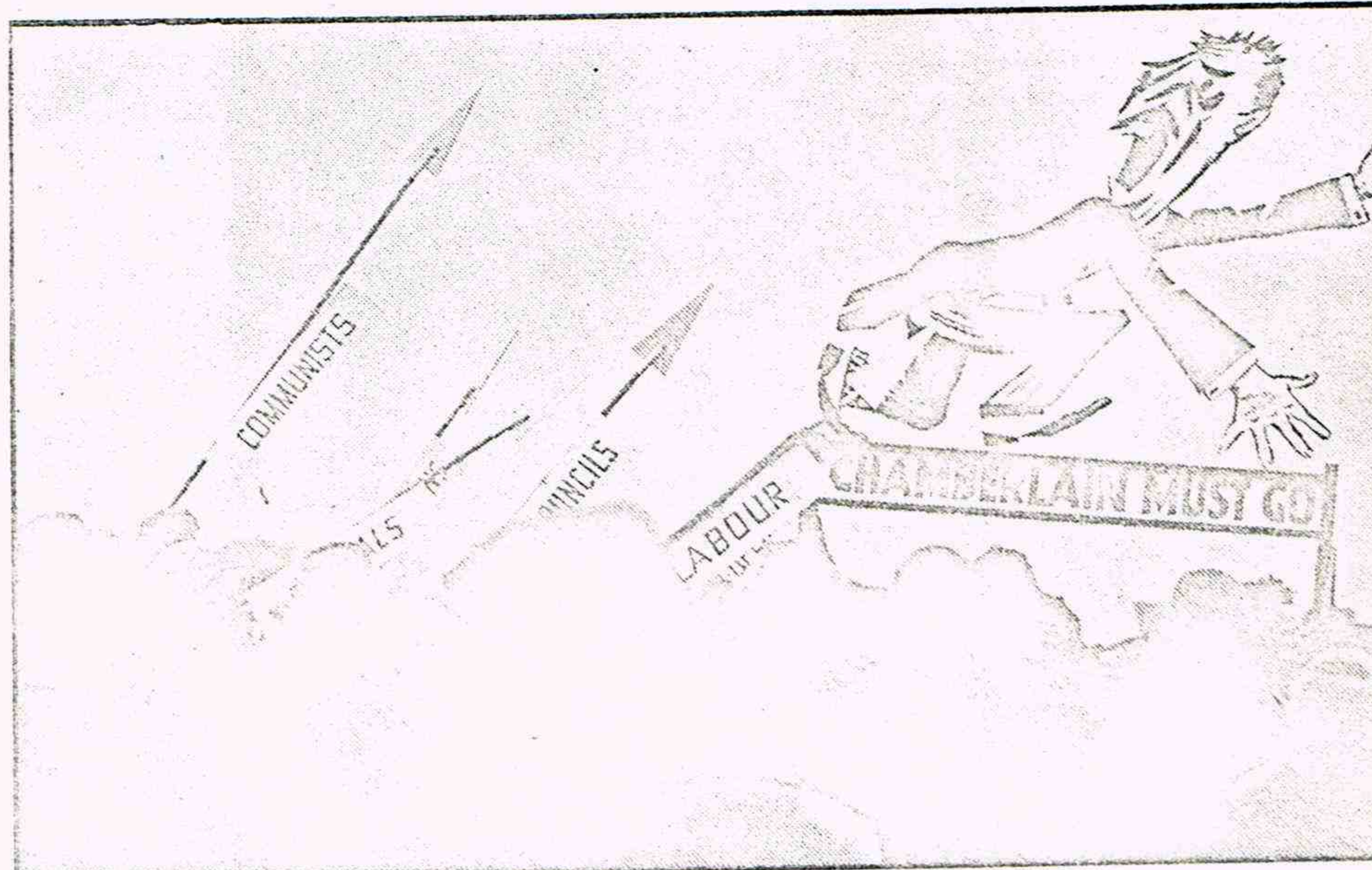
The platforms were bristling with speakers and banners over the crowds, six Labour platforms and, properly separated,

the six 'Unity' platforms, and, them, the platforms of those organisations which, through intransigence, pride or honest indifference, were none of either—the Socialist Party, the largest banner of all with the largest banner, the Social Credit group, and the black stand of the Anarchists, with Emmanuel denouncing the Front Populaire.

4 October 1938. In the afternoon, I went to the Burlington Galleries to see *Guernica*, which Roland Penrose has brought over here, and which is being exhibited for the Spanish Aid fund. All the drawings for it are here, too, drawn with crayon and pencil and ink, and some oil paintings, an immense amount of preliminary work.

I still think, as I did in Paris, that *Guernica* is a terrible and horrifying work in the same sense as the destruction of the city was both these things. The unrelenting ruthlessness and violence of the methods today make it possible to achieve a force in conveying sensations as horror and anguish that no other else could command; but it might easily be turned to glorification of the act. It is like dictatorial powers, dangerous in any hands, but part of modern spirit.

25 August 1939. Gave up work for the day—my work in London was looking for work. Even the galleries were closed—all the pictures at the galleries are already being packed up. Went along Charing Cross Road, learned about the books that have appeared since the date, and then walked on to see Victor Gollancz. There was a remover's van outside with half his furniture already in it. He had to stand last night to leave London for good; he cannot stand any more crises; so they had to stay last night until two o'clock packing up. His flat was half empty, and notice given that they were off to their weekend in the country and then to rejoin all their goods in London, where they will camp at Gollancz's until they can find a house. This



On the march, 1 May 1938