

Inez Holden

by Kristin Bluemel

Inez Holden was a London novelist and short story writer, as famous during her life for her flamboyant lifestyle, fantastic conversation, and celebrated friends, who included HG Wells, George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, Arthur Koestler, Stevie Smith, Mulk Raj Anand, and William Empson, as she was for her literary accomplishments.

There are virtually no archival sources to confirm anecdotal evidence from Holden's childhood and youth, but her cousin Celia Goodman wrote in an article in the *London Magazine* that Holden's mother Beatrice had been an Edwardian beauty who had owned fifteen hunters, and who had been known as the second-best horsewoman in Britain.

Holden's full name was Beatrice Inez Lisette Holden. Goodman reported that Holden's parents did not bother to register their daughter's birth and Holden told her friends that she did not know whether she had been born in 1903 or 1904. She described her parents as not merely ill-suited but as united in mutual antagonism. One of her earliest memories was her father firing a gun at her mother and missing. When Holden was fifteen, she visited Paris and then moved to London, living on her wits and her exceptional good looks). Goodman's daughter Ariane Bankes finds in Holden's childhood trauma the sources of her adult eccentricity: 'Inez was utterly original. She simply did not subscribe to the conventions of society, and her crossing of boundaries is entirely explicable in terms of her early rejection by her family and her subsequent rejection of all that her family stood for class values and all'.

In her twenties Holden was considered to be a bohemian society beauty, and the three novels she wrote during those years, *Sweet Charlatan* (1929), *Born Old, Died Young* (1932) and *Friend of the Family* (1933) record the frivolous, absurd lives of privileged characters who could have stepped out of the pages of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*.

Working without the formal education, family support, or a private income, Holden published seven novels, two story collections, and one wartime diary during some of the most tumultuous decades of the twentieth-century. Throughout this period she also maintained an extraordinary private diary, the surviving volumes of which begin in the midst of the London Blitz and continue well after the end of the war until August 1960. Here she records in astute and wry detail her encounters with prominent London personalities, including her brief affair with Orwell, as well as her impressions of hundreds of anonymous, memorable, ordinary Londoners.

By the time her novella *Night Shift* was published in 1941, Holden had developed a politicised identity of socialist writer, earning for *Night Shift* endorsements from HG Wells and JB Priestley, the latter describing the novel 'as the most truthful and most exciting account of war-time industrial Britain'.

Holden was Wells' tenant in a mews flat behind his house near Regents Park in 1940 while she was writing *Night Shift*.

During the early 1940s, when paper shortages made print publication increasingly difficult, Holden, like many other writers, was trying to sell her documentary accounts of everyday life in wartime London to BBC radio programmes. The BBC files on Holden and Holden's diary show that she was repeatedly encouraged or even requested to compose pieces for Overseas Service programmes or occasionally the Home Service, only to be told later that her work couldn't be used.

Holden's Blitz writings teach us about compassion amid crisis, of community amid difference, of the power of the written word to inspire hope amid violence and despair. *Night Shift* is a novel

about working-class characters conscripted into a London factory called Braille's that produces camera parts for reconnaissance planes. *It Was Different At The Time* is a wartime diary covering the years 1938–1941 with entries that Holden collated from her private diaries of that period. The entries record Holden's work in hospitals, in a government training centre, as a fire watcher, as an occasional broadcaster for the BBC, and as a guest at 'Hogsnorton', a farcical name for the BBC Centre in Worcestershire.

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