

John Xiros Cooper



The Cambridge **Introduction** to
T. S. Eliot

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
T. S. Eliot*

T. S. Eliot was not only one of the most important poets of the twentieth century; as literary critic and commentator on culture and society, his writing continues to be profoundly influential. Every student of English must engage with his writing to understand the course of modern literature. This book provides the perfect introduction to key aspects of Eliot's life and work, as well as to the wider contexts of modernism in which he wrote. John Xiros Cooper explains how Eliot was influenced by the intellectual climate of both twentieth-century Britain and America, and how he became a major cultural figure on both sides of the Atlantic. The continuing controversies surrounding his writing and his thought are also addressed. With a useful guide to further reading, this is the most informative and accessible introduction to T. S. Eliot.

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For Kelly

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Preface

Walk into any university or college library, look up T. S. Eliot in the catalogue, and you will be confronted with many shelves and banks of books by and about him. Most of the books about Eliot, however, are scholarly studies looking at specific aspects of his work. Many of these are written for specialists. This *Introduction*, on the other hand, is written for readers who are, perhaps, new to Eliot but would like an overview of the life and work in order to know more about the man and understand something about his poetry, his ideas, and his place in twentieth-century literary history.

There is as much interest in Eliot now as at any time in the past seventy or eighty years, yet what today's community of readers and critics has to say about him reflects current issues and concerns. Past introductions and companions have helped readers in previous generations to come to grips with a poet whose work can be difficult, but from perspectives that are grounded in their time. This book owes a great debt to those earlier scholars and critics who have contributed so much to our knowledge of the poet. We can say of our understanding of this wealth of scholarship and commentary what Eliot said about a poet's relationship to the writers of the past. We know more than they do, but they are what we know. This *Introduction* rests on the work of those who have thought and written about Eliot over the years. Some distinguished literary critics have in fact themselves offered introductory commentaries. George Williamson's *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot* (1953) still has much to offer in the way of particular analyses of the key poems. Northrop Frye's small book on the poet, *T. S. Eliot* (1963), provides a compelling, but acerbic, reading of Eliot's ideas. Perhaps the most popular short introduction for students has been B. C. Southam's *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (1969) and it is still a very useful guide. There are also a number of casebooks and A. D. Moody's essential *The Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot* (1994) for those who would like to pursue the work in more detail.

The current book has been written to introduce a great poet to a new generation of readers, students as well as the general reader. It tries to capture the complexity of a difficult man and poet but in a language and approach that will not alienate the nonspecialist. An introduction, however, is no substitute for direct knowledge of the work. If you are encouraged by what you read here to acquaint yourself more fully with T. S. Eliot, then this little book will have achieved its primary goal.

Abbreviations

- ASG *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934
- CP *Collected Poems: 1909–1962*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968
- FLA *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays on Style and Order*. London: Faber and Faber, 1928
- Idea *The Idea of a Christian Society*. London: Faber and Faber, 1939
- Notes *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. 1948; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1988
- PP *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957
- SE *Selected Essays*. 1932; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1951
- SW *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 1919; rpt. London: Methuen, 1957
- Use *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. 1933; rpt. London: Faber and Faber, 1964

Chapter 1

Life

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Early life, 1888–1914

At East Coker in the English county of Somerset, St. Michael's parish church, situated on gently rising ground, looks out over a benign setting of trees, fields, and a scattering of ancient-seeming cottage roofs. On a warm, sunny day in late summer, it is easy to imagine oneself standing before a landscape unchanged for centuries. Only the presence of one or two cars in the church carpark and the encroachments of a new housing estate just visible in the far distance remind travelers that they are still very much in the twenty-first century. Inside, stained-glass illuminates, here and there, the dark interior. At the back, in the right-hand corner, a modest memorial marks the place in the wall where T. S. Eliot's ashes are interred. The poet himself chose this place for the deposition of his remains. The choice is significant. Here in this modest, virtually anonymous place, he enjoys eternity in an old village off the main track, in a church difficult to find, and in a place where no public sign or fanfare trumpets the presence of a celebrated author. Only when you enter the church do you know that you have arrived.

A visitor without any knowledge of the literary culture of the twentieth century might be excused for thinking that the "Thomas Stearns Eliot, Poet" remembered in St. Michael's was a minor figure, of limited importance, memorialized by an obscure parish in a small, out of the way village only for want of more famous native sons. But the visitor would be quite wrong. The obscurity of the resting place contrasts with the fame and celebrity of the man. That Eliot preferred this place as opposed to the thrust of a louder monument reveals an essential quality of the man's character. But if one