London Calling

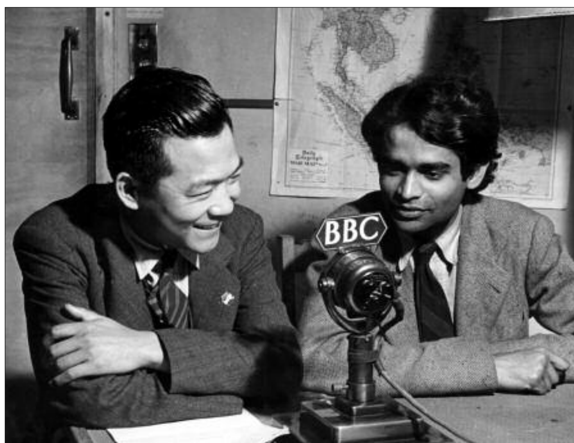
Freed at last from what he saw as "the crazy, petty atmosphere of army life",[1] Julian left the depot at Southend on the morning of Monday 9 August 1943, which he thought of as "Release Day".[2] He then made his way to the station and boarded the London train. Its hypnotic rhythm soon lulled him to sleep, his slumber apparently animated by an exhilarating dream in which the entire plot of *The Hunted Man* reeled through his head. Scene after scene was visualised with the clarity of a movie. All that remained now was to capture the whole thing on paper.

As planned, he moved into the flat he'd found. To celebrate his emancipation he treated himself to an extravagant shopping spree, unwittingly reprising his father's youthful improvidence. Of the money Jonathan Cape had paid him, he spent most of it on a flashy new wardrobe. Reacting against such a prolonged period of being confined to drab army uniforms, he kitted himself out with a crimson jacket and cream suit, both in corduroy, plus a black astrakhan-collared coat, a maroon cummerbund, a mustard-yellow waistcoat, and a silk Schiaperelli tie with a bold pattern of French newspaper headlines on it. He also acquired a pair of sunglasses, a rare accoutrement then, rendered doubly unusual by their American aviator-style frames. He took to wearing these most of the time, even when he was groping through the blackout, his unwillingness to remove them provoking wearyingly repetitive enquiries as to whether he was blind, or disfigured, or wore them "to hide behind because of a psychological need."[3] The desired gangsterish connotations were diluted by the rest of his outfit, the cream suit more evocative of the Riviera, the malacca cane more redolent of the *fin-de-siècle* foppishness he'd embraced as a teenager. In an era of uniformity, of wartime austerity, his appearance ensured that he was as conspicuous as a Technicolor interloper in a monochrome movie. And it aroused inevitable suspicion that he was, in the parlance of the day, queer.

Proudly attired in his latest get-up, his coat habitually draped round his shoulders in the style of a smooth but sinister Hollywood hoodlum, he passed the long summer evenings reacquainting himself with the riotous wartime Soho pub scene. Sometimes he went to the huge, high-ceilinged Swiss Tavern on Old Compton Street, its subdued lighting lending it a murky intimacy. Normally abbreviated to "the Swiss", it had a raffish ambience that made it popular with painters and writers – Julian's old acquaintance Mulk Raj Anand among them – who didn't mind the tarnished walls and the barman's dirt-soiled white mess jacket. Unable to afford pricey bottles of black market booze, he had to rely on the normal quota of, at most, two pints of beer each night. Drinking there one evening, Julian got into conversation with the wiry, lean-featured conscientious objector, would-be writer, and fellow Graham Greene aficionado, Stephen Fothergill, who made the mistake of telling him the story of how he'd been banned from a nearby pub "on account

of his staggering."[4] From that moment onwards Julian, quick to reduce people to the status of eccentric supporting characters in his personal drama, called him "Staggering Stephen".[5]

On another night there, soon after his arrival in the capital, Julian was buttonholed by the flamboyant, ruthlessly egotistical Tamil editor of *Poetry London*, Jim Tambimuttu. Slim and somewhat pale-skinned with sinuous black hair, his appearance made even more distinctive by his battered calf-length blue overcoat, buttoned to the chin against the cold, its velvet collar turned up, "Tambi" – as he liked to be known – was then at the height of his renown as a literary impresario. Appropriately enough for the man who claimed to have coined the term Fitzrovia, Tambi squandered the majority of his time in pubs and cafés, seldom without a flock of awestruck hangers-on, captivated by his bohemian glamour, his courteous, disarmingly relaxed and cordial manner, not to mention his deep and melodious voice, the vowel sounds elongated, the confiding phrase "y'know" peppering his speech. Within a few minutes Julian too had been swept along on one of his nightly pub crawls, their departure supposedly prefaced by Tambi's solemn warning against the danger of contracting "Sohoitis",[6] of "stay[ing] there always day and night and get[ting] no work done ever."[7]



J.M. Tambimuttu (right) giving a talk about T.S. Eliot, 1942 (© BBC Photo Library)

It was not to the Swiss but to Soho's northern annexe that Julian more often gravitated. Since he'd first got to know the area, the Fitzroy Tavern had remained physically unaltered, yet it had lost its bohemian cachet, its decline hastened by the annoying number of gawping sightseers who converged on it. Indeed, it was well on the way to becoming more famous as a homosexual pick-up joint, mainly frequented by sailors. The reputation of the place, sufficient for it to be declared out of bounds for army personnel at one stage, was confirmed by the presence of Paul, the bearded, kilt-wearing pianist – ears adorned with little gold earrings, wrists sheathed by bangles – who played stride piano and sang bawdy songs in a camp, high-pitched voice. Conscious of the Fitzroy's associations Julian preferred the Wheatsheaf. In the run-up to 6.00pm, he'd be waiting outside the front door. When opening time at last arrived, he'd breeze through the Public Bar and into the Saloon Bar, always making a beeline for the extreme lefthand end of the counter, where it was easiest to get served. One elbow propped on the back of the tall

settle to his right, he would stand there, casting an ironic, surprisingly observant eye over the noisy, jostling throng, his upright posture emphasising his height, his already precise and inhibited gestures constricted by the paucity of space. Neither the faint smell of food filtering down from the upstairs billiard-cum-dining room, nor the plangent wail of air-raid sirens, nor the dull thud of exploding bombs and the accompanying stutter of anti-aircraft fire could dislodge him from the Saloon Bar, its reassuringly cosy atmosphere enhanced by the tight-fitting blackout boards over the windows. Periodically, though, he had to relinquish his spot, wriggle through the crowd and up the packed stairs to the gents'. If he returned to discover that his place at the bar had been usurped, he would slowly but inexorably shoulder aside the intruder.

Finding himself in the company of devoted drinkers, nursing their precious pints, he began to increase his alcohol intake. Most of the time he drank acidic, suspiciously watery Scotch Ale, served by an ill-assorted trio of bar staff. The landlady was a short, plump spinster named Mona Glendenning, who ran the place with her similarly rotund brother, Redvers, and his wife, Frances, a spindly woman in a tweed suit and pince nez. Except on Sundays when he wore a battered-looking suit, Redvers – "Red" for short – favoured shirtsleeves and braces, his stomach spilling over the waistband of his trousers. In recognition of Julian's growing value as a customer, Red started providing him with extra beer and the odd additional measure of strictly rationed White Horse whisky.

Unlike the Fitzroy, the clientele of the Wheatsheaf tended to be a less boisterous, more diverse group. The predominantly middle and upper middle-class artistic and literary types, whose appearances tended to coincide with when they were on leave from the military, coexisted but seldom interacted with a fluid blend of businessmen, civil servants, black marketeers, criminals, deserters, elderly locals, and the occasional whore. While the pubs in the southern sector of Soho were overrun by foreign soldiers, sailors and airmen as well as male and female prostitutes taking a breather from servicing the servicemen, the Wheatsheaf's comparative distance from the West End meant that few of the foreigners or the whores found their way there. An exception was the demure-looking prostitute nicknamed "Sister Ann". Outside the evening rush hour when she stood on Tottenham Court Road, snagging prospective clients as they walked towards the tube, she was often to be seen loitering in the corridor between the two bars, her subdued appearance giving no indication of her trade.

Two of the Wheatsheaf's most loyal customers were Wilf, an ancient member of the Home Guard, a line of medals arrayed across his chest, some of which dated from the Zulu Wars; and a tiny, cantankerous octogenarian named Mrs Stewart, rumoured to have been a beautiful streetwalker in her youth. Always neatly clad in an anachronistic black dress, she would, like Julian, arrive punctually at opening time and head for the Saloon Bar. In a voice so garbled she was barely intelligible, she'd buy herself a bottle of Guinness and sit on the settle directly behind him, a newspaper spread out across the table, timing herself with an alarm clock as she ploughed through a crossword puzzle. As Julian — a self-confessed crossword addict — was to discover, she'd take umbrage if anyone tried to help

her with a tricky clue. She could also be offhand with well-meaning people who volunteered to stand her a drink. But Julian was so solicitous of her welfare, his attitude towards her chivalrous if a shade condescending, she soon accepted him, along with the drinks he bought her.

In the course of his visits to the Saloon Bar, he came across all its other stalwarts. There was the strapping, overtly lesbian novelist, Kaye Dick, emphasising the aptness of her surname with mannish clothes. There was Charles Wrey Gardiner, the amiable, bespectacled, formally attired proprietor of the Grey Walls Press, which Julian dubbed "the Grey Balls Press".[8] There was the venerable, floppy-hatted Augustus John, sitting at the other end of the bar, eavesdropping on whatever was going on around him. There were the two Roberts, Colquhoun and MacBryde, very different painters from Augustus John, both Scots, both belligerent and caustic yet as inseparable as the most devoted young married couple. There was the drug-addicted, homosexual John Booth-Palmer, secretary to the theatre critic James Agate. There was the charismatic, long-faced young artist John Minton, "boyishly diffident"[9] in "the blue reefer jersey he usually wore."[10] There was the sardonic hack James Graham-Murray (better known by the sobriquet, "James the Shit"), respectable-looking were it not for three or four missing front teeth, the legacy of a misjudged quip. And there was the exhibitionistic, sexually undiscriminating painter Nina Hamnett. Then in her late fifties, her face mottled and puffy, her teeth decayed, her figure concealed beneath fetid and shapeless secondhand clothes, her helmet-like hairstyle topped by a beret she never seemed to remove, she carried herself with panache, undaunted by her miserable circumstances or meagre finances, greeting friends and acquaintances with a jaunty "Hullo, ducks!" Every so often she'd go round rattling the tin where she kept her money, soliciting donations with the well-worn phrases, "Got any mun, dear?" or "You couldn't buy me a drink, could you, love?" For the price of a beer, she would tell oft-repeated anecdotes about her outrageous and happy-go-lucky existence in 1920s Montparnasse, about modelling for Gaudier-Brzeska, hobnobbing with Picasso, dancing naked for Van Dongen, meeting James Joyce, and chalking up affairs with Rodin and Modigliani. "Modi said I had the best tits in Europe," she was fond of remarking. At the faintest provocation, she'd peel back her pullover to reveal breasts far better preserved than the rest of her. "You feel them," she'd say. "They're as good as new."[11]

Other intermittent patrons of the Saloon Bar included the abstemious, thirty-something Quentin Crisp, dressed in the functional uniform of wartime women, a jacket worn over a blouse, trousers and medium-heeled lace-up shoes, hair meticulously coiffed and hennaed, fingernails glossy with lacquer, face subtly made up. Equally irregular visitors were Toni del Renzio, spewing tall stories about being related to the Romanoffs and having inherited the Italian title, "Count del Renzio"; Stephen Spender and John Lehmann, both radiating a palpable sense of unease in such flamboyant company; George Orwell, taciturn and watchful, pausing just long enough for a quick half; the ageing aesthete, Norman Douglas, sheltering in England for the duration; as well as the notorious

Annie Allchild (right) working in the Saloon Bar of the Fitzroy Tavern, c.1943 (© Sally Fiber)

Aleister Crowley, now overweight and seedy, his speech hesitant and doped. Aside from del Renzio and Crowley, the latter of whom claimed to have set fire to the lining of Julian's coat by putting a spell on it, Julian came to be on good terms with all these part-time Wheatsheaf-ites.

Whereas most of the regulars affected a heavily stubbled, self-consciously rumpled look, Julian was always scrupulously clean-shaven and fastidiously turned out. To go with his cigarette holder, cane, and furled gloves, he took to wearing a fresh pink carnation in his buttonhole and dispensing pinches of snuff to his acolytes. All part of the persona of "Julian the Writer"[12] which he'd created. Such was his aura of impending literary stardom, of someone possessing a privileged insight into the world, a huddle of admirers, many of them girls, attracted by his poise and good looks, would indulge him. They'd buy him drinks, play Spoof with him (which earned him yet more free drinks), and challenge him to name the characters and publication details of obscure novels. His memory was so exceptional, his reading so phenomenal, spanning nineteenth and twentieth-century English, French, and American fiction, he'd invariably meet the challenge.

The group clustered round Julian also provided a convenient audience for his waggishly outrageous pronouncements and interminable monologues, punctuated by long drags on his cigarette holder. Brushing aside any attempts at small talk, he'd hold forth about the books and films he admired, quoting passages or acting out scenes with no effort to distinguish the characters by modifying his voice or gestures. He'd talk about the mechanics of publishing. He would, assuming there were no women within earshot, tell smutty stories and brag about his sexual exploits – something he'd never been prone to

do in the past. He'd eulogise the suave villainy, the scene-stealing brio of the Hollywood actors Sydney Greenstreet and Eduardo Cianelli. He'd discourse knowledgably on the careers of infamous murderers such as Henrik de Jong and Eugen Weidmann. And he'd proclaim the books, plays, and filmscripts he planned to write, Weidmann forming a recurrent subject.

At other times he'd recite anecdotes, culled from his experience, their cast often recruited from among his fellow drinkers. Each anecdote would be told again and again, every retelling accruing embellishments and carrying it further from its source. Bit by bit, it would gain authority as well, the drama becoming more distilled, the dialogue terser and more incisive. Eventually it would reach a point where it stopped evolving, at which it was ready to be transcribed in his obsessively neat handwriting and then submitted to the editor of a magazine, the story's title as carefully considered and well-tested as the tale itself.

His ostentatious bearing and seemingly impenetrable forcefield of affectation alienated numerous Wheatsheaf-ites, who restricted their dealings with him to distant nods and mimed hullos. Yet he could be "genuinely kind and approachable".[13] When he was introduced to the young aspiring writer Derek Stanford, who had published what, Stanford himself conceded, was a "bogus"[14] essay on Wyndham Lewis in the *Fortune Anthology*, he could have made some sneering comment. Instead, he congratulated Stanford "in the most genial fashion."[15]

Apart from the way his normally unobtrusive eyelids lowered as the hours drifted by, Julian was capable of consuming any available alcohol with no tangible effect. He was so inordinately proud of this that he often used to boast about it. Slowly but steadily soaking up the booze, he'd cling tenaciously to his spot at the bar until closing time approached. Or until the supply of beer ran out – a common occurrence on particularly busy nights in most wartime pubs, where chalked signs declaring NO DRINK would spring up.

Once last orders had been called just before 10.30pm, the familiar cry of "time gentlemen, please" cutting across the hubbub, Julian would take advantage of a fortuitous discrepancy in the licensing laws. Due to the different regulations operated by the two boroughs of Holborn and Marylebone, the boundary of which ran right down the middle of Charlotte Street, the pubs on the opposite side of the street from the Wheatsheaf closed half an hour later. As did those on the other side of Oxford Street, the main section of Soho falling under the aegis of the City of Westminster. Picking his way past the fights that raged most nights in the street outside, past the swaying drunks who shouted slurred insults in his direction or launched unprovoked attacks, his trusty cane coming in handy as a means of defending himself, Julian would sometimes simply transfer to the Marquis of Granby or the Duke of York. Unless, of course, they had run out of drink already.

Positioned at the tip of the diagonal intersection between Rathbone Place and Rathbone Street, the Marquis had a well-deserved reputation for rowdiness. Its sleazy clientele mostly comprised small-time gangsters, bookies, guardsmen, and homosexuals on the lookout for rough trade, their amorous advances often precipitating punch-ups. If Julian wasn't in the mood to brave the hurly-burly of the Marquis, he'd navigate his way

through the blackout – fragments of shrapnel crunching underfoot – to the other end of Rathbone Street, where the Duke of York offered a less hectic alternative. While its Public Bar tended to be packed with the bearded, heavy-fringed, proto-beatniks whom Julian termed "Bums",[16] the posher Saloon Bar was occupied by the literary crowd. Behind the counter, staffed by the irascible "Mad Major" – Major Alf Klein – and his wife Blanche, an orthodox Jew who insisted on the pub closing during religious holidays, there was a large placard proclaiming the landlord "The Prince of Good Fellows". Not that he displayed much fellowship towards some of his bohemian customers, his high-handed attitude towards them earning Julian's dislike.

Alternatively Julian would join the column of laughing, shouting, shrieking revellers lurching southwards into Soho proper. Beyond the funereal Black Horse, on the final stretch of Rathbone Place, its narrow frontage giving no indication of its roomy, unalluring interior, he and his drinking buddies would turn right onto Oxford Street, then left down Dean Street, arriving at the vibrant, scruffy Highlander just in time, if they were lucky, to squeeze in an extra pint.

STRANGE GARB

Count Geoffry Potocki de Montalk, the Swedish poet, who is visiting London.

Count Potocki of Montalk, c.1940

When the two Roberts weren't in the Wheatsheaf, they were usually to be seen amid the perspiring crowd that jammed into the Highlander's pair of tiny, smoky bars. It was there that Julian first nerved himself to speak to "the wolfishly lean and sullen"[17] Robert Colquhoun. Having seen the latest exhibition of his paintings that afternoon, Julian went up to Colquhoun to congratulate him, only to be branded a phoney by the "gloweringly offensive",[18] Glaswegian-accented painter.

After the Highlander closed, Julian would move on to one of a plethora of cheap, handily placed cafés and restaurants. Occasionally he ventured down St Giles High Street, its pavements dotted with predatory homosexuals loitering near a French-style pissoir. Signposted by the obligatory heterosexual couple enjoying a quick knee-trembler against the wall, there was an unpromising doorway leading to the spacious, seedy basement that housed the strangely-titled Coffee An'. There you could get coffee an' something else, though its impoverished clientele tended to miss the point, assuming instead that it was really called "the Café Anne". Its brusque and swarthy staff, renowned for their readiness to threaten unruly customers with knives, served nothing more sophisticated than horsemeat steaks and salami sandwiches. These were eaten at long refectory tables, a couple of scrawny alsatians loping hungrily round them. Against the backdrop of a large, crudely executed

mural depicting a contemporary reinterpretation of the crucifixion, the Roman soldiers portrayed as jackbooted Nazis with swastiki armbands, their faces concealed behind sinister gas masks, writers and artists sat side by side with crooks and deserters, drawn to Soho because they could survive there without a ration book by purchasing unrestricted foods like salami, horsemeat, pigeon, and even sparrow.

On his visits to the Coffee An', Julian would have seen the New Zealand-born Count Potocki of Montalk, who was there most nights, gorging himself on what was reputed to be the cheapest food in Soho. Not content with asserting that he was the rightful heir to the throne of Poland, Count Potocki also claimed to be the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Hospidar of Moldavia, and High Priest of the Sun. His waist-length hair plaited and tied with a girlish bow, he wore sandals, a billowing scarlet medieval robe with a silver star emblazoned on the front, and a heavy-looking gold chain round his neck with an ornate medallion on the end, the whole risible ensemble topped by either a crown or a velvet cap. He always carried with him a small stack of *The Right Review*, the hand-printed magazine that he hawked round the West End streets, its pages filled with a bizarre combination of decorous woodcuts, poems by writers such as Lawrence Durrell, mad anti-semitic tirades, and convoluted genealogical justifications for his wide-ranging titular claims. Anyone prepared to pay for the Count's meal would be granted a knighthood, the recipient forced to kneel down while the ritual was performed. Only a few months earlier, the Count had been lambasted by the national press for ennobling a deserter.

As a rule, Julian tended to make for three of the fractionally more upmarket eateries in the environs of the Wheatsheaf. One of these, at 91 Charlotte Street, was Tony's, an unsalubrious ground floor café and cramped cellar restaurant where black market steak and eggs were served. Mainly patronised by spivs, huddled together in furtive conversation, plus pimps and their heavily made-up girls, each clutching a cheap handbag, "it was a place of 'deals' settled by a nod"[19] and "money exchanged at the exact moment a parcel slipped surreptitiously under the table."[20] Downstairs, braving the reek of fried onions and dry rot, Julian and a lot of writers, artists and misfits, notably Quentin Crisp, would sit at dirty white tables, eating and chatting. His other favourite post-pub destinations were a small Greek restaurant on Rathbone Place, and the rough and ready, sparsely furnished Scala, on Charlotte Street, where nothing cost more than about half-a-crown. The Scala's speciality was the misleadingly titled Vienna Steak, in truth a particularly unedifying form of rissole. As a satisfying epilogue to his night's drinking and socialising, he'd order goose pilaf from the Greek restaurant, Welsh Rarebit from Tony's, or spaghetti bolognese from the Scala, washed down by a carafe of cheap, astringent red wine, and a cup of strong black coffee.

Considering how he'd come to detest service life, it is ironic that Julian's first publication after his discharge was a comic tale called *I Like It In The Army*, featured in the second issue of the hardback anthology *Bugle Blast*. From his stockpile of army stories, he also

sold two more to Kaye Webb, editor of *Lilliput*. Besides which, he succeeded in placing *Mandrake*, an appealing piece about his childhood in the south of France, with *John O'London's Weekly*, the literary tabloid newspaper.

Despite racking up all these sales he was soon running short of cash. In pursuit of a screenwriting job, he made use of his existing connection with the Films Division of the Ministry of Information. He arranged to meet the bulky, floppy-haired Arthur Calder-Marshall and his radiant wife Ara straight after they'd finished work one evening. The venue was the Horseshoe Tavern, a huge, spartan hotel-turned-pub next to the Dominion cinema, right on the junction between Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. On hearing that Julian wanted to take up the earlier offer to find him work at the Ministry, where he had set his sights on a screenwriting job, the Calder-Marshalls whisked him from there to the Highlander, intent on helping him to make some useful but unspecified contact. In its sedate early evening incarnation, the appetising aroma of sausage rolls and other hot snacks permeating both bars, the Highlander was scarcely recognisable. Its proximity to the offices of the many small documentary film companies, now flourishing under the patronage of the Ministry, ensured a high proportion of young film industry employees among the drinkers. The majority of these were earnest recent graduates whom Julian referred to as "Slithy Toves",[21] "the girls in white blouses and slacks with shoulder-slung bags",[22] the boys in "tweed jackets with leather inserts in the elbows",[23] their university scarves coiled round their necks.

While her husband was ordering their drinks, Ara introduced Julian to someone he'd never met before, though they were more or less the same age and inhabited the same alcohol fuelled bohemian milieu. His new acquaintance, who had a "narrow white papery clown's face of despairing gaiety"[24] and thick glasses that gave his eyes a lunatic intensity, was the pipe-smoking Scots poet Ruthven (pronounced "Riven") Todd. Ara's husky voice made it sound as if she had introduced Julian to the "Reverend Todd". There was, in any case, something clerical about Ruthven's demeanour.

In "a characteristic Ruthven conversational ploy",[25] he said that he was responsible for Julian's discovery as a writer, having persuaded Cyril Connolly to publish him. Julian didn't believe Ruthven, yet he may have been telling the truth. Ruthven was, after all, helping out at *Horizon* at just the time Julian submitted *A Bit of a Smash in Madras*. Intriguing as Julian found him, Ruthven's competing talents as a monologuist were destined to prevent them from translating mutual curiosity into friendship.

Clearly awaiting someone's arrival, the Calder-Marshalls kept watch over the open door of the pub. Their vigilance was rewarded by the entry of a thickset man in his early thirties. Arthur Calder-Marshall guided him over to where Julian and Ara were standing. The newcomer was Donald Taylor, the blandly personable Managing Director of the Strand Film Company.

By securing a contract with the Ministry of Information, Strand had established itself as Britain's leading producer of documentaries, their morale-raising message imbued with a socialist vision of a more equitable future. Through his meeting with Donald,

who made a habit of recruiting talented writers irrespective of whether they had any screenwriting experience, Julian was offered the job he needed.

For a healthy salary of about £10 a week, payable every Friday, he started work at Strand towards the end of August. The company had a clutch of upstairs offices at 1 Golden Square, wedged right in the corner of a large, verdant park near the southern fringe of Soho. There, amid the clacking and chiming of typewriters, he became part of a triumvirate of screenwriters. His colleagues comprised Dylan Thomas and Phil Lindsay, the heavy-drinking Australian novelist, who was collaborating with Donald on a feature film script about the murderous Dr Crippen.

Julian's new boss paired him off with the short, tubby figure of Dylan, assigned them a shared office, and set them to work on a screenplay about the Home Guard. He and Dylan skirted one another warily at first, only establishing a rapport when they went drinking that evening. From the office they adjourned to the conveniently positioned Café Royal. A revolving door at the back of the building was screened by some heavy velvet blackout curtains. Fumbling through these in the darkness, they'd have found themselves at the foot of a shallow, dazzlingly lit flight of stairs. These led up to the smoky, red plush-upholstered Back Bar, where bohemians rubbed shoulders with American servicemen and their giggling girlfriends. Julian and his new colleague plundered the Back Bar's abundant supply of Irish whisky, its availability a perk of Ireland's neutrality. After a few drinks there, they headed off to the Wheatsheaf, pausing for a glass or two in their favourite Soho pubs, Julian gradually coming to appreciate Dylan's exuberance, his charm, his ribald sense of humour, his relish for the lurid and macabre.

Phil Lindsay, late 1930s (© Cressida Lindsay)

Except at weekends when Dylan frequently went off to Wales, where his wife Caitlin and their baby daughter were sheltering from the bombing, he and Julian now tended to spend their evenings together in the Wheatsheaf. Incompatible as they were in so many ways, not least in their potentially conflicting predilection for monopolising conversations and their constant need for admirers from whom to cadge money, they formed an unlikely alliance. With their loud voices and even louder clothing, Dylan affecting the style of check suit and matching cap favoured by illegal off-course bookies, they dominated the Saloon Bar. Often they'd discuss their screenwriting work. Or else Dylan would reminisce fondly about Fred Farr, his mentor on *The Swansea Evening Post*.

It was probably through Dylan that Julian got to know his friend and near-contemporary, the critic John Davenport. A broad-shouldered, chubby former wrestler and poet manqué, he was customarily to be seen with a cowlick of thick black hair drooping over his forehead and a cigarette protruding from his pneumatic lips. Davenport had a

well-earned reputation for being bellicose, embittered, tactless, and tetchy. Nevertheless, he struck up another unexpected friendship with Julian, whose narcissism he found endearingly absurd, whose essential generosity and tolerance excused his "didactic arrogance",[26] whose "independence of mind",[27] critical acuity and literary gifts Davenport considered worthy of respect.

But Julian didn't take to Dylan's other chum, the equally corpulent Gilbert Wood, who worked as a scene painter on film sets. Timid when sober but acerbic when drunk, he had what Julian felt was an undeserved reputation as a trenchant wit. Together with Julian, Dylan and Davenport, he formed part of the core of a sizeable Spoof-playing contingent. This was also made up of the cheerful, beer-bellied Welsh poet Keidrych Rhys and his smartly clothed wife Lynette, her face often haloed by a big black hat; the pudgy-featured Phil Lindsay; and the habitually tousled, unshaven Canadian-born, English-educated Paul Potts, inveterate scrounger, fervent left-winger and self-styled "People's Poet From The Canadian Prairies". Like Julian and Keidrych, Paul had been ignominiously discharged from the army, though he still dressed in a tatty army-issue greatcoat which flapped open to reveal a stained red shirt, worn with sandals and black corduroy trousers.

Two other integral members of the clique were Tambi and his Tamil sidekick Alagu Subramaniam, always abbreviated to "Subra". The antithesis of Tambi in most respects, Subra was dumpy, indolent, equable, and so reticent he seldom mentioned the short stories he wrote. Whatever the weather, a long red scarf dangled from his stubby neck. A lawyer-turned-loafer, Subra supported himself by working in a bookshop on Southampton Row, where he told people he was the General Manager. In reality he was no more than a dogsbody, his income supplemented by stealing books on request.

Via Tambi, Julian also met the abstract-expressionist painter Gerald Wilde. Tambi would sometimes sweep into the pub, trailing Gerald behind him like some faithful but badly fed mongrel, a startled expression on his prematurely grisled countenance, his attenuated face wreathed by twin fronds of shaggy ginger hair, his clothes so dirty they looked as if they belonged to a tramp. Requisitioning a hat from someone, which served as a begging bowl, Tambi would work his way round the pub. His double-jointed fingers pointing in the direction of Gerald, whose unkempt appearance spoke eloquently of bohemian penury, he'd solicit contributions for "a poor but brilliant artist [...] who lacked not only food but also the materials to express his genius."[28] The contents of the hat would then be decanted into Tambi's pocket, the hat returned to its owner, and a round of drinks purchased. If Gerald was lucky, Tambi might treat him to a pint of bitter and a Scotch egg from the restaurant upstairs.

Every so often Julian and his entourage were joined by Walter Allen, now living in London. Adept at straight-faced teasing, Julian convinced the gullible Walter – who found him amusing company – that his cane was really a swordstick he carried in case John Davenport attacked him. Moreover, in a casual display of what he referred to as his "absolutely photographic memory",[29] he dumbfounded Walter by reciting the entire concluding chapter of Walter's prewar novel, *Blind Man's Ditch*.

Two other intermittent members of the group, their appearances restricted to whenever they were on leave from the military, were Mac and a tall, debonair young naval officer, Oxford cricket blue, and poet by the name of Alan Ross. For him, Julian offered a welcome respite from months of stultifying naval conversation, though the fascination palled once Julian had exhausted his extensive repertoire of anecdotes and started to repeat himself. His repertoire included a story about his first day in the army. This described how he'd studied "the Routine Orders" pinned to the wall next to his bed. Midway down the list, it stated that "Buttons will be cleaned every day." On parade next morning, the Sergeant Major bellowed at him for not polishing the buttons on his uniform. Julian supposedly replied, "I'm terribly sorry, but the notice in our hut says 'Buttons will be cleaned every day', so I've been waiting for the fellow to come round and clean them."[30]

At closing time Julian would often join Tambi, Subra, and whoever else was still in tow for a late night meal in an Indian restaurant on St Giles High Street. Huddled together in the darkened street after they'd downed their last pints of the evening, he showed them the lucky bullet he had, with such equivocal results, been carrying round since the summer before last, its mangled shape momentarily spotlit by someone's torch. But it slid through their fingers and dropped down an adjacent gutter, from where all attempts to retrieve it failed.

On nights when Julian wasn't with Tambi, he'd head for his old haunts, Alan Ross accompanying him on one of these visits to the Scala, his image of himself as a successful writer dictating that he should treat the place as if it was the Ritz. Its menu, spattered with food stains, was sparse and unvarying, but even that didn't deter him from studying it with all the eyebrow-flexing care of a gourmet wavering over an array of tempting and esoteric dishes. At length he opted for his current favourites: soup, followed by roast beef and vegetables. In dictating his order to the Greek waiter, he gave detailed instructions as to how he wanted the vegetables and beef cooked. When he'd finished, the incredulous waiter "ambled across to the serving hatch and bellowed 'Roast and two veg for His Nibs and his mate.' Similar consideration was given to the matter of the wine, at the end of which House Red was selected with the same deliberation that others might have given to a rare Mouton-Rothschild."[31]

Though the easy-going nature of the documentary film world meant there was no pressure on him to keep normal office hours, both he and Dylan showed up at Golden Square each morning, regardless of how heavy a night they'd had. Facing one another across their desk, the narrow window beside them framing the spire of the otherwise devastated Soho church of St Anne's, they swapped notes on the latest movies they'd seen. And they made a tentative start on the Home Guard script they'd been allocated. Neither of them knew anything about the subject, so they painstakingly constructed a comedy-thriller set in an imaginary village, possibly a precursor of Llareggub in *Under Milk Wood*. The village was peopled by *Dads' Army*-like eccentrics, who had to contend with a German parachutist and a group of Nazi collaborators. Reliant as ever on first-hand

experience for his writing, Julian modelled one of the villagers on Wilf, the ancient Home Guard who drank in the Wheatsheaf.

As a sideline they were encouraged by Donald Taylor, who was planning to move into feature film production, to discuss the formal possibilities of screenwriting and come up with ideas for scripts. Julian managed to interest his boss in producing an adaptation of his army stories. And, together with Dylan, he devised the outline of a script which they were going to call either *The Whispering Gallery* or *The Distorting Mirror*, inspired by their shared passion for thrillers and Gothic horror movies. Anticipating Ealing Studios' masterful *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, which exploited an identical premise for blackly comic purposes, it told the story of a distant relative of the owner of a stately home, who plots to eliminate everyone in the long path to succession.

Alan Ross (left), 1946 (© Jane Rye)

Provided their morning's work had gone well, Julian and Dylan would join Phil Lindsay on a trip to the Horseshoe Club, one of many afternoon drinking venues that thrived because pubs were prohibited from opening between 3.00pm and 6.00pm. Located in a basement at 21 Wardour Street, it was approached via a litter-strewn staircase down to a door with a spyhole in it, through which the doorman vetted prospective customers. To Dylan, who went there on a regular basis, this lent it the low-life frisson of a gambling den or speakeasy. The more worldly Julian found the place disappointingly tame. All that awaited them inside, slouched on the club's cracked leather sofas, were bookies' touts, elderly lesbians, and a regiment of bulbous-nosed old men. Because of Dylan's tendency to confuse "age with sage",[32] he was on the best of terms with most of the old boys, particularly the art critic Tommy Earp, remarkable for his wiry physique, red face, quavering voice, and absurdly exaggerated upper-class accent. Dylan often used to extol his "subtle deadpan wit",[33] but Julian found him boring and a little creepy. Baffled by his friend's tolerance of Earp and his ilk, he stopped going to the Horseshoe. From then on, he and Dylan came to an arrangement whereby they'd take turns manning the office after lunch, enabling Julian to devote alternate afternoons to his complicated love life. By his own admission, he was dating "various young women"[34] at the same time as Scylla, any potentially awkward phone calls to the office tactfully fielded by Dylan.

One of his harem was Monica Foster, a small, well-spoken twenty-year-old who had a carefully made-up face, piercing blue eyes, and shortish curly brown hair, tucked behind her ears. Born with a slight limp that prevented her from wearing high heels and caused her to walk with self-conscious care, she wore flat shoes that made her appear even smaller than she was. She had just graduated in French and German from Cambridge

Dylan Thomas, 1940s (© BBC Photo Library)

University. New to London, where she had enrolled at a secretarial college, Monica was staying in Bayswater with her elder sister, Sheila, and brother-in-law, George Viliesid. Both Sheila and George, a prewar Soho-ite who had been invalided out of the army, were devotees of the Wheatsheaf. It was there that Monica had been introduced to Julian by her sister. For Monica, it was probably her first serious sexual relationship. But Julian remained noncommittal, refusing to give her any "real idea what [he] felt about [her]."[35] While he introduced her to his friends as "the Pinchables"[36], she addressed him by the endearing nickname of "Jay"[37], also used by Scylla.

In the evenings she would often go straight from the secretarial college to the Wheatsheaf, where she'd place her handbag on the bar and perch proprietorially on a barstool beside Julian, her head only reaching up to his shoulder, all the while sipping glasses of beer or rough Algerian wine. Whenever the opportunity arose, she'd drop references to her student days, a habit that peeved Julian, who was sensitive about his lack of a university education.

If he could afford it, after the pubs closed he'd take her to the Gargoyle, a moderately expensive and famously rumbustious Soho club where several of his friends, who were members, made a habit of signing in him and Monica as guests. The club was situated above a printing works on Meard Street, a grimy, cobbled thoroughfare sometimes facetiously mispronounced as "Merde Street". Run by the Hon. David Tennant and his wife, the revue star Hermione Baddeley, it had been launched in the 1920s to provide a

meeting place where artistic and theatrical types could mingle with members of London high society. By then, its fashionable status was waning, though it continued to attract a loyal and disparate clientele that encompassed John Minton, Nancy Cunard, Augustus John, and Bertrand Russell.

From the street outside, you could usually hear the sound of laughter and music leaking through its open windows. Beyond the burly doormen who guarded the narrow entrance and greeted guests with a salute or a deferential touch of their peaked caps, there was a short, dingy passageway that led to a claustrophobic cage-lift, not much bigger than a phone box. Creaking and rattling as it made its ponderous ascent, it would jerk to a halt on the top floor, where a uniformed member of staff would slide open the squeaky lift door and politely shepherd its occupants across the large, wood-panelled vestibule, the walls of which were hung with Henri Matisse lithographs. At the reception desk, customers would sign the guest book before being relieved of unwanted coats and scarves. They were then free to explore the warmly lit club, its patinated fittings conveying an impression of tarnished opulence. Past the reception desk and the cloakrooms, there was a bar, a chintzy lounge, and a dining room where, in spite of wartime constraints, the chef upheld its reputation for serving delicious yet relatively inexpensive French provincial cuisine. Even the dried egg omelettes were more palatable than those served elsewhere. The bar, not the dining room, was nonetheless Julian's preferred destination. Eschewing the banquettes along the edge of the room, the low tables in the middle, or even the bar stools, he liked to stand, more often than not flanked by Dylan Thomas and John Davenport, at the polished mahogany counter, which spanned the width of the building.

Only on rare occasions would he allow himself to be chivvied down the stairs connecting the bar with the low-ceilinged, L-shaped ballroom. Designed by an incongruous pairing of Matisse and the architect Edwin Lutyens, its windows were hung with leather curtains decorated with African motifs, its ceiling was encrusted in gold leaf, and its walls were tessellated with glittering mirror-glass. All but a fraction of the floorspace was taken up by tables and chairs, bounding the generally heaving dance floor. As the night wore on, Alex Alexander's nattily kitted out four-piece house band would play louder and louder, the dancing becoming progressively more unrestrained.

The Home Guard script, which Julian and Dylan had been having such fun with, was abruptly cancelled around mid-September. Their brief partnership over, Julian was redeployed to another project. Still relishing the freedom of civilian life, his work for Strand was juxtaposed with both the social whirl of Soho and spells of working on his novel. In contrast to the rigid routine and predictability of the army, "every day seemed a great new adventure."[38]

He wasn't making much headway as a screenwriter but his career in the short story genre continued to flourish. *Y-List* was selected for inclusion in the forthcoming *Little Reviews Anthology*, scheduled for release during the build-up to Christmas. Added to

which, on the first Friday of September, *Tribune* published *A Sentimental Story*, his portrait of an abortive wartime romance. Two more of his stories also made it into print during October. Alongside pieces by Frank O'Connor and William Sansom, he had one of the brief sketches already sold to *Lilliput* reprinted in a short-lived pocket magazine called *Writing Today*. And he had *Are You Happy In Your Work* published in *The Saturday Book*, edited by Leonard Russell, who maintained "a high opinion"[39] of his writing despite his apparent failure to deliver the novel he'd agreed to write. Better still, Russell – displaying what Julian regarded as a "sympathetic understanding"[40] of the problems he faced – was prepared to pay promptly.

His sense of himself as a rising star was given further endorsement when Nina Hamnett asked if he'd sit for a portrait. One afternoon, in between pub opening hours, he went back with her to where she lived at 31 Howland Street, only a short walk from the Wheatsheaf. Under the prying eyes of her landlady, who observed the comings and goings with a mixture of suspicion and envy, he tramped right up to her sordid top floor flat-cum-studio, its two rooms littered with unprimed canvases, stretchers, and empty tubes of paint. There he posed for her while she executed a watercolour portrait of him.

With the onset of winter, Donald Taylor was summoned by the board of directors to repeated crisis meetings at Strand's studios in Boreham Wood, an air of uncertainty consequently suffusing the company. Donald, however, remained buoyant about the future, predicting that they'd soon be making features instead of documentaries. The portents were less encouraging though. Films scheduled to go into production were halted, the offices becoming a waiting room for bored cameramen and directors. Yet Julian, who worried that Donald had grown disenchanted with him, somehow clung on to his job and kept up his boozy regime.

On the evening of Friday 10 December he and Keidrych Rhys were at the bar of the Wheatsheaf. As one of them handed a fresh Guinness to Mrs Stewart, who was poring over her crossword, Keidrych became aware of a dark-haired, high-cheekboned Major in the New Zealand army peering at Julian, outraged perhaps by his longish hair and flashy yellow waistcoat. The stranger was sitting with another Kiwi: a small, stockily built woman a few years older than him. They were positioned at the table next to Mrs Stewart. Glass in hand, Keidrych stared at the Major. In his soft Welsh accent, a seldom-heard tinge of antagonism audible, he invited the Major "to agree what a dirty game of rugger the All Blacks played."[41] He went on to recall "a notable, if exceptional, defeat by Wales at Cardiff [...] with provocative satisfaction." The Kiwi's mild retort only served to rile Keidrych, whose attitude became even more threatening.

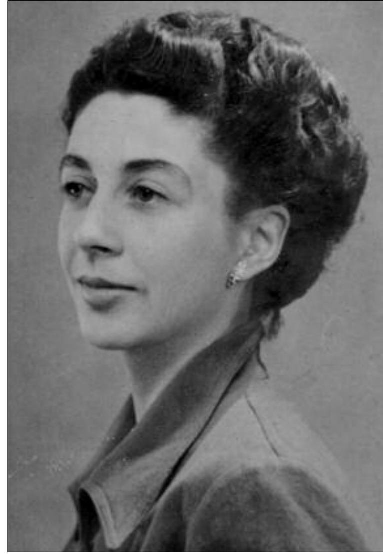
Indifferent to either sport or nationalism, Julian initially remained aloof from the burgeoning argument which showed signs of escalating into a bar room brawl. For all his occasional verbal aggression, his love of violent stories and his sense of himself as someone formidable, someone not to be trifled with, he was terrified of violence, invariably beating a surreptitious retreat whenever a fight started. "His pen was," as Mac

put it, "always mightier than his sword",[42] yet that didn't deter him from goading the Kiwi. Noticing that the Major had an old edition of *Penguin New Writing* with him, Julian said, "But look. He can read."

Far from initiating the anticipated fracas, his comments gave the Kiwi a chance to defuse the situation by saying, "It's got a short story of yours in it."

"You know my name?" Julian replied. Pacified a shade, but still circumspect, he said, "Perhaps you'll tell us your name."

The butt of their comments turned out to be the up-and-coming short story writer, poet, and essayist Dan Davin, who had lived in London and knocked around Fitzrovia before the war. On discovering Dan's name, Julian said, "Didn't you write a story, *Under the Bridge*, in *New Writing* Number 13?"



Monica Foster, late 1940s.(© Sheila Cutforth)

Dan admitted that he had.

"Why didn't you tell us you were a writer?" Julian demanded. "We thought you were an officer. Have a drink."

So began his friendship with Dan and his wife Winnie, who were snatching a few days together before Dan's next posting to an unknown destination.

As the year approached its conclusion Julian should have been preparing to celebrate the release of his first book. But Wren Howard had fallen several months behind schedule. Now he'd decided to print only Julian's army stories. Borrowing the title of the military memoir conceived earlier in the war, Julian wanted to call the book *They Can't Give You A Baby*. The staff at Jonathan Cape, however, vetoed the title because they feared that booksellers would think customers were asking for contraceptives. On a provisional basis, the collection was, instead, given what Julian regarded as a dreary title – *Are You Happy In Your Work.*

Even though Wren Howard had infuriated Julian by shunting back the book's publication date until early July, his writing was in wider circulation than at any previous juncture. In the space of only a month, four different publications carried work by him. The most well-established of these was *The Strand Magazine*, recently relaunched in the voguish pocket format. With the publication of *It Won't Be Long Now* (later retitled *Through the Usual Channels*), his story about his protracted struggle to obtain a divorce while still in the army, Julian joined a roster of big name authors such as C.S. Forrester and Agatha Christie. He also had another army story featured in *Lilliput* and two more

included in the opening issue of *The First Eighteen*, co-edited by "the intriguing and attractive Patricia Joan Bruce",[43] its contents selected from work "by men who are serving – or who have served – in the Forces during the present war."[44] And, furthermore, two of his sketches made it into *Christmas Pie*, the latest of a series of charity fundraising magazines published by Hutchinson and edited by Leonard Russell, who modelled them on *Lilliput* — minus the pin-ups.

Russell's playful foreword to the magazine parodied the casual, apparently effortless style of Julian's army stories and, at the same time, poked gentle fun at the way he contrived to smuggle references to Eugen Weidmann into the most unlikely conversations. "Really this style of writing is ridiculously easy," Russell declared. "No wonder Maclaren-Ross writes six stories a day. (Interruption by J. Maclaren-Ross: I write four-and-a-half stories a day, not six. To paraphrase Weidmann, [...] let us at least have accuracy on the part of the editor.)"[45]

Yet Russell remained a staunch admirer of Julian's work, his enthusiasm affirmed by his acceptance of two more stories for inclusion in *Spring Pie*, the next edition of the magazine. Of these, one was set in the army, the other in the civilian world, reflecting Julian's altered circumstances and yielding his earliest published writing about the Soho scene within which he'd already become such a noted personality.