



# The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, I.A. Richards, Robert Graves, and Laura Riding

By Donald J. Childs

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Amid competing claims about who first developed the theories and practices that became known as New Criticism - the critical method that rose alongside Modernism - literary historians have generally given the lion's share of credit to William Empson and I.A. Richards. In *The Birth of New Criticism* Donald Childs challenges this consensus and provides a new and authoritative narrative of the movement's origins. At the centre stand Robert Graves and Laura Riding, two poet-critics who have been written out of the history of New Criticism. Childs brings to light the long-forgotten early criticism of Graves to detail the ways in which his interpretive methods and ideas evolved into the practice of "close reading," demonstrating that Graves played such a fundamental part in forming both Empson's and Richards's critical thinking that the story of twentieth-century literary criticism must be re-evaluated and re-told. Childs also examines the important influence that Riding's work had on Graves, Empson, and Richards, establishing the importance of this long-neglected thinker and critic. A provocative and cogently argued work, *The Birth of New Criticism* is both an important intellectual history of the movement and a sharply observed account of the cultural politics of its beginnings and legacy.

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### **Review**

“This is a first-rate study of a contentious period in twentieth-century English literary history, about which a great number of misconceptions, myths, and ideologically driven errors have accumulated for almost a century. Childs sets the record straight here in ways that make this one of the most original contributions to the scholarship of this period. Intellectually adventurous, thorough, well-researched, and lucidly written in lively, energetic prose, it is an excellent book that will change the way we tell the story of New Criticism in the twentieth century.” John Xiros Cooper, Department of English, University of British Columbia

### **About the Author**

Donald J. Childs is a professor of English literature at the University of Ottawa. He is the author of T.S. Eliot: Mystic, Son and Lover.

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