

## **English Soldier-Poets of the First World War With Special Reference to Wilfred Owen**

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**Abstract**

The Military Service Act of 1916 of the United Kingdom required every unmarried man of military age to enlist at once or attest at once under the Group System and if he does neither, a third course awaits him; he will be deemed to have enlisted under the Military Service Act. The present work talks about the writings of the young English soldier-poets who fought during the First World War and who expressed what they saw and felt on the Western Front. And to see their feelings and sentiment the paper discusses some of the major poets of First World War: Rupert Brooke, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen who left great influence on younger poets of his age and the succeeding poets of the Second World War looked upon him for an inspiration as he had expressed the sense of indignation and pity of war so fully in his works.

**Keywords:** Poets, First World War, Self-dedication, homesick regrets, Rupert Brooke, Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen.

**Introduction**

War is terrible. Yet every male child is crazy after military uniform, the gun and the gun fire. And every male child wants to be a soldier when he grows up. But, in reality, a soldier's life is not as exciting as it appears to be. The present work deals with the writing of the young English soldier poets who fought during the First World War and who expressed what they saw and felt on the Western Front. The ordinary educated Englishmen went to war along with the professional soldiers but, unlike the professional soldiers who were steeled by the unquestioning spirit of discipline and obedience, they became acutely sensitive and vulnerable to the brutality of war. Moreover, they were inclined to express their thoughts and feelings in verse. During the war years, that is, between 1914 and 1918, hundreds of war poets saw their work in print.

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John Lehmann (1982) has observed “Napoleonic war was fought by professional armies as was the Crimean War. The first major modern war in which educated civilians were involved was the American Civil War, but no Englishmen were involved, or at any rate no articulate Englishmen.” (p.7)

It was the first war in which ordinary educated English civilians took part either by voluntary enlistment or later conscription.

We may also note the pre-war mood: poets often advocate the heroic vision of a struggle for the right of noble sacrifice for the ideal of patriotism and country. But right from the start of the war, the mood had changed, and the war poets wrote what they saw and felt. Martin Stephen (1988) says about the war poets: “For many people the anguish and the truth about the First War are forever symbolised by the work of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and other famous ‘trench-poets’. So great is the association that, in Britain at least, the term, ‘war poets’ can only mean the poets of the Great War.” (p. 6)

John Lehmann (1982) pointed out about this war: “It became a war of attrition, in which huge offensive were planned, again and again, and failed, at a shattering cost in material and lives. The carnage and suffering were ceaseless and to those taking part with rifle and bomb, increasingly pointless and full of horror.” (p. 9)

The pre-war period saw a literary movement known as “Georgian Poetry” a term which was coined and edited by Edward Marsh then secretary to Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty. To be more precise, Georgian years were from 1911 to 1922 when a series of anthologies were published during the reign of King George V. Edward Marsh (p. 67) introduced the Georgian Poetry with the remarks that “English poetry is now once again putting on a new strength and beauty... We are at the beginning of another ‘Georgian period’ which may take rank in due time with the several great poetic ages of the past.” The authors represented of this period are Abercrombie, Bottomley, Brooke, Chesterton, Davies, De la Mere, Drinkwater, Flecker, Gibbson, D.H. Lawrence, Monro, Sturge Moore, Ronald Ross, E.B. Sargant, Stephens and R.C. Trevelyan.

Most Georgians found to their cost that they were becoming inflexible. War poetry and pastoral poetry alike were too narrow for the poets, ways of excluding too much of human experience. Robert Graves has always been an explorer. He found another way out. He dismissed the output of a whole decade as youthful enthusiasm and removed virtually all his early work, the Georgian and the military together, from his reprinted collections. As the Great War started, the Georgians Poetry which mainly dwelt on the themes of peace and security was left out for the shocking conditions of trench warfare on the Western Front by a negative

psychological reaction. If the epic glorified primitive combat as a heroic occupation and a test of individual worth, and the notion of dying in the battlefield as the greatest sacrifice a man could make for his country, the First World War made it clear that a man could no longer depend on his personal courage or strength for victory or even survival; mechanization, the increased size of armies, the intensification of operations, and the scientific efficiency of long-distance weapons destroyed the elements of human individuality: courage, hope, enterprise, and a sense of heroic possibilities in moral and physical conflict. (John H. Johnston, 1964, p.10)

Robert Graves (1988) writes about the very type of poetry which the First World War poets dwell on the themes of war: “War poetry at first had resolute, self-dedicatory tone but, as the war settled down to a trench deadlock, self-dedication become qualified by homesick regrets for the lovely English country side, away from all the mind, blood and desolation - the theme of mud, blood and desolation being more realistically treated.” (p.9)

The modern soldier is portrayed as a passive and often degraded victim of circumstances. Siegfried Sassoon’s infantry men, for example, succumb to hysteria (“Lamentations”); take their own lives (“Suicide in the Trenches”) or perish in an ill-conceived attack (“The General”). In “Third Ypes”, Edmund Blunden’s soldiers die ignominiously or, stunned and helpless, crouch amid the ruins of a shell-blasted pill box. The weapons of modern warfare add new terrors to death mutilation, dismemberment, the agony of poison gas (Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”). In terms of that reverse all idealistic conceptions of death in warfare, Isaac Rosenberg’s “Death Man’s Dump” depicts the pitiable degradation of the slain... (John H. Johnston, 1964, pp.10-11)

Amid such conditions a mood of bitter disillusionment was inevitable; this attitude, of course, provided the poetry of World War I with its major themes and materials. The soldier-poet, indeed, was seldom inclined to take such liberties; he felt it his special role - even his obligation - to see and portray the war as a starkly contemporaneous event. His material was the reality of the war as personal experience revealed it to him and the unadorned expression or communication of that reality was his urgent concern.

The reactions of different poets of the world war vary ranging from the romantic idealism of Rupert Brooke through the pathos of Owen to a nightmare of horror, bitter disillusionment, and indignation of Siegfried Sassoon. The English poetry of the First World War can be divided into two phases: the early phase, from the outbreak of war to about 1916, the time of the battle of the Somme and the later phase, from 1916 to 1918 and the Armistice. The two phases were very different in mood. Poets of the first phase were Julian Grenfell, Rupert Brooke, and Robert Nichols.

## **Rupert Brooke**

Rupert Brooke, the romantic figure, was born of a Rugby housemaster on 3 August 1887. He attended his father's school in 1901, where he had a reputation as both a scholar and an athlete. From Rugby, Brooke went to Ming's College, Cambridge where, John H. Johnston has pointed "he, was regarded as one of the leading intellectuals of the day; he was absorbed into poetry, dramatics, and literary discussion" (ibid., p.25). Brooke's first volumes of the poems, *Poems* (1911) appeared in December. He had also been instrumental in launching with Marsh the series of Georgian Poetry which made a mark on the times. Brooke by this time had an unhappy love affair, and a serious nervous breakdown as a result of it. He travelled to Europe in 1912 in search of peace of mind and wrote his famous 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester in Germany'. He went to America and Canada, which he described in letters published in the West-minster Gazette.

Brooke returned to England in June 1914 on the very eve of the war and joined the Anson Battalion on September 27. Brooke's sonnets are "War Sonnets", "The Soldier", especially in the sense that they are vehicles for imperialist attitudes. Brooke wrote to Violet Asquith as he learned that he was being sent with Royal Naval Division to Gallipoli: "I've never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so persuasively happy; like a stream flowing entirely to one end". Jon Silkin (1972:67) wrote about the patriotic attitude of Brooke thus: "The tragic meaning possible here is of an unconscious adherence to public service and death, used to dissolve those personal problems with which he had been hacked"<sup>11</sup>. But "Brooke was perhaps not intelligent enough to have grasped the possible dimensions to learn from the experience, even when immersed in it." (ibid., p.68). I.A. Richards viewed Brooke's poetry has "no inside" and Vivian De Sola Pinto pointed out that "his mind remained to the end that of a clever public schoolboy." However, in spite of the criticism which came from the fellow-soldiers and fellow-poets for his sonnets, Churchill wrote a fulsome obituary in The Times when Brooke died in the Aegean, which accelerated the growth of the Rupert Brooke legend.

### **Edmund Blunden**

Edmund Blunden was born in 1896, Kent, and attended Christ's Hospital, London. In 1914 he gained the senior classics scholarship at Queen's College, Oxford and privately printed two pamphlets of verse: *Poems and Poems Translated from the French*. Edmund enlisted in 1914 as a temporary 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the 11<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment and crossed to France. In the valley of the Ancre and around Thiepval Wood, Blunden experienced some of the most violent fighting of the war. In November, however, his unit was moved north to the Ypres salient, where it remained for over a year. He was awarded the Military Cross for bravery and was transferred in 1918 to a training centre in England.

Edmund writes of nature and war. The most important characteristic qualities of Blunden's poetry are derived from the themes of traditions of eighteenth-century pastoral verse. He takes delight in simple observation, evocation of a wide range of rural scenes; sensitivity to the rhythms and harmonies of nature (John H. Johnston, 1964, p. 117). Significantly for

Blunden the tender rural memory and the experience of war are inalienable from each other. Although, Blunden writes about war, he does not transform nature and he maintains his sensitive relationship with nature. Blunden describes himself in the last sentence of *Undertones of War*: 'a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat'. Johnston in his penetrating study of Blunden draws a conclusion: "... there is no satire in Blunden's work" a remark which speaks volumes about Edmund Blunden.

### **Sassoon Siegfried**

Sassoon Siegfried born in 1886 came from a well-to-do family on his father's side but his father having left his wife when Siegfried was five, he was brought up by his mother. He was educated at Marlborough and Cambridge. In 1906 he privately published his poems and began to move in literary circles and by August 1914 he was acquainted with writers like Edmund Gosse and Eddied Marsh, Rupert Brooke and W.H. Davies. Soon he began to contribute to the Georgian anthologies. And soon he found himself restive and unhappy. He enlisted in the Yeomanry two days before the war broke out and was sent to France. His first wartime poems show his ingrained love of the countryside, his belief in England's cause and the sense of 'fighting for our freedom'.

But the war gave a severe jolt to Sassoon. The Battle of the Somme removed the last vestiges of patriotism, and he began to write poems, bitter, satirical, and as he had said himself deliberately written to disturb complacency. Sassoon wanted to show that war was a fact for which the politicians were responsible. Therefore, his poetry had the twin aims of showing the suffering of the war-victims and lashing out at the insensitive "brass hats" and the civilians who caused it. "They" embodied a vigorous attack on the ignorance, false optimism, and hypocrisy of the Anglican Church at home.

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause...'  
'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's Stone blind;  
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change'.

And the Bishop said:

'The ways of God are strange!'

Sassoon was trying hard to present the great division that grew between the fighting soldiers and the civilians which in fact, led to a greater loyalty and fraternity among the soldiers

themselves. During his period of convalescence at Craiglockhart, Sassoon remembers his soldier friends:

“In bitter safety I awoke, unfriended;  
And the dawn begins with slashing rain  
I think of the Battalion in the mind.  
When we are going out to them again?  
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?”  
(Sick – leave)

Sassoon becomes the most articulate spokesman for the mood of protest and rejection that animates the later poetry of the war. Sassoon’s aggressive realism constitute a second stage in the development of World War I poetry and the problems he confronted were the problems confronted by all the poets as they sought to communicate some of the catastrophic effects of the struggle. (ibid., p.78)

### **Isaac Rosenberg**

Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) was born on 25 November 1890 in Bristol whose parents emigrated from Russia for fear of the brutalities of the Czar. As a child he was sickly and until he was fourteen, he attended the elementary schools at Stepney and was then apprenticed as an engraver which he hated. In the line of Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg delineates the reality of trench life and the slaughter of the English soldiers in the war vividly with detached observation in the poems like, “Break of Day in the Trenches” and “Dead Man’s Dump”. Rosenberg observes that death could come swiftly with its sinister bite any moment in the battlefield as he could comprehend the song of the larks in the background:

Death could drop from the dark  
As easily as song –  
But song only dropped,  
Like a blind man’s dreams on the sand  
By dangerous tides,  
Like a girl’s dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,  
Or her kisses where a serpent hides.  
(Returning, We Hear Larks)

### **Owen as a War Poet**

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born at Oswestry on 18 March 1893 and matriculated from London University, went to France in 1913 and became a teacher of English at the Berlitz School in Bordeaux. He returned to England in 1915 and enlisted in the Artist’s Rifles and was gazetted to the Manchester Regiment in June 1916 and sailed for France in December of the same year. After the Somme battles in 1917 he was invalided home and was sent to the



Craiglockhart War Hospital, where he met Siegfried Sassoon. He returned to his regiment in 1918 after being awarded the Military Cross for outstanding bravery and was killed in action a week before the Armistice while trying to get his men across the Sambre canal. We may note that England lost over 420,000 soldiers in the Somme offensive alone. Although a major poet of the First World War, Owen saw only five poems in print during his lifetime ‘Song of Songs’ in *The Hydra and the Bookman*, ‘The Next War’ in the *Hydra*; ‘Miners’, ‘Futility’, and ‘Hospital Barge’ in *The Nation*.

Owen’s second editor, Edmund Blunden writes: “He was, apart from Mr. Sassoon, the greatest of the English War poets”. Owen had begun writing poems at an early age of ten or eleven. In the beginning Keats and Tennyson were his models but it was his meeting with Sassoon, a man, seven years senior to him and already an established poet at Craiglockhart Hospital and the friendship which blossomed between the two made Owen a war-poet. By Sassoon’s manner he means the bitterly satirical tone of Sassoon’s poetry. Owen’s efforts of “Sassoon’s manner” may be grouped as follows:

S.I.W., Disabled, Dluce et Decorum est, the Dead-Beat, The parable of the Old and Young, The Chances, Mental Cases, A Terre, Inspection, and Asleep. We can also note the similarity between the lines of Owen’s poem ‘Mental Cases’ and that of Sassoon’s *Suicide in Trenches*:

“Memory fingers in their hair of murders  
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.”  
(Mental cases)

“You Smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you will never know.  
The hell where youth and laughter go.”  
(Suicide in Trenches)

Owen combined Keats’s apprehension of sound and vision to Sassoon’s horror of war, in ‘Spring Offensive’:

“Marvelling they stood, and watched the long grass wild  
By the May breeze, murmurous with wasp and midge,  
For though the summer oozed into their veins  
Like an injected drug for their bodies’ pains.  
.....  
.....  
Hours after hour they ponder the warm field.  
And the far valley behind, where the butter cup  
Had blessed with gold their slow boots  
Where even the little brambles would not yield,

But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing hands,  
They breathe like trees unstirred.”

The second and third lines show a resemblance to Keats’s “Ode to Autumn” but Owen uses the beautiful setting in a different vein, elaborating an ironic scene-setting for the horror and destruction of the soldiers.

Robert Graves in a letter to Owen in 1917 urged him “for God’s sake cheer up and write more optimistically”. In reply Owen sent one of his greatest poems, ‘Apologie Pro Poemate Meo’ in which his irony, his uncompromising realism and his compassionate fellow-feeling with the sufferings of the soldiers he led and amongst whom he lived in the midst of the fighting are expressed as counterpart to and transposition of the merriment that Graves appeared to be looking for. (John Lehmann, 1982, p. 60)

Owen came to see the real picture of war during his medical treatment at Craiglockhart Hospital and his sense of comradeship with his fellow soldiers and his anger was showered upon the indifference civilians who prolonged the war made him remarked in August 18 letter: I wish the Boche would pluck to come right in and make a clean sweep of the pleasure boats, and the promenades on the Spa, and all the stinking Leeds and Bradford War-profiteers now reading John Bull on Scarborough sands.” Owen, in his poem, ‘Insensibility’ attacks on the callousness of the politicians and civilians at home and cursed for their indifference and stupidity:

“But cursed are the dollards whom no canon stuns,  
That they should be as soldiers;  
Wretched are they, and mean  
With Dancity that never was simplicity.”

In ‘A Terre’, Owen who himself was awarded Military Cross expresses the uselessness of military honours or decorations which for him are nothing but a mockery:

“I have my medals? – Discs to make eyes close  
My glorious ribbons? – Ripped from my own back  
In scarlet shreds. (That’s for your poetry book)”

Unlike the traditional romantic poetry which was blind to the realities of the war and showed a false picture by glorifying war and death in the war for the sake the country, Owen was writing a new kind of poetry, like Sorley whose sympathy and admiration for the people of Germany and the country did not help him to hate the Germans. Hamilton Sorley (1895 - 1915) in his last sonnet writes:

“Victor and vanquished are a one in death:



Coward and brave: friend, foe.”

In a similar vein Owen brings about a compromise between the former enemies though in hell and restores the broken thread of universal brotherhood in ‘Strange Meeting’:

“I am the enemy you killed, my friend  
.....  
Yesterday, through me as you jabbed and killed  
I parried: but my hands were loathe and cold  
Let us sleep now ...”

In 1917 Owen’s religious ideals had undergone a drastic change and he came to learn that one of Christ’s important messages was ‘Passivity at any price’, and as the time rolled by, he realised a direct resemblance between the passive suffering of soldiers and that of Christ. He wrote to Osbert Sitwell in 1918: “for 14 hours yesterday I was at work - teaching Christ to lift his cross by numbers, and how to adjust his crown, and not imagine he thirst till after the last halt. I attended his supper to see that there were no complaints; and inspected his feet that they should be worthy of the nails. I see to it that he is dumb and stands at attention before his accusers. With a piece of silver, I buy him every day, and with maps I make him familiar with the topography of Golgotha”.

But the “Christ-soldier”, whose sufferings are utterly meaningless, compared to Christ whose suffering and death redeemed mankind. Owen said about the Christ-soldier:

“And though your hands be Pale,  
Paler are all which trail  
Your cross through frame and hail:  
Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.”

C. Day Lewis (1963) writes: “... it is Owen, I believe, whose poetry came home deepest to my generation, so that we could never think again of war as anything but a vile, if necessary, evil.” (pp. 11 -12) He further gives his opinion about Owen: “His (Owen’s) war poems...seem to me certainly the finest written by any English poet of the First World War and probably the greatest poems about war in our literature ... Looking once again at his poetry, thirty-five years after I first read it, I realize how much it has become part of my life and thinking so much so that I could hardly attempt dispassionate criticism of it. Now, as then, I find Owen’s War poetry most remarkable for its range of feeling and for the striking power of individual lines. “He’s lost his colour very far from here” would stand out even in a play by Shakespeare or Webster: “Was it for this clay grew tall?” has a Sophoclean magnificent and simplicity. Ranging from the visionary heights of Strange Meeting or The Show to the brutal, close-up realism of Mental Cases or the Dead-Beat, from the acrid indignation of such poems as ‘Dulce Et Dolorum Est’ to the unsentimental pity of ‘Futility’ or ‘Conscious’ and from the lyricism of ‘The Send-off’

to the nervous dramatic energy we find in Spring Offensive, the war poems reveal Owen as a poet superbly equipped in technique and temperament alike.” (ibid., p. 28)

### Conclusion

Owen brought innovative poetic style in his poems with the introduction of half-rhyme and consonant rhyme (escape/scooped, grained/groaned, snow-dazed/sun-dozed) to bring out his meaning. Owen also left great influence on younger poets of his age like Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis MacNiece, C. Day Lewis and others so much so that they tried to copy his style. However, none could do so as he had composed some poems in his formative period under the spell of Keats. And Owen had expressed the sense of indignation and pity so fully in his works that the succeeding poets of the Second World War like Keith Douglas looked upon him for an inspiration. In fact, when the Second World War broke out, “the modern poet had no illusions about it, thanks to the poets of the First World War.” (A. Banerjee, 1976, p.8)

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