

WAR POETRY REVIEW

2017 – 2018

The War Poetry Review is the journal of the War Poets Association

Published in Great Britain in 2017 by the War Poets Association, Narrow Quay House, Narrow Quay, Bristol, England, BS1 4QA

www.warpoets.org

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ISSN 1753-9463

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Design and typeset by Dare-Gale Press

Printed in England by Imprint Digital

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**Edited by
Merryn Williams**

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Editorial | 7 |
| Alan Franks, 'The Manor' | 8 |
| Interview with Alan Franks | 10 |
| Merryn Williams, 'Charles Causley, War Poet' | 13 |
| Alison Brackenbury, 'Three Poems from Steep' | 22 |
| Philip Lyons, 'On Top of the World' | 23 |
| Lyn Moir, 'Centenary Soldiers' | 24 |
| Nicholas Murray, 'How "Anti-War" were the War Poets?' | 25 |
| <i>Reviews:</i> | |
| Phil Carradice: <i>Ivor Gurney, Poet of the Trenches and the Gloucestershire Countryside</i> | 38 |
| Morgan Merrington: <i>Keith Douglas: Genius Overlooked</i> | 42 |
| John Pikoulis: <i>Alun, Gweno and Freda</i> | 45 |
| Rod Madocks: <i>The Rising Flame: Remembering Sidney Keyes</i> | 50 |
| Anne Powell: <i>Gardens behind the Lines 1914-1918: Gardens Found and Made on the Western and Eastern Fronts</i> | 53 |
| Deborah Fisher: <i>Siegfried Sassoon at the Grave of Henry Vaughan</i> | 55 |
| Chris Dickon: <i>A Rendezvous with Death: Alan Seeger in Poetry, at War</i> | 56 |

EDITORIAL

There have been, or soon will be, many events to mark the centenary of the First World War, 1914-18. In this year we particularly remember 1917, which included the battles of Arras and Passchendaele and the deaths of three poets, Edward Thomas, Francis Ledwidge and Hedd Wyn (an Englishman, an Irishman and a Welshman, the last two killed on the same day, 31st July). That year also saw, on 24th August, the birth of Charles Causley. He belonged to that generation of men whose fathers had fought in the first war and who themselves fought in the second. He was one of the very greatest English poets, and it's appropriate to remember him in the year in which he would have turned one hundred.

We remember, too, the three British poets lost in 1939-45 – Keith Douglas, Alun Lewis and Sidney Keyes. As the late and much-missed Jon Stallworthy reminded us, it wasn't only the earlier war which produced great work, and it's good that these poets are finally getting the attention they deserve.

The War Poets Association exists to promote interest in poets of all times and all nations whose subject is conflict. In this country, they go back at least as far as Henry Vaughan, who is usually thought of as a religious and metaphysical poet but who must have been affected by his service in the English Civil War. There are living poets, too, who have not experienced war in their own flesh but who are compelled, as we all are, to respond to it, and it is a pleasure to include distinguished work by Alan Franks, Alison Brackenbury, Philip Lyons and Lyn Moir.

Merryn Williams

THE MANOR by Alan Franks

It's said the old manor was tinder-dry that summer,
With heat holding the corners of the air
So hard above the overgrown parterre
And tangled banks, it skewed the view with simmering.
Through the long, prone afternoons the clicking
Of expanding pans and pails was heard.
The silence, through exhaustion, of the birds
Amplified the timbers' death-watch ticking.

Down the long perspectives of the passages
High-born souls nursed half-remembered grievances,
Strained to scan the lie of old allegiances
Forged in the fierce madness of intermarriage.
By the ha-ha, past the kitchen garden,
A single pistol shot, the day destroyed.
Fired by some strange disaffected boy
Through the heart of the unsuspecting warden.

The echo cracked the ceiling of the sky,
Which set a-shiver the chambered air indoors
And sent a draught down to the service corridors
Where restless household staff were standing by.
The Dowager, having dreamed herself to royalty,
Was authorising death-writs by the dozen,
Signing off some dim and distant cousins
Whose in-laws allegedly faltered in their loyalty.

Students of the subsequent disaster –
Themselves at odds through public vanity –
Unite in this belief; a vast insanity
Must have underlain such wanton slaughter.

Some pinned the blame on *homo aristocratus*,
That classy villain known for his receding
Chin worn down by centuries of inbreeding
To make him look deceptively innocuous.

This much is known; the building blazed and blazed
Until the walls were air and air was flame
And only the foundation shapes remained
As groundplan templates when successors raised
Their fresh construction. In the briefly binding
Calm that came, the estate's refurbished sky
Grew great with chastened migrant birds so high
You couldn't see them dropping their fresh kindling.

'The Manor' won the Wilfred Owen Poetry Competition in 2014

INTERVIEW WITH ALAN FRANKS by Jan Woolf

JW: 'The Manor' is a marvellous poem, containing a whole world; its oppressive opening atmosphere shattered by that 'single shot'. I wondered if that was analogous with the infamous assassination in Europe – and then of course the world?

AF: Yes, the single shot was definitely meant to have come from the starting pistol of the conflict, that is, the assassination of the Archduke in Sarajevo. With the great benefit of hindsight – now a century's worth – all the pieces were in place, in Europe and beyond, for a dreadful sequence of military confrontations. If you look at the causes, which are still a matter of disagreement among historians, you do run straight into that powerful combination of rivalrous nations and old alliances. Because of what happened next, there's no getting round it. There's no doubt that when I tried to write a poem about it – this poem – I was completely out of my depth in the historical analyses. So I did what, I guess, a lot of writers do, and I devolved the whole thing to an extended metaphor – a conceit in which a great but moribund estate is riddled with domestic tension and ripe for a catastrophic blaze. Then, as you do, I tried to pursue that line of narrative and see what happened. I wouldn't claim for a moment that the analogy doubles as some explanation. What it did do, while I was trying to write the thing, was give me the basis of a structure, that's all. I wasn't trying to recreate a war, just do the much smaller thing of writing a poem about an entrenched order poised for conflagration.

JW: Wilfred Owen brought insight, testimony and a terrible knowledge to us though his poetry – some of it as vivid as we can bear. Do you think that the job of the poet is to show us just so much before

we switch off in emotional defence?

AF: I suppose the job of the poet is to come up with poems. I'm not sure that his or her function is to show us things that become too much to bear, although it's undeniable that some of the best poetic writing comes from circumstances or people in extremis. In that respect it's probably comparable to music, moving towards a realm that is actually beyond words. You're absolutely right in saying that Owen made it as vivid as we can bear, and yet even that pitch of awfulness fell short of the actual experience of those young men, German as well as English. It seems very clear to me that what was elevating Owen's art to something really sublime was – though this might sound mundane – journalism. In other words, he had the technique, the intellect, the word-music, and had been working towards poetic excellence for half of his twenty-five years. But then he walks into an ordeal which is, both figuratively and physically, front-line. It's a kind of gift; a grim one to be sure, but, as an offering of material, it's bountiful. Clive James has been saying similar things about the process of dying.

JW: What do you owe Owen in your own development, not just as a poet but a humanitarian? (if you can forgive such a vague term).

AF: What do I owe Owen? Same as the rest of us, I'd say; gratitude for his clarity and craft under fire. He was much in my life as a teenager. My father had been a paratrooper in the Second War and gave me a collection of Owen's poems as a kind of answer to the sort of questions I'd started asking about this country and the making of war. He (my father) was both proud and embarrassed, rather as I think Owen was.

JW: A more general question about the WW1 centenary. We at No Glory have been working very hard on the cultural front, as this is a most effective way of countering the style of this centenary which would have us 'celebrate a victory that defended democracy'. Something we are very keen on is that we learn the lessons of the time and apply this to warmongering today. Could you comment on how artists can address this?

AF: Yes, I think scepticism is a proper response to the defence-of-democracy claim. In the sense that our apparent victory in the First War kept intact a society which makes its laws through the Parliamentary process, then yes, OK. But doesn't this have the whiff of post-hoc justification? Isn't it closer to the mark to say that there were huge nationalistic surges running through Europe – not least in Britain – which were bound up with the cycles of industrial advance and imperial ambition? You ask a very timely question about lesson-learning. One of the related phenomena that worries me a little is the nature of our memorialising. I won't say we're guilty of necromancy, and yet we keep on finding some beauty of thought, some divinely tear-producing ache in the contemplation of those eternal ranks of dead young men. Youth, death, sacrifice, remember, nation, glory, fallen – the tangled dance of these words has a seduction that is live and awesome. In such a context it is easy for a poet like Owen to be falsely recalled, to be pressed into our battalions of barbed nostalgia. I don't think this would be a proper fate for him. Although his poetic voice may have been a world away from that of his contemporary Hilaire Belloc, Owen's verse was nothing if not cautionary.

CHARLES CAUSLEY: WAR POET?

Charles Causley (1917-2003) belonged to what is sometimes called 'our greatest generation'; he grew up in the shadow of the First World War, which he believed had destroyed his father, and the Second World War absorbed six years of his life. He is not usually thought of as a war poet. He was many other things, including a Cornish poet and a poet for children, but his early years were dominated by these two great wars and some of his finest poems are meditations on his youth, the time before he was born, and lost lives. He spent much of his twenties (1940-46) in the Navy, and, as Malcolm Wright argues, 'in effect, the war gave us a major poet Today, only some Causley scholars would ever describe him primarily as a war poet, but that he certainly was in his early writing days, and it was the war poems that eventually drew the attention of publishers'¹.

His father, also Charles, had volunteered in 1914 and become a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps, but he was invalided out in 1919 because he had developed tuberculosis after suffering a phosgene gas attack. He is commemorated on the war memorial at Trusham, as described in the poem of that name, but is not officially recorded as a casualty because he did not die until 1924. His son remembered him only as an invalid with a terrible cough and his family had no doubt that the war had ruined his lungs:

'It was the First War brought your father down',
My aunts would say. 'Nobody in our clan
Fell foul of that t.b.'

(*'To my Father'*).

1 Wright, Malcolm, *Charles Causley: A Universal Poet* (2013) p.13

In later life he would write some of his greatest poems about the father who had disappeared when he was seven. His parents had got married in 1915, the 'year of the *Lusitania*; gas/ Used at the Front; Arras and Ypres/ More than place-names' ('A Wedding Portrait') and he 'brought home/ The war stowed in his body's luggage' ('Dora'). But no one is born a poet, and as a boy Charles Causley had only vague ideas of what had been happening around the time of his birth:

One Armistice I wept through the Two Minutes
Because my dad was killed in France (not true).
(*'My Enemy'*).

He also wrote in 'Dick Lander' about his memories of a man who had been 'shell-shopped'; children taunt him with, 'What did you do/ In the Great War?' Both these poems were published in the 1980s, some sixty years after the events they describe.

Nothing in his early life suggested that he would become a famous poet. He grew up a long way from literary London, in a one-parent working-class family, and left school at fifteen to get a job as a builder's clerk. But he always read voraciously. As an intelligent teenager in the 1930s, discovering the poetry of the previous generation, he felt that another war 'would inevitably engulf me and my contemporaries':

None of the writers pretended that the war wasn't likely to happen. They communicated a marvellous sense of imaginative reality, and helped to alleviate the oppression of spending one's teens under the long shadows of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and the Spanish Civil War. By this time, too, I had read most of the writers of the First World War: Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Edmund Blunden, Edward Thomas, Siegfried Sassoon. On my first holiday in London, I bought a second-hand copy of Siegfried

Sassoon's war poems in a second-hand bookshop in the Charing Cross Road. His were the first poems I learnt by heart because I wanted to carry them round with me all the time, wherever I was.

One of the first poems he memorised was Sassoon's 'The General' (much later he and Sassoon would become good friends). 'The words: clear, hard as stones, spoke clearly and seemed to crystallise my confused feelings about poetry; to point a way'².

His own poetry, which he began to write a few years after he had been 'engulfed', as he foresaw, in another war, is crystal clear. He tells us that he had 'a strong disinclination towards army life, particularly in wartime'; he remembered what the military had done to his father and was repelled by the 'absurd, unbelievable pantomime' of troops being exercised near a barracks in Plymouth – 'the stiff, mechanical ritual - like some stilted temple dance before an unseen war-god, of rifle-drill'³. So in 1939, forced to choose between services, he opted for the Navy, although he was quite nervous of the sea. Rightly or wrongly, he felt that older people were annoyed to see him still at home when other young men were in uniform. Over the next six years he worked as a coder, mainly in Gibraltar, and travelled the world with his ship, seeing some exotic places which yielded a hoard of glittering images, and losing some friends. He does not seem to have been involved in any actual fighting. Forty years later he felt able to speak frankly:

I disliked life in the Royal Navy, and my sole ambition was, if possible, to emerge in one piece. I spent almost six years in its salt and hairy grasp, and it was an experience I could well have done without. There were, of course, certain rewards But there are

2 Summerfield, Geoffrey (ed.), *Seven Modern Poets* (1974) pp.21-22
3 Causley, Charles, *Hands to Dance and Skylark* (1979) p.167

two kinds of men and women in the world: those who enjoy and seem to thrive on a life in the armed services, and those who do not. It didn't take me long to discover that I was a born member of the latter, and, I suspect, much larger group⁴.

And the rewards? 'The Navy certainly gave me my first subjects: separation, loss, death in alien places, extraordinary characters, a perpetual sense of unease about how things might end'⁵. Afterwards, he took a teacher training course aimed at ex-servicemen and would spend his working life as a teacher in his birthplace, Launceston. The war had, at least, immensely widened his horizons; the Navy had been 'my Eton, Harrow, Oxford and Cambridge'⁶.

Some of his very early published poems, 'Convoy', 'Song of the Dying Gunner AA1' and 'Rattler Morgan' (the nickname of a close friend) are about death at sea. A drowned sailor stares through 'green freezing sea-glass' at the northern lights. A young man bleeding to death speaks a last message to his mother. Sunken ships are covered with seaweed and display 'no flags'. These were all collected, along with other poems about life on board, in the pamphlet *Farewell Aggie Weston* (1951).

This war poetry is, on the whole, not about heroes. A single poem which celebrates the courage of those who fought is 'Death of an Aircraft', based on 'an incident of the Cretan campaign, 1941'. But it ends when a young Greek partisan sacrifices himself rather than bring down punishment on his village. Much more often, Causley writes about the victims. He was haunted by the death of a young man who had enlisted at the same time as himself and been lost at sea; it reminded him irresistibly of the

4 Ibid, p. 164

5 Summerfield, p.23

6 *Skylark*, p. 187

biblical text, 'one shall be taken, and the other left'. 'Since 1946, certainly, life has seemed a survivor's leave, coloured always with guilt at the thought of time squandered and misused'⁷, he wrote, and *Survivor's Leave* is the title of his second collection, published in 1953.

'At the British War Cemetery, Bayeux', is about survivor's guilt, and seems to me a much better poem than Binyon's often-quoted 'For the Fallen'. The poet walks among five thousand graves and asks the silent dead what he can do for them 'before I weep and walk away'. Their answer has to be:

All we ask

Is the one gift you cannot give.

One poem from the early 1950s which regularly appears in anthologies of Second World War poetry, along with 'Song of the Dying Gunner', is 'Recruiting Drive':

Under the willow the willow

I heard the butcher-bird sing,

Come out you fine young fellow

From under your mother's wing

Your pillow the nine bright shiners

Your bed the spilling sand,

But the terrible toy of my lily-white boy

Is the gun in his innocent hand.

Strip away the traditional images of stars and willows and you will find that this boy is going to be killed by another boy, who has been told that he is a barbarian. They are both victims, like the adolescent in Wilfred Owen's 'Arms and the Boy'. Causley nourished a deep distaste for recruiting officers of all nationalities who had put his generation in the firing line. This is expressed in another poem from the 1953 collection, 'Soldiers' Chorus'.

'The Song of Samuel Sweet' (also in *Survivor's Leave*) is based on an incident after the Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685,

7 Ibid, p. 190

the last time armed men fought one another on English soil. An innocent young west countryman minding his own business on his father's farm is bullied by the King's soldiers who tell him, 'If a rebel thou art hiding/ We'll hang both him and thee'. But after they have gone he discovers that a rebel is indeed hiding in his hayloft and is mortally wounded:

I was not meant for a soldier,
I do not want to die,
But I must take a journey
Across the silver sky.

All that Samuel does is fetch the dying man a cup of water, but the soldiers find out and decide to kill him anyway. He is given the chance to run away from the mounted men, but of course they catch him. 'I was not made for a hero, /I was made to run', he says, but, centuries later, the poet sees him 'run for ever/In the alleys of the air'.

War sweeps up those who want to fight and those who don't, and whichever war he is writing about, Causley is sceptical. The famous poem 'Timothy Winters' is about a child who lives in Suez Street, at the heart of a crumbling empire which doesn't look after its young. It was first published in the collection *Union Street* (1957), and the hint at the 1956 Suez crisis is probably not a coincidence. The mysterious late poem 'Red' may be relevant too. It appears to be about a man he knew very well during the war years, who kept his little group together, but who, twenty years later, for no obvious reason, took his own life.

Once his own war experience had been absorbed, Causley would write some of his greatest poems about the war he didn't remember, which cast a permanent shadow over his parents' lives. He first approached his father's war in the 'Ballad of Jack Cornwell', published in *Underneath the Water* (1968). John Travers Cornwell, a boy aged sixteen and five

months, became famous, posthumously, as the youngest ever naval VC. The legend is that he was fatally wounded at the Battle of Jutland but 'remained standing alone at his post, quietly awaiting orders, with the gun's crew lying dead and wounded about him, until the end of the action'. Yet could he have remained standing, one wonders, when he was fatally wounded? Perhaps he was unaware that he was bleeding to death; perhaps he simply died of shock. Whatever the reason, he was not identified as a hero straight away but was buried in a common grave. Shortly afterwards, though, he was mentioned in dispatches and 'immediately extolled by publicists, journalists and public figures as a model of obedience, selflessness, and fidelity for the young'. The schoolboy Charles Causley would have known all about him and his story was still being told in the 1950s, when Causley was a teacher, as an inspiring example to children. This poem is spoken in the voice of the dead teenager.

Jack Cornwell had been dug up after his first funeral and reburied with great pomp, 'partly as an exercise in patriotic propaganda'⁸. The second funeral is arranged by the 'gods of war' who cynically exploit his death, while he is a silent observer. He knows that he is dead, as are his 'freezing comrades', and has no control over what is done with his corpse or his memory:

In the Admiralty heaven
Lurked the gods of war,
Waiting for young Jack Cornwell
As they had once before.

'They' pin a medal on his chest, fire a salute over his remains and put him underground again. The boy has been wronged twice, first by being killed and then by having his name used to lure others to their doom:

⁸ Richard Davenport-Hines, 'John Travers Cornwell', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

The great Sir Edward Carson,
First Lord of the Admiralty,
Asked men and women who grumbled
If ever they heard of me.
It was the second year of the war:
Thiepval, the Somme, Verdun.
The people were encouraged,
And the Great War went on.

Words ‘clear, hard as stones’, indeed. ‘All poetry is magic’, Causley wrote. ‘It is a spell against insensitivity, failure of imagination, ignorance and barbarism’⁹.

The alternative to the military machine is the world of mothers, although they cannot do very much to protect their husbands and sons. ‘Jack Cornwell’, like the dying gunner, tries to speak to his mother from a great distance. The boy in ‘Recruiting Drive’ is removed from under his mother’s wing. More ambiguous is the woman in ‘Mother, get up, unbar the door’, dated around 1960, in which a ghost returns from Alamein to find his wife beside another man. Causley was very close to his own mother Laura, who had been widowed in her thirties and belonged to a generation of women who had had to bring up their children alone. She had lost her husband and her brother, indirectly, to the First World War, and no doubt endured agonies while he was away in the Second. After she was disabled by a stroke in 1966 he spent a great deal of time listening to her memories of her early life, and these memories inspired some extraordinary poems about his childhood and the time before his birth.

‘A Wedding Portrait’, first collected in 1975, describes the photograph of his father and mother, married in 1915 with his father in uniform, which confronts him silently every day. It reminds him that the Great War, as it was then called, was the cauldron from which he had sprung.

9 Charles Causley, Introduction to *The Puffin Book of Magic Verse* (1974)

His dead parents reappear in his masterpiece, ‘Eden Rock’. The older Charles Causley, killed by the effects of German gas, would walk into his dreams decades later, ‘possessed by fearful coughing’. ‘At seven, this was the last I saw of him’ (‘To my Father’), and, seventy years on, he knows he can never catch him up. He wrote memorably, too, in ‘Uncle Stan’, about his mother’s beloved younger brother who ‘died when I was in my pram’, and after whom he was named. Stanley Bartlett, who had emigrated to Canada (the last time Laura saw him was for a few minutes before the London train whirled him off), died aged twenty-seven at the very end of the war, on 23rd October 1918. He had evidently been in no hurry to join up and apparently died of pneumonia – ‘a Canadian winter got him first’. This time it is a sister’s love which cannot save a doomed man.

Causley’s finest war poems, then, were written a few years after the Second World War and decades after the First. ‘From childhood’, he wrote, ‘... it had been made perfectly clear to me that war was something more than the exciting fiction one read about in books or saw on films’¹⁰, and although he surely never doubted that he had served on the right side, he said as an old man that ‘war is the very worst thing that can happen to mankind’¹¹. All his instincts were anti-military and pacific. His poetry is not concerned with victories, but about the effects of war on ordinary people, particularly women, and on very young men.

Merryn Williams

10 *Skylark*, p. 165

11 Green, Laurence, *All Cornwall Thunders at my Door: a Biography of Charles Causley* (2013) p.198

THREE POEMS FROM STEEP

by Alison Brackenbury

(i) Letter, 1917

I had one dream in France,
curled up before the fight.
I fell past the bugles,
stray blackbirds, stabs of light,
landed by our table.
Though you clasped Baba, smiled to me,
I was a sort of visitor, and
I could not stay for tea.

(ii) No 2, Yentree Cottages

This was your garden. And the grass is long,
rough as a child's hair. The wind gusts strong.
Only the half-pruned hazels by the hedge
shelter the new stone pigs, by the path's edge,

broad rue bush, grey with buds, high fat for birds
you might have bought, if men paid more for words.
Stray vegetables, too few to meet your needs,
break old black garden soil, part-raked for seeds.

Is nothing left? A book, a garden tool?
Does the cramped house recall you, kind or cruel?
The March light, like a soldier's body, thinned,
sweeps us down your cracked path, out with the wind.

(iii) Visitor

But while I wait by that low door
where he would duck, though rarely shout
I sense harsh pressure thrust me back,
someone in pain, who must walk out.

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ON TOP OF THE WORLD, by Philip Lyons

Ivor Gurney is walking on Crickley Hill,
the green escarpment giving him a view
across the Severn to the hills of Wales.
He watches clouds float by like wind-filled sails
and hears a skylark singing through the blue
to make him half-believe he isn't ill.

But ill he is, just weeks back from the front,
his mind a dugout where the shells assail him
and bodies lie abandoned row on row,
the war's unseemly harvest. Down below
is Gloucester, where cathedral and asylum
are promising to heal him, though they won't.

CENTENARY SOLDIERS, by Lyn Moir

We see them stagger, black and white,
through twisting trenches, faces blank,
unseeing, hollow-eyed, or grim,
grimacing at the hand-cranked camera.

We do not know which of them lived,
which died, which left a limb, or two,
in foreign mud, which left their wits
behind when they returned, never the same.

Under the weight of comrades' arms,
or rifles, bent with horror, sleep,
they walk a Möbius strip, dancing
their nightmare deathwalk for our eyes, over

and over, death's foul stench sanitised
by celluloid, forever tramping trenches.

HOW 'ANTI-WAR' WERE THE WAR POETS?

As the commemoration of the centenary of the First World War approaches its final year (with some understandable lessening of public attention when compared with the activity of 2014) there have been far fewer signs than one might have anticipated of radical and original questioning of what that commemoration might be for. There is of course the No Glory in War movement which busied itself early on with the then tabloid provocations of Michael Gove but generally there have been few rebarbative or even mildly critical voices.

The Tower of London's eye-catching installation *Blood Swept Land and Seas of Red* by the artists Paul Cummins and Tom Piper where 888,246 crimson ceramic poppies filled the moat progressively from 17 July to 11 November 2014 (the closing date deferred by popular request) and where each poppy represented a British fatality (other nationalities were presumed to have their own commemorations) captured this sense of deeply felt...what? Beautiful, striking, and immensely popular with the general public, the vivid installation described itself on its website as 'a location for personal reflection' but what might those reflections have been? Apart from a general honouring of the dead (which it would be indecent not to offer – as the minimum response) was it meant to provoke anger, pride, sadness, gratitude, complacent satisfaction, determination that such slaughter between two putatively civilised European cultures would never happen again, or lively expectation that it would happen, gloriously, again?

One was hoping for some astringent voice to puncture this inarticulate solemnity and it duly came, early in December 2014. "The centenary commemoration is also big business and the next four years are going to create as

many millionaire entrepreneurs as did the manufacture of uniforms, poison gas and dodgy canned food stuffs from 1914 to 1918', thundered this vigorous dissenter, not a member of No Glory in War, but the late Oxford Professor of Poetry, Geoffrey Hill. In his lecture at Oxford on 5 December Hill's subject was the poets and in particular 'the dangerous sentimental fallacy' that their rhetoric (he begged his audience to treat the term as a neutral descriptor) had come to be taken for the last word on the war. Hill castigated the idea that poets such as Owen and Sassoon and their 'items of testamentary witness' could be taken as 'total objective evidence of historical fact'. Such a conclusion, he declared, is 'not rationally possible'. Drawing on an acerbic 1933 pamphlet by Percy Wyndham Lewis, *The Old Gang and the New Gang*, Hill deplored the influence of Owen and Sassoon 'on post-war political intelligence in Britain' and cited Wyndham Lewis's dismissal of Sassoon's 'very sentimental battle doggerel' as evidence that these poets lacked the intelligent anger that the age demanded and had succumbed too readily to 'an ideal of piteous fraternity and inert helplessness' that 'placed an unnatural emphasis on the allegedly Christian virtue of passivity at any price, thereby leaving the management of national and international affairs in the hands of the New Gang'.

With scant regard for the pieties of British poetry lovers, especially at this season, Hill went on to denounce Owen's famous Preface with its assertion that the poetry is in the pity. 'But that Preface!' wailed Hill, repeating the phrase three times as if it were a prophet's anguished lamentation. 'But that Preface! I wish it had not been written or that having been written it had been lost'. The three short sentences of Owen that appear in every undergraduate essay on the war poets 'amount to an intellectual and emotional self-betrayal on Owen's part and a betrayal of

all that should be strong and enduring in English poetry'. The poetry, he insisted 'can *never* be in the pity; the pity can only truly be registered in the poetry'. There is a far-off echo here of Yeats's notorious exclusion of Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* on the grounds that passive suffering is not a fit subject for poetry.

Hill, however, must have known that he was swimming against the tide. It will need more than this to change the terms of the debate. The poetry of the war continues to shape public perceptions of the conflict – although at September 2014's English Association Conference at Oxford on 'British Poetry of the First World War', speaker after speaker questioned the common assertion that poetry critics and military historians are at loggerheads over issues of interpretation. The inference was that this was a phony war but the fact remains that the poetry of the First World War has retained its position as the primary means by which the war is imagined, and *felt* about. One central tenet of the conventional wisdom is that the corpus of British war poetry shows the poets to be universally anti-war, as any sixth former writing an essay on 'Dulce et Decorum Est' will readily confirm. But were they?

In the first book of Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War* the historian sets out his desiderata for a critical historian of the war. His strict criteria are offered as a prophylactic against what he calls 'the imaginative exaggerations of poets'.¹ A little later, in the second book, Thucydides presents us with the oration of Pericles over the war dead at the end of the first year of the conflict. 'We need no Homer or other man of words to praise us', Pericles declares, 'for such give pleasure for a moment, but the truth will put to

1 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* edited in translation by R.W. Livingstone (London, 1943), p44.

shame their imaginings of our deeds'.²

The inference is clear: for an exact and historically truthful rendering of the reality of war do not go to the poets. Many 21st century military historians would agree. Counter-intuitive though it may be I would argue, quite simply, that not a single one of the leading British war poets could be defined as 'anti-war', however graphically they evoked its horrors. But, of course, everything hangs on definition.

One starting point would be to ask: what exactly did it mean to be 'anti-war' in the years between 1914 and 1918? One obvious answer is to be a pacifist. But Owen, inconveniently, declared: 'I hate washy pacifists'.³ Though the picture needs to be complicated a little, as it does with Sassoon, the rejection of pacifism as an option is clear. What that option might mean in practice can be seen in a leaflet issued by the radical anti-war movement in North London during the initial 1914 recruitment drive. The North London Herald League, founded in 1913, handed out a bill with the words:

A GOOD SOLDIER

A good soldier is a blind, heartless machine. At the word of command he will put a bullet in the brain of the bravest and noblest man who has ever lived. He respects neither the grey hair of age nor the weakness of childhood. He is unmoved by tears, by prayers or by argument. He is indifferent to human thought or human feelings.

DON'T BE A SOLDIER – BE A MAN!⁴

2 *Ibid.*, p114.

3 *Wilfred Owen: Selected Letters* (London, 1985) ed. John Bell, p282 'As for myself, I hate washy pacifists as temperamentally as I hate whiskied prussianists. Therefore I feel that I must first get some reputation of gallantry before I could successfully and usefully declare my principles'.

4 Ken Weller, '*Don't be a Soldier!*': *The radical anti-war movement in North London 1914-1918* (London, 1985) p21.

War, from this perspective of working class socialist activism, is seen to be workers attacking other workers and serving class and imperialist ends. The *Daily Herald*-inspired group called instead for 'a united world movement of the working class'. A more aristocratic objection came from Bertrand Russell, eventually imprisoned at the end of the war for his protests. In his 1916 book *Justice in War Time* Russell wrote, in the chapter on 'The Ethics of War': 'It seems to me that no single one of the combatants is justified in the present war, and yet *I cannot believe that war under all circumstances is a crime.*'⁵ (my italics). That declaration could not have been made by a pure pacifist or 'absolutist' as such were termed at the time. Those who were pacifists, the conscientious objectors to conscription when it was introduced on 2 March 1916, faced public hostility as well as legal sanction. Of the 16,500 conscientious objectors who declared themselves, 350 exemptions from conscription were granted, mostly to Quakers, the rest accepted alternative war work, but 1,298 were imprisoned⁶. The only major British poet of the 20th century who chose this option, rejecting any compromise such as agricultural work, and who was imprisoned in Wormwood Scrubs, where he went on hunger strike for a time, constitutes the concrete 'control' of our thought experiment. This poet who rejected war root and branch was the 18-year-old Basil Bunting, a Quaker. He had told a military tribunal on 17 April 1918 that in refusing to fight he was 'doing his duty as a citizen of the world'⁷.

5 Bertrand Russell, *Justice in War Time* (London, 1916) p19.

6 See Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (London, 1980).

7 Keith Aldritt *The Poet as Spy: The Life and Wild Times of Basil Bunting* (London, 1998), p21. Richard Burton in *A Strong Song Tows Us: the Life of Basil Bunting* (London, 2013) reveals that earlier in his schooldays, the intransigent sixth former had written a conventional Newbolt-style poem called 'Keep Troth'.

Yet, between the ‘conchies’ and the amateur authors of patriotic verses – *The Times* was receiving 100 of these a day in the first months of the War – the war poets of the British canon, if not anti-war activists, were certainly not writing in the exalted heroic manner of Julian Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’ or of Rupert Brooke’s ‘begloried sonnets’ in Isaac Rosenberg’s memorably tart locution⁸. The heroic style, the literary glorification of war drawing on classical models, was hardly possible after 1916, however much we want to avoid simplistic schema of pre- and post-Somme writing. Such a style could have seemed credible only to an audience that was determined not to face the facts. That same *Times* readership could have read, from its own war correspondent, as early as 24 November 1914, the following clear-sighted account of the realities of trench war: ‘Day after day the butchery of the unknown by the unseen ... War has become stupid At the cost of thousands of lives a few hundred yards may be gained, but rarely indeed does the most brilliant attack produce anything’⁹. Newspaper rhetoric – what Ted Bogacz has called ‘high diction’ – continued, but the poets were having none of it.

But surely, it will be objected, Siegfried Sassoon, was ‘anti-war’.

When the nerve specialist Rivers joked to Sassoon, during the 1917 charade at Craiglockhart, that he was suffering not from any physical or psychological ailment but from ‘anti-war syndrome’ he was speaking to a man who had

8 Rosenberg wrote: ‘I am thinking of enlisting if they will have me, though it is against all my principles of justice – though I would be doing the most criminal thing a man can do – I am so sure my mother would not stand the shock that I don’t know what to do’. (*Collected Works*, p216). ‘I never joined the army for patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over’ (*Collected Works*, p227).

9 Cited in a valuable analysis by Ted Bogacz, ‘A Tyranny of Words: Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War’, *The Journal of Modern History* 58 (3) 1986, p651.

just, at considerable personal risk, made an emphatic declaration against the war which, without the agile intervention of his friends, could have resulted in a court martial and the severest of penalties. Sassoon was a brave and decorated soldier and no ‘washy pacifist’ but he had strong and passionate views about the conduct and aims of war. His position is complex, ambivalent, and sometimes perplexing and his rhetoric can often sound like the most vigorous and trenchant ‘anti-war’ stance but in the end it was his actions, not his words, that were decisive.

Sassoon’s statement on the war was planned and drafted in the spring and early summer of 1917. He was encouraged by metropolitan intellectual pacifists like Ottoline Morrell but her husband, Philip Morrell, advised against the planned statement as counterproductive for Sassoon¹⁰. At their suggestion, however, he consulted, in London, Middleton Murry and H.W. Massingham and eventually wrote the statement at his London club with the help of Murry and Bertrand Russell, both of whom thought that ‘a statement against the war from a serving officer decorated for bravery would help the pacifist cause’¹¹. Bertrand Russell, in spite of believing, correctly, that Sassoon was not an out-and-out pacifist¹², took him to Hastings Lees-Smith, the Labour MP who offered to publicise it in the Commons, and to the socialist journalist and publisher Francis Meynell who agreed to print it. On 30 July it was read out in the House of Commons by Lees-Smith. It was first reported in *The Times* on 31st July where it was noted that the Under-Secretary of War had answered that

10 Max Egremont *Siegfried Sassoon: a Biography* (2005) argues that Philip Morrell was ‘defeated and ineffective, a compromising pacifist’ and believed any such gesture would be not only useless but painful and humiliating for Sassoon himself.’ p143.

11 *Ibid.*; p143.

12 Letter to Ottoline Morrell n.d. Harry Ransom Centre, cited by Egremont, p153.

the officer in question was now being treated for ‘nervous breakdown and shell-shock’. The next day, 1 August, police raided the No Conscription Fellowship office and seized 1000 printed copies before the statement could be distributed.

Sassoon’s statement was very careful to stress that he was not anti-war in the ‘absolutist’ sense but was protesting against the conduct of the war, ‘the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed’. It was the fact that the war in his judgement had (a) lost its way morally and (b) was being ‘deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it’ that forced him to speak out. He had no difficulty with the notion of war as such. His biographer, Max Egremont, calls the statement ‘quite startlingly naïve’ and ‘muddled’¹³. I believe it is neither of those two things. It is a carefully weighed, morally brave and intellectually coherent statement but it was also the product of very complex motivations and was the work of a deeply conflicted mind. When he was drafting *Siegfried’s Journey* in the 1940s Sassoon asked himself: ‘I now wonder how much I was influenced by the fact that by protesting I was – as it seemed then – making it impossible for me to be sent to the front again...the idea of being martyred appealed to me emotionally as a form of “heroism”’¹⁴. He had sat in 1917 for a portrait by Glyn Philpot which created an idea that ‘remained with me for several years If I looked Byronic, should I behave as such? And do something spectacular.’ Years later he would say: ‘the impulse which caused me to perform the protest exploit was identical with that which led me to behave with reckless daring in the front line’¹⁵. Vanity

13 Egremont, p145.

14 *Ibid.*, p145.

15 Egremont, p150 citing draft of *Siegfried’s Journey*.

was thus not absent from a story that he would soon be describing sardonically as ‘my grand gesture’¹⁶.

Sassoon was a passionate, impulsive man – something he rightly identifies here as being connected to his ‘Mad Jack’ courage on the battlefield. As we can see most clearly in his journals of 1917, he reacted to things in the heat of the moment and shot his mouth off. The statement, in the circumstances, was a model of restraint. Here he is, for example, on 22 February, in No 25 Stationary Hospital, Rouen, recovering from a wound, possibly in pain, maddened by the soldiers in the ward who played cards and traded obscenities all day long: ‘For the soldier is no longer a noble figure; he is merely a writhing insect among this ghastly folly of destruction’¹⁷. Yet, a few months later, he would write, more calmly: ‘I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers’.

On 21 June he wrote in his journal: ‘I am revolting against the war being continued indefinitely; I believe that Carson, Milner, Lloyd George & Northcliffe intend the war to continue at least two more years. To carry out the scheme of “crushing Kaiserism & Russianism” by means of brute force, the war must go on two more years. If they stated our terms definitely, once & for all, and those terms were the ones we went into the war to enforce, the German people would realise that they had been enforced; & would insist on the war being stopped. (But the one thing which our side ignores is the true psychology of the Germans)’.

In short, this is the anger of poems like ‘The One-legged Man’ and ‘The Hero’. The simple fact is that at the end of 1917 Sassoon returned to the front. After the war he would continue to engage with progressive politics and support the Peace Pledge Union. He was not a warmonger

16 Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) p223.

17 *Siegfried Sassoon: Diaries, 1915-18* (1983) ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, p134.

or jingoist. He tried to tell the truth about war; but he was not an 'absolutist'.

But surely, it will be objected, Wilfred Owen, if not Sassoon, was 'anti-war'. Did he not write 'Dulce et Decorum Est'? This poem's popularity with teachers and learners has much to do with its simplicity. It begins by invoking the classic heroic idiom of Horace, presents the shocking reality of war and the use of gas, and concludes with an injunction not to pretend that dying on the battlefield, as truthfully represented in the poem's foregoing lines, is sweet and fitting. And that is really it. This is not 'anti-war' but 'anti-heroic'. The Horatian mode of celebrating war, it states, doesn't work anymore in the conditions of modern warfare. That perception hardly adds up to a condemnation of war itself, though Owen, like Sassoon, was a brave and decorated soldier and, as his most recent biographer, Guy Cuthbertson, puts it 'had wanted to be a hero'¹⁸.

To return to 'that Preface', a draft prepared for a collection of war poems that he hoped to publish in 1919 and written in Ripon, Yorkshire in 1918, this is a text even better known than Sassoon's. Yet familiarity – for this reader at least – does not make comprehension any easier, for this is a profoundly ambiguous document. Taking each of its six propositions in turn:-

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Does this imply that somehow the prevailing mode of utterance in war verse is not yet equal to the task, that the true contemporary heroism has not found an adequate way of being expressed in poetry, the fault being rather in poetry, which is judged incapable of handling the subject, accused in some way falling short? Does 'not yet fit' mean

18 Wilfred Owen (2014) Guy Cuthbertson, p274.

not in a condition to do so or not worthy of speaking of these great heroes? When will it be fit? Is it a lack of the just style or a moral deficiency? Do heroes exist but need to find poets able, up to the task, of celebrating them?

Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. This seems to imply that war is something other than its professed causes and ends; it is a pure activity that needs to be understood in its essential nature stripped of any secondary considerations. It is as if war's traditional nature having been exposed as hollow it can only be represented, as it were, in the same way that a war photograph does, claiming to show not tell, an image merely without any moral dimension. Is that an adequate account of Owen's own war poetry?

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. Why is a poet not concerned with Poetry? Why the initial capital? Does this mean that Poetry constitutes some precious aesthetic realm that the harsh reality of war disdains? That Poetry is frivolous set against the actuality of conflict? Does this not diminish the art of poetry? Is Owen really claiming for himself no more than the role of a war photographer's Leica lens?

My subject is War, and the pity of War. This is his most direct and seemingly unambiguous statement: the war poet has the unique authority to write about war; it is, inescapably, his subject. This leads on to:-

The Poetry is in the pity. But what do we mean by 'the pity'? Geoffrey Hill has much to say on this subject in his lecture. Is it naked, tragic confrontation with the reality of it? Or does compassion and feeling enter in? Pity is another ambivalent word. Tragic pity can be simply clearness of sight, acquiescence in the inescapable, the necessary truths of human existence. Hill speaks of 'the rather awful

question of the pitilessness of pity'. Compassionate pity, on the other hand, wants to console and assuage the pain of the victim. I ask again: is this an adequate account of Owen's own poetry? Is it compassionate or angry? In Simone Weil's powerful essay of 1940, 'The Iliad or The Poem of Force', she writes that in the *Iliad*: 'Whatever is not war, whatever war destroys or threatens, the *Iliad* wraps in poetry; the realities of war, never. No reticence veils the step from life to death The cold brutality of the deeds of war (*la froide brutalité des faits de guerre*) is left undisguised; neither victors nor vanquished are admired, scorned, or hated'.¹⁹ Can we be certain that Owen was *not* adumbrating this 'pitilessness of pity'?

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful. Owen says that no comfort is to be derived from writing about war, no consolation. Where does that leave pity? Why exactly will the next generation be consoled when this one can't be? Because it will be uniquely liberated from false rhetoric, unreal expectation, outmoded notions of the heroic? Because this generation of poets has done its work, speaking a new truth in new accents? Paving the way? Doesn't 'warning' imply purpose and mission that up to now the Preface has disparaged? A secondary purpose is now being admitted? To 'be truthful' means to influence or remedy conduct in the future rather than merely present the unvarnished truth of how things are now.

It seems to me that what both these statements, by Sassoon and by Owen, have in common is that they are highly considered, rhetorical, and at some very deep level,

¹⁹ Simone Weil, 'The Iliad or The Poem of Force', translated by Mary McCarthy in *Simone Weil: An Anthology* edited by Sian Miles (2005), p210. French text from *L'Illade ou le poème de la force* (Paris 2014, Editions de l'éclat), p80.

profoundly ambivalent. War gave both these poets a subject and a role, in different ways it made both of them, but it also brought out complex and conflicted responses from them. By labelling them simplistically 'anti-war' we sell them short, we diminish that complexity, we do not read them with an attention that is adequate. We owe them that discipline of attention.

Nicholas Murray

REVIEWS

Phil Carradice, *Ivor Gurney, Poet of the Trenches and the Gloucestershire Countryside* (Cecil Woolf)

How times change. The current issue of that excellent new literary journal, *Raceme*, contains two articles on Ivor Gurney, both worth reading, both taking for granted that Gurney is worth writing about. Thirty years ago I doubt if he'd have been thought to warrant such attention. At all events, the majority of those who saw themselves as lawgivers on modern English poetry passed by on the other side. What brought people across was P.J. Kavanagh's 1982 edition of poems, and though this has since been upgraded – by Kavanagh himself – it was the original edition which opened our eyes to Gurney's achievement. Before then, he was at best regarded as a Georgian poet of minor worth. But with the publication of Kavanagh's *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney* a great poet was suddenly revealed. After that came R.K.R. Thornton's edition of *Collected Letters*, reprints of the two collections published in the poet's lifetime, *Severn and Somme* and *Rewards of Wonder*, plus gatherings of poems he'd not himself been able to see into print, and, in 2004, a much-revised and expanded edition of Kavanagh's *Collected Poems*. All of these, by the way, appeared under the Carcanet imprint, which deserves our grateful thanks for doing so much to facilitate the recovery of Gurney's work.

As for critical attention. My own brief monograph appeared in 2001, and there have been numerous essays in journals, plus forays into biography (all taking off from Michael Hurd's pioneering *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney*, 1978), though inevitably more material has come to light since

Hurd published his work, and emphases have shifted. Above all, perhaps, Gurney the poet is now widely accepted as a prominent, and surely permanent, feature in the landscape of modern literature.

Well, good. And good that Phil Carradice's pamphlet-length and warm-hearted account should be offered in tribute to a poet who died, miserably and, as he feared, virtually neglected in 1937, though he had at least the satisfaction – if that's the right word – of knowing that an edition of *Music and Letters* was due to be dedicated to his compositional works, and that OUP intended to publish twenty of his songs in volume form. When this news was brought to him on his deathbed, where he was succumbing to tuberculosis, and too weak even to undo the wrapping paper, he muttered, 'It is too late'.

In a series of brief chapters, Carradice sketches in Gurney's life, from its beginnings in Gloucester, through his schooldays, student years at the Royal College of Music, his war experiences, and then a series of breakdowns which, beginning before the war, became increasingly severe and led finally to his post-war incarceration in an asylum at Dartford. Once he was there only a few loyal friends – and a visit from Helen Thomas – kept him from abandonment, if not from a prolonged slide into near-despair. Even so, it's difficult not to think of his death as a merciful release.

Carradice manages this narrative well, and feeds in information about the poetry as he takes us through Gurney's life. 'Gurney's poetry does not fit into any category', he remarks at one point. 'He is not a nature poet, nor, in the accepted sense of the phrase, is he a war poet. He remains the poet of the common man and in the 1930s – that "low, dishonest decade" as Auden called it – such a stance meant nothing in the gradual build-up towards

another world war’.

Where to start? Given that Carradice chooses to label Gurney a poet of ‘the Gloucestershire countryside’ it’s difficult to see how he can avoid recognising him as a writer who directed deep and loving attention to its natural history, including its flora, as, to take a random example, he does in ‘The Bare Line of the Hill’. The claim that Gurney is not a war poet ‘in the accepted sense’ is even odder. In fact I haven’t a clue what Carradice means. Is Rosenberg a war poet? Owen? Sassoon? Is Thomas? (No, apparently not, at least according to Carradice). In what way can ‘The Silent One’ *not* be a war poem ‘in the accepted sense?’ – unless that sense is one unashamedly celebratory, triumphalist, in which case none of the above mentioned is a proper war poet.

I have more sympathy with Carradice’s claim that Gurney is a poet of the common man, at least to the extent that you want his poems to appeal to as wide a constituency as possible. But to claim that his work was unlikely to appeal to readers in the very decade during which poets went out of their way to insist on their connection to the workers of the world (‘Brothers, who when the sirens roar’) is, I fear, beyond salvation. What Carradice might have considered is that those who claimed to be representing ‘the common man’ backed into a spotlight which they or their acolytes then made sure was trained exclusively on them.

Not that this would have helped Gurney’s cause. The fact is that a variety of factors had combined to make him virtually invisible. They didn’t, however, include a preference for T.S. Eliot, as Carradice rather wistfully suggests. Quoting from ‘Laventie’, he remarks that there are ‘shades of T.S. Eliot’ in the poem. The lines about ‘the dawn with aeroplanes high at Heaven gate/ Lovely aerial beetles’ apparently make the reader think of ‘Prufrock’ (when

‘the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table’) because both have the ‘ability to make common things memorable’ – aeroplanes, beetles, patients, ether. But at the time Gurney was writing aeroplanes *weren’t* common, although he is obviously drawn to the weird disjunction between their death-dealing powers – this is a war poem – and their look of innocent, playful attractiveness. And the comparison Eliot makes between the evening ‘spread out against the sky’ and a patient’s medically induced unconsciousness is deliberately bizarre. You could, it’s true, try to argue a case for Gurney as a modernist poet in his use of images that wrench us away from the familiar and the accustomed, and for sure not many would think of aeroplanes as beetles, and who, lepidopterists apart, would commend them as ‘lovely’?

But I don’t want to press the point. And although Carradice’s suggestion that readers preferred to Gurney’s ‘raw and bloody’ emotions the apparent objectivity of ‘offerings like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*’ (which readers, *what* poems were like Eliot’s?) on the grounds that ‘Eliot had not served in the trenches’ and so ‘his view of a tortured world, destroyed by conflict, was objective and more bearable’ – remarks which suggest that either Carradice hasn’t read Eliot’s great poem or he hasn’t a clue about its meaning – it is better to note that the value of his pamphlet doesn’t lie in its critical observations but in its account of the life of one of the definitive spirits of the last century. *Ivor Gurney, Poet of the Trenches and the Gloucestershire Countryside* is worth reading for that alone.

John Lucas

Morgan Merrington, *Keith Douglas: Genius Overlooked*
(Cecil Woolf)

Some years ago I was standing in the middle of a field of potatoes in Normandy, thinking about Keith Douglas. I was making a radio programme about Douglas and his poetry for BBC Radio 3, and this spot was as near as the production team could get to the precise place where the poet had died. In that place, I found myself remembering the recurring motif of a reflective glass in Douglas's poems, and how, shortly before embarking on that last campaign, he had written, in 'On a Return from Egypt':

This next month, then, is a window
and with a crash I'll split the glass.
Behind it stands one I must kiss,
person of love or death,
a person or a wraith,
I fear what I shall find.

The mirror in which Keith Douglas regarded himself was about to be pierced, and here was the place and moment where the glass was split. Morgan Merrington's concise, unpretentious introduction to the work of Douglas recalled that moment vividly in my mind. Here, in less than sixty pages, is much of what you would wish to know – or remember – quickly of the poet, his life and work, and the book skilfully relates that work to that life. It can't replace – nor does it seek to – more comprehensive and detailed studies such as those by Desmond Graham and William Scammell, but it's a good place to start, and part of its value is the useful bibliography and route to further sources.

The staging posts of Douglas's life are all here, briefly, and so you get the shape of his time; Christ's Hospital, Oxford, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, the prelude to the invasion

of D-Day and then the death, to which so much of the writing had seemed to be leading, as far back as the lyrical 'Canoe', touching as it is, and speaking for a poignant Oxbridge generation before the Second World War:

Well I'm thinking this may be my last
summer, but cannot lose even a part of
pleasure in the old-fashioned art of
idleness

It is always hard to separate the poems from the life when dealing with a short existence that seems to end with a definition of the person themselves, but in a way, with Douglas, much of his poetry, written immediately prior to and during a war that would kill him, that is the point. How he would have lived and written as roughly a contemporary of Larkin is one of those useless and fascinating questions that one can't help but ponder, but he was a real person and there's a sense of that reality in him that makes him all the more likeable in his human frailty. I remember talking with one of his last girlfriends, Betty Jesse, a secretary at Tambimuttu's poetry press, who recalled her feelings of 'combined fascination and irritation for his charming arrogant attitude'. It was Betty who called him her 'Bête Noir', a phrase that struck him to the core and which he adopted as a title.

Merrington refers to this book as a 'gentle tribute'. It's an apt description of a work that will more than serve its purpose if it leads new readers to Douglas's writing. Whether the sub-title of the work, 'Genius Overlooked' is an entirely accurate summing up of his reputation to date is debatable; many of the poems take the breath away, and the world would certainly be better for reading Douglas more. In the meantime, the unique mix of toughness and sensitivity continues to bear witness to a voice that is at once completely distinctive and justifiably lasting. A

favourite poem – not quoted as it happens by Merrington – somehow sums this up perfectly for me, and links Douglas to the war poets of a previous generation as he would wish to be linked. In ‘Desert Flowers’ he writes:

Living in a wide landscape are the flowers –
Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying –
the shell and the hawk every hour
are slaying men and jerboas, slaying
the mind...

All those who knew Keith Douglas personally remarked on his honesty as a person. It is a quality that continues to shine vividly through the poems, a clear-headed light that we need as much now in these days as we ever did before.

Sean Street

John Pikoulis, *Alun, Gweno and Freda* (Seren)

Alun Lewis was one of the two finest British poets who died in the Second World War. I say ‘died’, not ‘killed’, because he never went into action; he shot himself accidentally or on purpose, aged twenty-eight, on 5th March 1944. This was in Burma, a very long way from the Welsh valleys where he had grown up. He left a few deeply felt poems for his wife Gweno:

If I should go away,
Beloved, do not say
‘He has forgotten me’.
For you abide,
A singing rib within my dreaming side;
You always stay.

(‘Post-script, for Gweno’)

‘Goodbye’, which is in several anthologies, describes their last night together, quietly reminding those born afterwards of just how much that generation endured:

So we must say ‘Goodbye’, my darling,
And go, as lovers go, for ever;
Tonight remains, to pack and fix on labels
And make an end of lying down together.

The Army concluded that his death had been an accident. He hadn’t wanted to die, he wanted to win the war (and it is true that he hated Fascism) and get home to his wife. That was the official version for several decades, but the story is more complicated.

Alun Lewis was a remarkable young man, a teacher’s son and miner’s grandson who grew up in the 1930s in Aberdare and was deeply affected by the poverty of South Wales. His feelings were strongly left-wing and he was attracted to pacifism. In ‘All Day it has Rained’ he thinks

about ‘the quiet dead and the loud celebrities/ Exhorting us to slaughter, and the herded refugees’, which sounds very relevant today. The war derailed his ambition to be a professional writer, although he published two well-received volumes of poems and short stories in 1942. By this time he had married Gweno Ellis, a teacher at a Mountain Ash grammar school, with whom he had ‘a safe and fructifying life’. She and Alun were parted, forever as it turned out, when he was sent to India as a lieutenant in the South Wales Borderers. As with Edward Thomas, with whom he identified, the war which overshadowed everything was good for his poetry.

A great many letters survive. He felt that he would ‘never be a good soldier’, and dreaded the thought of killing more than being killed. The sun and sterility of India, shockingly unlike his native place, produced remarkable poems like ‘The Mahratta Ghats’ and ‘The Peasants’:

Across scorched hills and trampled crops
The soldiers straggle by.
History staggers in their wake.
The peasants watch them die.

Some of his finest work was written on the voyage out and in this brutal landscape, over a year and a half when there was all too much time to think. It was hard to believe that he was fighting for democracy when he was in India as a representative of the occupying power. And there was one more complication. He intended to be faithful to his wife; the superb ‘In Hospital: Poona’ was inspired by the ten thousand miles that parted them. But in August 1943, not having seen her for nine months, he encountered Freda Aykroyd, a glamorous and sympathetic woman whose husband was away from home. Very rapidly they fell into an affair, but he could not take it lightly. Freda had no intention of ending her marriage, and was, in fact,

pregnant with her third child. Alun felt committed to Gweno, ‘not out of obligation but out of love’. He wrote another great poem, ‘The Way Back’, which was inspired by, but did not name Mrs Aykroyd, and they exchanged intense letters in which he said ‘I cannot come to you . . . in consonance with everything I’ve lived’. In the days leading up to his death, when at last there was a prospect of fighting, he appeared to those around him to be very depressed. He made a will leaving everything to his wife, burned Freda’s letters and sent his poems back to Wales where they were published. His bereaved family always insisted that he had just happened to fall over his gun.

John Pikoulis knows more about Alun Lewis than any other living person. In 1984 he published an invaluable biography, *Alun Lewis: A Life*, which revealed, for the first time, Freda’s part in the story. He had met and bonded with her, and after her husband’s death (she herself died in 2005), she was happy to talk. His problem was that his book was certain to distress Gweno, who never remarried and lived on until 2016. On the other hand, he believed that Lewis was the finest poet of his generation, was in danger of being forgotten, and could not be understood if the facts about his last year were not known. Gweno, as it turned out, had long had her suspicions. She behaved with dignity and did not stymie the book, as she could have done by refusing permission to quote. The 2015 book is not a biography but a study of the poet’s state of mind in the last months of his life. It includes several letters from Freda, members of the Lewis family and men who knew him in the army, and it argues that he shot himself deliberately and after long thought – which I am sure is true.

I can’t warm to Freda. She wrote several emotional letters, long afterwards, which claimed that their very short relationship was ‘the greatest thing that ever happened to him’, and that ‘there was only one woman for Alun Lewis to love as he

wanted and needed to love and that was me'. She also said that she was reluctant to hurt Gweno, but her catty tone is unmistakable. His wife, she thought, was 'unworthy of Alun's love'. She was 'the sort of person who never would have had anything but her marriage to Alun'. She, Freda, felt 'an anger and revulsion which made me want to strike back at her'. She did worry that their affair might have been one of the reasons for his suicide.

Knowing these things about Lewis (whose centenary fell in 2015) will leave most people in little doubt that by early 1944 he wanted to die. He had suffered from occasional depression for a long time. 'The Sentry', which he wrote in England after the army had taught him to use a gun, shows a fascination with the darkness:

I have begun to die.
For now at last I know
That there is no escape
From Night. Not any dream
Nor breathless images of sleep
Touch my bat's-eyes. I hang
Leathery-arid from the hidden roof
Of Night, and sleeplessly
I watch within Sleep's province.
I have left
The lovely bodies of the boy and girl
Deep in each other's placid arms;
And I have left
The beautiful lanes of sleep
That barefoot lovers follow to this last
Cold shore of thought I guard.
I have begun to die
And the guns' implacable silence
Is my black interim, my youth and age,
In the flower of fury, the folded poppy,
Night.

Alun Lewis was one of those people whom we call a suicide risk but who may, in happy circumstances, avoid suicide. His generation could not avoid the war, which damaged his marriage and equilibrium at the same time as it provoked his best work. He didn't die fighting, but he was still a war poet and a great one. Seventy years later, very few will be hurt by the truth.

Merryn Williams

Rod Madocks, *The Rising Flame: Remembering Sidney Keyes* (Shoestring Press)

‘A period which can laud the poetry of Sidney Keyes is no period for me’, wrote Philip Larkin, who was the same age, and had been a fellow student at Oxford. But Larkin was annoyed with Keyes, because he had been published in some prestigious journals and appeared in a little anthology called *Eight Oxford Poets*, and Larkin had not. No doubt he would have been part of the literary establishment had he lived, but he would die in the war. Afterwards his friends tried to keep his poetry in circulation, but Larkin never thought much of him, nor did Leavis, nor Clive James, who wrote that he was ‘hardly talented at all’.

Yet talent there was and it emerged very early in his short life. He was not quite twenty-one when he was killed in Tunisia, in April 1943. Very few people of that age have written great poetry – I can think only of Sorley and Chatterton – and Sidney Keyes is not the great British poet of the Second World War. That is Keith Douglas, who had a precious extra four years; and Vernon Scannell also wrote marvellous war poetry decades later. As well, Keyes had no chance to write about his experience on the front line, because he perished after he had been in action for less than a month.

Instead, his writing is filled with foreboding about the ‘approaching winter’, that is, the compulsion to take part in the war. He could not, like Larkin, get out of it for medical reasons; he did not even think that it would be right to get out. But he absolutely hated it. ‘My feet are shackled and my neck is roped’. He was an incompetent soldier (at first), and was bullied by other men including the actor Trevor Howard. He was also unhappily in love,

and in his fine poem ‘Actaeon’ suggests, as others had done before him, that women sacrifice men in war:

For I was torn to shreds as well you know,
And in my mouth the blue-tongued lichens grow.

A fine poem? Yes. Just because he wasn’t as good as Keith Douglas doesn’t mean that we should dismiss him. His poems could be called post-Georgian, full of ‘cloudy symbolism’ (Andrew Motion’s phrase) but not at all difficult. He occasionally produced a pompous phrase – ‘O wake them not, the big-boned kings’ – but he improved very quickly, perhaps feeling that his time was running out. He was obsessed by the conflicts of the past. In one of his very best poems, ‘Letter to M.C.’, written in 1941, he thought of ‘others/ Who would not be amazed at war’:

Now that the scent of stocks invades my windows
I think of gun-torn Germany under Napoleon’s
Calipers cut, under his wheeltracks furrowed:
And Goethe working by his quiet candle
Undaunted by the soldiery, content
To rule the steadfast empire of the heart.

In the same poem he talks about the need for courage and about Goya, who ‘fought an inner war, vomiting/ His nightmares on to paper’. That was more or less how he dealt with his own nightmares and, in the end, he went forward bravely and is said to have ‘sacrificed himself for the men under his command’.

Rod Madocks, in this valuable new book, has collected some of the best poems and also written a memoir of the last year of his life. His late father, ‘a more natural and pragmatic soldier than Keyes’, served alongside him and has revealed several new facts, so we get quite a clear picture of what it was like for him: ‘Tunisia is like Scotland must have been in the eighteenth century, a mass of bald mountains, terribly cold at night’. It is an excellent

introduction for those who would like to know more about him, beginning perhaps with 'War Poet':

I am the man who looked for peace and found
My own eyes barbed.
I am the man who groped for words and found
An arrow in my hand.
I am the builder whose firm walls surround
A slipping land.
When I grow sick or mad
Mock me not nor chain me:
When I reach for the wind
Cast me not down:
Though my face is a burnt book
And a wasted town.

Merryn Williams

Anne Powell, *Gardens Behind the Lines, 1914 – 1918: Gardens Found and Made on the Western and Eastern Fronts* (Cecil Woolf)

It is all too easy to forget that, in among the devastating battles that ravaged the countryside of the Western Front, there were moments of calm. Soldiers did not spend all their time in the trenches but had periods of rest behind the lines. Fairly early on in my research into the First World War for a series of commemorative exhibitions, I discovered that Philip Gosse MD had for a time been the Rat Catcher Officer of The British Second Army on the Western Front. Philip was the son of Sir Edmund Gosse but, unlike his father, he was not a poet but studied medicine, became a physician and joined the Royal Army Medical Corps in WW1. His grandfather was the well-known naturalist Philip Henry Gosse. Philip was also a naturalist and I found his book *A Naturalist goes to War* fascinating, as it describes in detail the flora and fauna of the Western Front. I was therefore very interested in Anne Powell's lovely little book.

Skilfully weaving extracts from poems and eye-witness accounts from diaries and letters home written during WW1 by men and women, this beautiful slim volume is a gentle reminder of mother nature's fight back against 'man's inhumanity to man'. From the introduction onwards, Anne's descriptions are a visual delight, but - much more than that - she gives us glimpses of hitherto unseen corners of the Western Front and often forgotten Eastern Front, where 'nature remained unaffected' (p.6), as she charts the progress of the war year by year, beginning with Rupert Brooke's attempts to save Antwerp with his Company of Anson Battalion of the Royal Naval Division.

By 1915, the trenches had been dug and hospitals, casualty clearing stations, advanced dressing stations etc. had been set up – all of these gave opportunities for garden areas. Seeds and plants were sent from home and Anne quotes extensively from the letters of Alexander Douglas Gillespie (1890-1915), who ‘wrote enthusiastically of the garden he made in a trench outside his dug-out in the grounds of a shattered farmhouse’ (p. 8). In the spring, pear and cherry trees came into blossom among the trenches in spite of the devastation of the constant shelling and ‘birds fly between the lines’ (p. 11). Gillespie wrote of little girls from villages behind the lines picking lilac and of hearing a nightingale sing (remembered from his time at Winchester School).

I was fascinated to learn from Gillespie that British Prime Minister Gladstone’s grandson was killed on the Western Front – ‘I suddenly came upon young Gladstone’s grave, in the corner of an orchard railed off, where he lies with about fifty men of different regiments... it’s curious to think of him there and his grandfather in Westminster Abbey’ (p. 12).

Anne uses quotes from poets who survived the conflict, as well as poets who were killed - Richard Aldington, Rupert Brooke, Edmund Blunden, Leslie Coulson, Geoffrey Dearmer, Robert Graves, Ivor Gurney, Francis Ledwidge, Siegfried Sassoon, Geoffrey Bache Smith, John William Streets, Edward Wyndham Tennant and Edward Thomas, and from a letter by Osbert Sitwell. You will also find quotes from diaries and letters home written by women doctors, nurses, ambulance drivers, and so on. In the Afterword is a detailed description of how the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was set up along with the well-tended cemeteries, remembrance gardens and memorials that we now find when visiting the Western Front in Belgium and France. Did you know that my favourite gardener, Gertrude

Jekyll was involved in the planning of some of the gardens in cemeteries on the Western Front? (p. 38).

Anne has also included brief biographies of all those from whose work she quotes in the book, as well as comprehensive notes. From cover to cover this is a wonderful book – the back covers have a full list of the titles available in Jean Moorcroft Wilson’s War Poets Series. I urge you to read it.

Lucy London

Deborah Fisher, *Siegfried Sassoon at the Grave of Henry Vaughan* (Cecil Woolf)

Here’s an oddity from the often-excellent series of monographs on the war poets published by Cecil Woolf. Deborah Fisher has the confidence to take as central to her theme what is a distinctly mannered and weak sonnet by Siegfried Sassoon on the feelings evoked in him by a 1924 visit to the grave of Henry Vaughan, ‘the Silurist’, the metaphysical author of the fine and difficult collections *Olor Iscanus* and *Silex Scintillans*. We all like visiting poets’ graves. Vaughan’s, behind the church at Llansantffraed near Brecon, is a particularly soothing ‘old green slab of simply graven stone’. You have to admire Ms. Fisher’s *chutzpah* in choosing so undistinguished a hub for her theme as the Sassoon sonnet, which amply reminds of how much more distinguished a prose-writer Sassoon was than a poet. For all that, her thematic variations bring into focus fascinating sympathetic parallels between the two poets, and emphasize Vaughan’s place of grace and mystery among the metaphysical poets.

James Perrin

Chris Dickon: *A Rendezvous With Death: Alan Seeger In Poetry, At War* (New Street Communications)

In a recent volume of the *Wilfred Owen Association Journal*, Merryn Williams, who is editing this volume of the War Poets Society Journal, published an article on the poetic ‘one-hit wonders’ of the Great War. These were the authors of poems which were traditional in form, lyrical in tone, and often intended, or used, for recruiting purposes. The one-hit authors include John MacRae, W.N.Hodgson, TP Cameron Wilson – and, of course, Alan Seeger, known to British readers almost entirely through one poem, ‘I Have a Rendezvous with Death’.

Even in his native America, where he has been much more widely known and revered than in Britain, the poem ‘Rendezvous’ is still Seeger’s main claim to fame. The post-humous collection of Seeger’s poems, letters and diaries which was first published in 1917 was accompanied by an essay from the critic William Archer, but there was no scholarly biography until the 1960s. Now Chris Dickon, originally a radio and TV journalist, whose special subject is the history of Americans who have died fighting for other countries, or who have fought and are buried abroad, has reconstructed the life, death and afterlife of Alan Seeger. In addition, he has provided a great deal of contextual detail, much of which will be only vaguely familiar to British readers – who probably in general know less than they should about the home and overseas front from the American point of view in 1914 and 1915. That was a time when the United States government was very firmly staying out of the War, but when a number of significant Americans had chosen to enter it.

The history of the traditional alliance (the ‘antique debt’) linking the United States and France; the part played in

American history by the early twentieth-century Mexican revolution; Unitarianism; the history of the various American libraries in Paris; above all, the tortuous path by which the United States eventually arrived at participation in the Great War – all these are dealt with in interesting detail, but with a light touch. There are also some fascinating (and to this reviewer previously quite unknown) black and white photographs, many by the author himself.

Alan Seeger was born in 1888, which makes him the exact contemporary of both Rupert Brooke and TS Eliot (his classmate at Harvard, though it is not entirely clear how well they actually knew one another). Though the Seegers were of German rather than English descent, in many ways his background was similar to Eliot’s - in that they were a family whose money came from the business world, but whose leisure interests were cultivated and high-minded. They were enlightened, but magisterial in outlook, conscious of privilege and obligation, but also of their superiority:

There were simply things that Seegers did not do;
there were things that other people could do and the
Seegers would tolerate them, and things that other
people could do that the Seegers did not tolerate and
did not approve of.

Alan was the second of three children: the other two also made their mark – Elizabeth as a writer on Asian history and spirituality (surely not ‘spiritualism’ as the text of the book has it?) and Charles - the folklorist, musicologist and in due course the father of the folk-musicians Pete and Peggy – both of them peace activists with an ambivalent attitude to the uncle they never met. Alan was born on Staten Island, and brought up on the edge of the country and town, with dramatic views of the sea and harbour and Ellis Island – so that as a small child he literally looked

towards Europe. He loved stories of knights and chivalry, and played endless, fearless games of adventure ‘in which he always died nobly’. When he was ten, trouble in the family business took them back to Mexico, where the children received a multicultural education with tutors, and grew up observing the dramatic beauty of the country. When in due course the two boys returned to the States, they went first to a Unitarian boarding school which laid stress on ‘the cultivation of beauty’ – and, it seems, on the cultivation of that sense of destiny which was to turn Alan into an icon: ‘The great thing which you are here for, which you are at school for anywhere, and which you are in the great school of life for, is to *become* [my italics]’.

But Alan – later in his short life a model of physical fitness and outgoing behaviour – suffered at this period in his life from ill health, which drove him on to his own resources: for several years he seems to have been an extreme introvert (there is an obvious parallel here with Siegfried Sassoon) and this reclusiveness lasted well into his career at Harvard, where he compared himself to an ‘anchorite’, spending all his time in the Library, often pursuing subjects which had nothing to do with his official studies. This extra-mural reading included the Celtic Revival – in the course of which he found a traditional song including the prophetic lines:

It is blindness for anyone making a tryst
to set aside the tryst with death ...

Above all, he immersed himself in the mediaeval period and chivalry (‘Malory, Froissart, Don Quixote, “Sir Walter” and other kindred spirits’):

Chivalry was a desired attribute of the military man, along with loyalty and personal honor. Valiant action was taken for the well-being of the community rather than for the benefit of the self, though the self was

endowed with power to find its own destiny [...] Bodily strength was important, but courage was a matter of the spirit and without limit. The exercise of strength in battle was necessary, but not to the exclusion of actions that would enhance the qualities of the soul. The fear of death was subordinate to the fear of dishonor.

At one stage, Seeger intended, like Milton before him, to write on an Arthurian topic; and some Miltonic influences (particularly that of ‘Lycidas’) are obvious in the early poems to which this book gives us access. Although there are evident Keatsian influences at work in the middle section of ‘Rendezvous’, the usual English chain through Shakespeare and the Romantics is not particularly obvious in Seeger – alongside Milton, there are clear technical and thematic debts to Spenser, Gray and FitzGerald. However, Chris Dickon is a journalist and historian rather than a literary scholar, and this book is not the place to look for detailed analysis of the poems in their own right.

At Harvard Seeger struck many (and it is hard not to agree with them) as a poseur, ‘disturbed and disturbing’, conscious of his own superiority and difference:

It was a passion to live fully, in his view, and those who followed it ‘are the supermen, the elite of humanity. Take as respective types Napoleon, Byron, Pico della Mirandola [a Florentine scholar and philosopher, a contemporary of Savonarola, who died young at the hands of a poisoner]. All superior minds attach themselves more or less to one of these three ideals’.

At Harvard also, he became known for romantic good looks, in a dark, gipsy-ish style (several people commented on his red lips). Rather strangely, we seem not to be told what kind of degree he eventually took – but after Harvard, he embraced the bohemian life, and moved to a literary boarding-house in Washington Square. Since his father had strict principles about not subsidising his

children with family money once their education was complete, Seeger was hard-up and depressed, but reluctant to take on an ordinary job:

... his 'chief direction in life is and always will be to Poetry and the pursuit of the Beautiful', and ... his requirements for a position would not be [those] which offered 'the best prospects of advancement, but what position involves the least offense to the more exquisite type of sensibility'.

Again, he struck some observers as spoiled, even obnoxious – and again it is hard to disagree:

My only salvation will be to die young, and to leave some monument, which being, if such a thing is possible, more beautiful than the life it commemorates, may seem to posterity an only and an adequate excuse for that life having been.

One companion commented that at this stage Seeger 'hated almost everything in life. His existence was one long hopeless search for beauty but he was incapable of seeing it in the common things about him'. Predictably enough in the circumstances, he began to fantasise about living in Paris, and to dress in a flamboyant, vaguely Byronic fashion – as though waiting for, or trying to create, a legend to match his sense of himself – 'wrapped in a cape (sometimes described as tattered) with a guitar strung over his shoulder (though there is no indication that he played the instrument)'.

In September 1912, he finally sailed for France, and took lodgings in the shadow of the Musée de Cluny, the museum of mediaeval art. He continued to live from hand to mouth, writing but not managing to publish anything, trying absinthe, and making literary and artistic contacts, including, apparently, Apollinaire, Ravel and Chagall. He loved the physicality of France, but saw its atmosphere as corrupt and 'anti-patriotic', unworthy of the country's

culture and traditions, which had once represented something loftier:

Art, music and literature told epic stories and pointed fables of love and valor. Language evolved from ancient societies, important enough to be learned and translated anew. Love at its best thrived in fidelity and honor. Again, the chivalrous individual was both gentle and strong. It could be a violent world, fueled by the demands of rulers and religion, and played out in battles and tournaments. The true knight would fight as required, with grace and good intention.

France, in those last pre-war years, felt itself threatened from outside: the romantic expatriate Seeger at this stage saw the threat as being from within. As with so many of his contemporaries at that time (Brooke, obviously, but also Owen) he had an embryonic sense that the world needed a violent cleansing.

In the summer of 1914 he was actually in England, trying to find a publisher – Robert Frost was trying to do much the same thing at the same time. Seeger was excited by war even before it had broken out, and saw it as part of a cosmic pattern:

We saw not clearly nor understood,
But yielding ourselves to the master hand,
Each in his part as best he could,
We played it through as the author planned.

He made his way rapidly back to France, to find that many of his companions had already joined up in one capacity or another. For Seeger there was no possibility of not joining in – not through hatred of Germany, but through love of France, and through that sense of destiny, and romantic death-wish, which is so familiar from other war poets:

Suddenly the world is up in arms. All mankind takes sides. The same faith that made him surrender himself

to the impulses of normal living and love, forces him now to make himself the instrument through which a greater force works out its inscrutable ends through the impulses of terror and repulsion. And with no less a sense of harmony with a universe where masses are in continual conflict and new combinations are engendered out of eternal collisions, he shoulders arms and marches forth with haste [...] death is a higher place than life.

The ‘ancient debt’ and the name of Lafayette were being constantly invoked in Francophile-American circles. Many – notably many Ivy League graduates from internationalist backgrounds – joined the British Army in Canada, or the medical services. And some, like Seeger, joined the French Foreign Legion, which in August 1914 was thrown open to volunteers: every ethnic group could carry its own flag. Those who joined included 150 Americans: they signed their names on the white stripes of their flag.

The French Foreign Legion, created to sustain France’s presence in her colonies...

was storied as a collection of misfits and troublemakers, those who inherently marched to different drummers, or none at all. An operating principle seemed to be a [lack of interest] in discipline for its own sake, but effectiveness in conflict that was driven by whatever the individual strong motives or apathies of its members. They could be recluses or revolutionaries, poets or professionals. It mattered little.

Alan Seeger to a T, one might say: and although he had certain snobbish objections to the company he was keeping (‘the dregs of society’) ultimately he remained loyal to the Legion even when he had the chance to move into more salubrious circles. In the Legion there would be more ‘adventure’: ‘it is for glory alone that I engaged’.

Meanwhile, Americans considering joining the Legion

or any other foreign force risked actually losing their American citizenship, though the US ambassador to France was personally sympathetic. The United States, busily involved in resisting Pancho Villa in Mexico, was not merely holding aloof from the European War: many forces were campaigning determinedly for non-involvement, claiming even that a German invasion of Canada might not be sufficient provocation. Interventionists like Seeger were not on their own, but they did risk being identified with the forces of privilege and reaction. Seeger identified himself with Theodore Roosevelt rather than with Woodrow Wilson, challenging America to live up to its own declared principles and values:

You are virile, combative, stubborn, hard,
But your honor ends with your own back-yard

The ‘virile, combative’ Seeger did actually spend a considerable amount of time in the line, if not always in the kind of action he craved. It cannot necessarily be said, as it is said of Brooke, that he would have changed his mind about the war if he had lived longer. His nephew Pete Seeger claimed that Alan had eventually seen the ‘reality’ of war, but if by this he means the realism of Sassoon or Owen, it does not appear in the poems. His early experiences of warfare seem merely to have reinforced his heroic expectations:

Craonne, before thy cannon-swept plateau,
Where like sere leaves lay strewn September’s dead,
I found for all dear things I forfeited
A recompense I would not now forego.
For that high fellowship was ours then ...

Julian Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’ had yet to be written, but the parallel with Grenfell’s ‘high comradeship’ is striking. Grenfell’s poem, unlike Seeger’s, singularly lacks *human* companionship – his protagonist is alone with Nature

– but Seeger has a similarly magical/mystical view of the part played by Nature in the ritual ceremony of war, ‘the elemental “Strife” of nature’; and a similarly lofty attitude towards death in battle:

Nothing but good can befall the soldier, so he plays his part well ... killed, more than any other man, he can face the unknown without misgiving - that is, so long as Death comes upon him in a moment of courage and enthusiasm, not of faltering or of fear.

Parallels with Brooke are obvious too. Within a few weeks of the death of Brooke, comparisons were being made between him and Seeger. Although his poems were not known at this stage, his journalism – letters and opinion articles in the American press - had given him a reputation, and some people were already mentioning him in the same breath as Brooke. He was not happy about that, feeling himself at a disadvantage. Chris Dickon, to my mind, rather overstates the differences between Seeger and Brooke, but it is undoubtedly the case that Seeger’s accounts, however lyrical, have their roots in lived experience as well as in the imagination – rather more than one could say of Brooke, though that was an accident of fate. Seeger’s day-to-day reality is where his experiences seem most different from those of the BEF: in parts of France – Champagne and the Vosges and Alsace – which were far more beautiful than Picardy, and living a life of brotherhood in international company, his accounts are at times almost ecstatic. One of Chris Dickon’s own undoubted strengths is his ability to convey the physical surroundings in a paragraph or so:

Trenches of either side were lined, if at all, with sandbags or with retaining walls of thatched branches that were reminiscent of the design of medieval gardens [...] Straw floors were especially welcoming for rats and other vermin, and, with enough materiel,

the soldiers could create cages to keep them away. Killed rats were often tied to overhead wires as an expression of at least some kind of victory. In some constructions, the earth removed to create a trench was used to build up parapets above the ground that could be tall enough to accommodate holes for gun sights and periscopes. And tree limbs laid across the opening could offer the structure for whatever further roofing could be improvised.

The military narrative is also blissfully concise, concrete and non-technical.

It was not until he had been under arms for a year that Seeger at last saw real action, in the second Battle of Champagne – and it is there that his diary ends, though his letters continued. As the battle ended in stalemate in October 1915, Seeger was, briefly and wrongly, reported to have been killed. At the same time, there appeared the first and only of his poems to be published in his lifetime. ‘Champagne 1914-15’, is reminiscent, in metre and tone, of Gray’s ‘Elegy in a Country Churchyard’ and Tennyson’s ‘In Memoriam’, and also contains some quasi-Brookean sentiments about becoming one with nature:

Obscurely sacrificed, his nameless tomb,
Bare of the sculptor’s art, the poet’s lines,
Summer shall flush with poppy-fields in bloom,
And Autumn yellow with maturing vines.

‘Rendezvous’ – first published in October 1916, after Seeger’s death - was probably written just before or just after Christmas 1915. During a spell of sick-leave in Biarritz (was this, as it were, his Craiglockhart? – characteristically, he was embarrassed to be there as a result of sickness rather than wounds) he *may* have had an affair, or at least a romantic relationship – quite possibly more fantastic than real - with an unnamed young woman hospital worker. She may have been the inspiration for some

love sonnets, and for the pseudo-Keatsian lines about romantic love in 'Rendezvous' (to my mind the worst lines in the poem):

God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath

But for Seeger, the rendezvous with death was kept at Belloy-en-Santerre, on the Somme, on American Independence Day, July 4th 1916. Some scholarly iconoclasts have tried to disprove this too-perfect date, but it seems to be true. Inevitably, it was not a case of midnight in some flaming town, or of ceasing upon the midnight with no pain: although the details are disputed, the rendezvous seems to have been as arbitrary for Seeger as it was for all the others. He seems to have been hit in several places, and to have taken some time to die, in great agony. How, during his dying hours, he might have thought about his destiny is something which of course we cannot guess: we must at least allow for the possibility that he retained all his old heroic convictions – or of course that he did not. Neither of these would necessarily make him a better or a worse poet.

At all events, in his literary and biographical afterlife, his family, his editors and his admirers chose to present him as having met the death he would have chosen. Chris Dickon comments on the fact that poets and poetry were news in those days: his poems, letters and diary were all published in rapid order, and a French translation also appeared very shortly. The works were an immediate and sustained success with the reading public, and with some reviewers – though other critics fairly noted the imitative, even occasionally facile, character of much of Seeger's verse: 'a certain easy talent', as one described it. Eliot, by that time

in England, evidently wanted to tread lightly over the post-humous reputation of someone whom he had known, but succeeded in damning with faint praise:

The work is well done and so much out of date as to be almost a positive quantity. It is high-flown, heavily decorated and solemn, but the solemnity is thoroughgoing, not a mere literary formality. Hence, if his vision seems theatrical, it is sincere.

None of this did anything to damage Seeger's mythic, iconic status. In death as in life, amidst the inevitable speculations as to what he might have become had he lived, he became a figurehead, a 'fiery evangel', for the movement to get America into the War. After the War, his parents, Charles and Elsie Seeger, in particular made it their task for the rest of their lives to commemorate him, keeping his death as a source of inspiration rather than as a tragedy. The royalties from the sustained sales of his writing went to help found the American Library in Paris, which kick-started the tradition of free public libraries in several other European countries. The parents helped to give back life to the ruined village where their son fell - restoring its destroyed trees and church bells. Belloy to this day is as proud of Seeger as Ors is of Wilfred Owen, and his name appears on the village war memorial alongside that of the other 'enfants de Belloy'. In Paris, the figure of Seeger provided a model for the memorial to the Americans who had died fighting for France, and his name was inscribed on the wall of the Panthéon. Elsewhere in France, public commemorations – often including a recitation of 'Rendezvous' – continued more or less up to the outbreak of the Second World War, and have been revived in recent times as the centenary approached. After many years of uncertainty as to where his body might have been buried, it seems likely that his remains are in the ossuary of the

Nécropole Nationale de Lihons, a few miles from Belloy; and his name has now been added to the engraved roll-call there.

Since this review has been written with access only to a pdf. text of the book, I cannot comment on its physical appearance, though the typeface is an attractive one. I hope, however, that if the book should run to a second edition, the author will employ the services of a different proof-reader. For a paperback volume costing £20, the inaccuracy of some of the text can at times be dismaying. On top of straightforward typos such as ‘ultimatim’, ‘beneficient’ and ‘immeditaley’, we encounter the ‘playwrite’ Ibsen and the ‘Franco-Russian’ war of 1870. And there is a disappointing lack of engagement with the French language for which, amongst other things, Seeger was fighting. French accent marks come and go randomly; we encounter ‘Appollinaire’ and the ‘Marseilaise’; ‘ainsi’ (*thus*) is translated as though it meant the same as ‘aussi’ (*also*) and ‘N’ayant pas de patrie’ (*having no homeland*) becomes the meaningless ‘Way ant pas de patrie’.

In the end, of course, it is that one poem which, rightly or wrongly, is Seeger’s striking memorial. In the words of Robert Graves, it finds ‘Beauty in death; in dead men, breath’, which no doubt is why it has been so much loved. It dramatises loneliness, courage, the speaker’s sense of his relationship with the universe, and it shares those qualities with other poems which perhaps warrant greater critical attention. Chris Dickon puts it succinctly: ‘The sub-conditions of time don’t apply’ – the poem *can* be judged on its own merits, but it would be artificial (not to say impractical) to look at it out of its context, and the context is what Chris Dickon provides very satisfyingly.

Meg Crane

