A black and white close-up portrait of a young man with dark, wavy hair, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He is wearing a dark military-style jacket. The background is dark and out of focus.

JOURNAL OF THE WAR POETS ASSOCIATION

WAR POETRY REVIEW
2020

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WAR POETRY REVIEW

2020

Edited by

Merryn Williams

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Dedicated in memory of Cecil Woolf

(1927-2019)



EDITORIAL

Our last issue, 2017-18, coincided with the centenary of the last days of the First World War. You will all remember the many programmes, publications, religious and other events commemorating that war and celebrating its poets – and now it is all over, you may think that there is nothing left to say. But that war did not end all wars and the War Poets Association is interested in what people have been writing about organised violence in all times, countries and languages. Jon Stallworthy's last work, *The New Oxford Book of War Poetry* (2014), begins with the Bible and Homer and illustrates war poetry's vast range.

So it seemed a good idea to begin with a poem by Joel Barlow, two hundred years old but very relevant, about Napoleon's deadly impact on Europe. Zooming forward in time, we note that several living poets remember the Second World War, that that war produced some great poetry, and that other anniversaries are coming up. The centenary of Keith Douglas (who was never likely to live to a ripe age) passed quietly on 24th January 2020. 1922 will mark the centenaries of Vernon Scannell, who survived that war, Sidney Keyes, who didn't, and Philip Larkin, who did not put on uniform but gave us the wonderful poem MCMXIV. Another poet not usually considered a war poet was Norman Nicholson, born 1914, too frail to fight in 1939-45, intensely aware of the potential horrors associated with the Cold War. Civilian voices are valuable and worth hearing too.

I'm very grateful to all those who have contributed to this Journal and wish I could have got more from outside Britain. It is dedicated to the memory of Cecil Woolf, whom so many of us remember with great affection and

who contributed so much to scholarship as the publisher of the War Poets series. His wife, Jean Moorcroft Wilson, is the distinguished biographer of Rosenberg, Thomas, Graves and Sassoon. Their work will endure.

Merryn Williams

ADVICE TO A RAVEN IN RUSSIA (1812)

Joel Barlow

Black fool, why winter here? These frozen skies,
Worn by your wings and deafened by your cries,
Should warn you hence, where milder suns invite,
And day alternates with his mother night.

You fear perhaps your food will fail you there,
Your human carnage, that delicious fare
That lured you hither, following still your friend
The great Napoleon to the world's bleak end.
You fear, because the southern climes poured forth
Their clustering nations to infest the north,
Bavarians, Austrians, those who drink the Po
And those who skirt the Tuscan seas below,
With all Germania, Neustria, Belgia, Gaul,
Doomed here to wade through slaughter to their fall,
You fear he left behind no wars, to feed
His feathered cannibals and nurse the breed.

Fear not, my screamer, call your greedy train,
Sweep over Europe, hurry back to Spain,
You'll find his legions there; the valiant crew
Please best their master when they toil for you.
Abundant there they spread the country o'er
And taint the breeze with every nation's gore,
Iberian, Russian, British widely strown,
But still more wide and copious flows their own.

Go where you will; Calabria, Malta, Greece,
Egypt and Syria still his fame increase,
Domingo's fattened isle and India's plains
Glow deep with purple drawn from Gallic veins.
No Raven's wing can stretch the flight so far
As the torn bandrols of Napoleon's war.

Choose then your climate, fix your best abode,
He'll make you deserts and he'll bring you blood.

How could you fear a dearth? have not mankind,
Though slain by millions, millions left behind?
Has not Conscription still the power to wield
Her annual falchion o'er the human field?
A faithful harvester! or if a man
Escape that gleaner, shall he scape the Ban?
The triple Ban, that like the hound of hell
Gripes with three jowls, to hold his victim well.

Fear nothing then, hatch fast your ravenous brood,
Teach them to cry to Bonaparte for food;
They'll be like you, of all his suppliant train,
The only class that never cries in vain.
For see what mutual benefits you lend!
(The surest way to fix the mutual friend)
While on his slaughtered troops your tribes are fed,
You cleanse his camp and carry off his dead.
Imperial Scavenger! but now you know
Your work is vain amid these hills of snow.
His tentless troops are marbled through with frost
And change to crystal when the breath is lost.
Mere trunks of ice, though limbed like human frames
And lately warmed with life's endearing flames,
They cannot taint the air, the world impest,
Nor can you tear one fibre from their breast.
No! from their visual sockets, as they lie,
With beak and claws you cannot pluck an eye.
The frozen orb, preserving still its form,
Defies your talons as it braves the storm,
But stands and stares to God, as if to know
In what curst hands he leaves his world below.

Fly then, or starve; though all the dreadful road

From Minsk to Moscow with their bodies strowed
May count some myriads, yet they can't suffice
To feed you more beneath these dreary skies.
Go back, and winter in the wilds of Spain;
Feast there awhile, and in the next campaign
Rejoin your master; for you'll find him then,
With his new million of the race of men,
Clothed in his thunders, all his flags unfurled,
Raging and storming o'er the prostrate world.

War after war his hungry soul requires,
State after State shall sink beneath his fires,
Yet other Spains in victim smoke shall rise
And other Moscows suffocate the skies,
Each land lie reeking with its people's slain
And not a stream run bloodless to the main.
Till men resume their souls, and dare to shed
Earth's total vengeance on the monster's head,
Hurl from his blood-built throne this king of woes,
Dash him to dust, and let the world repose.

December 1812

Joel Barlow (1754-1812) was an American poet, diplomat and radical. He died of pneumonia in Poland on Boxing Day 1812 after witnessing the horrors of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

THE STONEMASON

Gladys Mary Coles

My name is Legion, for we are many'

Mark, v. 9

He's sure of each new name he carves in marble,
Precision in his chipping out by chisel –

Each hammer tap exact to sculpt a letter,
He's not employed to grieve or show he's bitter

But merely etch the names and regiments,
The years and very finest sentiments.

He has to keep a steady hand and nerve,
Try not to picture faces young, naïve,

Clear-eyed, smooth-skinned beneath their caps and
badges,
Consigned to death's red mouth, hell's hostages.

He mustn't think of flesh or the distress
Of mothers, wives, or children's life-long loss.

He's now at work in every town and region
Inscribing names in stone. These names are legion.

THE XXIIInd BIENNALE

Tony Curtis

This summer of Nineteen Forty – unforgettable
Venice,
Our white-sailed yacht with the men working aloft
Taking its place with a flotilla on the milky green
waters
Of the lagoon between the Lido and St Mark's.

Last night Joseph was in triumph on the balcony of
the palace
With minister Alfieri echoing his praise of il Duce;
The crowd packed into the torch-lit square,
Then jostling to get closer to us at the Café Florian.

This Biennale celebrates Veronese the Master,
But Sciltian's modern tricks – his *trompe l'oeil* and
nature morte,
Impressed us too. Of course, there are no British or
French this year,
And the Americans are degenerate, impure; they
have no art.

Here on the lagoon one can put aside the strategies
of war;
The French have collapsed and so surely shall the
British.
Joseph is relaxed on deck in his white slacks, hat and
sunglasses;
Though each day the aeroplane brings state papers
to be read.
One dark cloud: his staff, hearing him say how
much he missed
His Airedale, flew over today with the dog on board
– fools!

FRANK 'TORONTO' PREWETT

An excerpt from the Introduction to *Trauma, Primitivism, and the Making of Frank "Toronto" Prewett* by Joy Porter, forthcoming from Bloomsbury

Joy Porter

This is an analysis of how the first world war affected one of the finest Canadian poets of the First World War, Frank 'Toronto' Prewett. War-induced trauma or "shell-shock" led him to 'play Indian', that is, to pretend to be an indigenous North American, whilst in hospital undergoing treatment for 'shell-shock' and afterwards when living in Oxfordshire. He was accepted as indigenous by some of the most significant literary figures of the time, notably Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden – key members of the group of first world war poets brought into critical relief in 1975 by Paul Fussell. Often thought of as quintessentially English poets, they continue to stand in symbolic guard over the cultural memory of the war.¹ Prewett also 'played Indian' to great effect within an exceptional literary and intellectual milieu that included Lady Ottoline Morrell, Virginia and Leonard Woolf and W.H.R. Rivers as well as a great many others. This first book-length consideration of Prewett as a poet of combat-induced trauma directly connects his adoption of an indigenous identity to both his experiences in war and the primitivist cultural currents of the time.

This volume foregrounds a number of archives new to scholarship including the Lennel Papers held at the National Records of Scotland and sheds light upon an

1 They are figures of memory in Jan Assman's phrase. Jan Assmann. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Beck, 1977.

individual whose life, associations and work merit much greater exposure, but it does not attempt a conventional biography or pronounce critically upon Prewett's poetry in total, the worth of his literary style or his status as a Canadian icon. Instead, the focus is solely upon war-induced trauma, primitivism and the brief, bright snapshot of Prewett's life and thought around the time of the war and its aftermath revealed by the available archives. Those seeking a detailed recovery of Prewett's family history and experiences from birth to death or discussion of his poetry as it relates to anything other than his experience of war are asked to await further studies.

Prewett was profoundly affected by combat. A Canadian promoted into the British Expeditionary Force, he experienced some of the worst fighting at Passchendaele, the Somme, the Second Battle of Ypres and Vimy, the battle often held up as the coming of age conflict for Canada as a nation on the world stage. As a Lieutenant in the 5B Reserve Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery, he was thrown from his horse at the Somme early on 1916, and sustained a serious spinal wound. He then spent a year in hospital in England recovering, before returning to the front as an officer with the Royal Welch Fusiliers, the regiment revered by Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves throughout their lives. Prewett was buried alive in April 1918 after a dug-out collapsed on top of him during combat, but he managed to claw his way out with his bare hands. Deeply traumatized and badly wounded in the spine, he was sent once again first to hospital in southern England, then to recuperate in Scotland at Craiglockhart, and following this to Lennel House on the Scottish Borders. Here, like Siegfried Sassoon, he received



*Frank Prewett at Garsington 1919, Photo by Lady Ottoline Morrell
National Portrait Gallery*

care from the influential Cambridge anthropologist and psychologist, W. H. R. Rivers. At Lennel, he began to dress and behave as an 'Iroquois Indian'. He formed attachments that led to his being introduced to the literary set that orbited around Garsington Manor, Oxfordshire,

at the time a clearing house for creative talent and the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell and her husband, Philip, a pacifist Member of the British Parliament.

In this way Prewett's life interconnected with some of the early twentieth century's most significant literary and cultural figures. One intimate circle contained Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who hand-set his first book *Poems* (1921) at the Hogarth Press, William Heineman, who published his second collection, *Rural Scene* (1924), Siegfried Sassoon, who fell in love with Prewett and remained his friend and benefactor; Robert Graves, who consistently championed his talent, included his work in *Oxford Poetry 1921* and edited his *Collected Poems* (1964), and the Morrells, vital benefactors and employers for Prewett during and after the war. A wider circle whom Prewett either met, corresponded or had sustained interactions with included the painters Mark Gertler and Dorothy Brett, the translator S.S. Koteliansky and the writers and poets Lytton Strachey, Aldous Huxley, Ezra Pound, D.H. Lawrence, Edmund Blunden, poet laureate John Masefield, T.E. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield and her husband John Middleton Murray, Edward Marsh, W.B. Yeats, the Sitwells and Thomas Hardy, a particular influence. Prewett also met Harold Monro, who included his work in *Georgian Poetry V*. Other Garsington visitors he encountered included T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster and Walter de la Mare. Prewett was therefore a remarkable intellect caught up at an extraordinary time with exceptional people.

A significant number of the post-war intellectual élite were convinced he would be the next big literary splash. Virginia Woolf, after Prewett's first book came out, wrote to Lytton Strachey on 29 August, 1921, 'The [*Times*]

Literary Supplement, by the way, says that Prewett *is* a poet, perhaps a great one.² Siegfried Sassoon was convinced Prewett was special from the moment he set eyes upon him. He told fellow poet Robert Graves, ‘Toronto is a great man, and will be a great writer, – greater than you or me, because of his simplicity of mind and freedom from intellectual prejudices’. Graves, for his part, remained convinced all of his life of Prewett’s literary importance. His introduction to Prewett’s posthumous *Collected Poems* states, ‘dedicated poets like Frank Prewett are few in any age; and lamentably so in this’.²

Such strong personal impact was rooted in Prewett’s inherent charisma, his good looks and his self-presentation as a glamorous figure from another culture. Fresh from the war, he said he had either Iroquois, Mohawk or Sioux ancestry. It helped that he looked and acted every inch the movie version of a ‘Native brave’. Adroit on a horse, he liked to ride shirtless, was prone to brooding silences and made a point of giving others the sense that he possessed both profound sensitivity and a kinship with nature. At five feet nine with a dark complexion, high cheekbones, hot, deep-set hazel eyes and dark hair, he reminded those he met of the Italian movie star Rudolph Valentino. One of the strongest literary and emotional engagements he formed was with Lady Ottoline Morrell, the remarkable beauty and aristocratic patroness whom Lytton Strachey memorably described as the daughter of a thousand earls. Dorothy Brett and Siegfried Sassoon also became deeply emotionally engaged with Prewett, along with a number of other visitors to Garsington after

2 Robert Graves, ‘Introduction’, *The Collected Poems of Frank Prewett*, (Cassell, 1920) p.viii. (CPFP)

the war.³ As the artist Mark Gertler remarked with some chagrin in 1921, ‘Women seem rather taken with him, goodness knows why...’ Even towards the end of his life, after Prewett had been an alcoholic for many years because of demons he linked to psychological trauma caused by the war, he was still attractive. The artist Vivienne Jenkins was forced to admit when she created Prewett’s bust late in his life, ‘There was something about him to which you could not help being drawn.’

Prewett felt he was a man apart and that his literary voice was attuned to generations far in the future instead of to the morés of his own time. He wrote that he heard ‘a hard but true music, and do not belong to the cant of the age.’ When he was living at Garsington he confessed to Edmund Blunden, ‘I occasionally get a moment in which I see more than this world’ and even though he suffered acute poverty following the war, he never wavered from this profound commitment to his own sense of literary integrity. He knew that if poetry presented ‘new and halting expressions’, then the general public would not like it, as he explained to Lady Clementine Waring, the aristocrat with whom he became fast friends when he spent time recuperating at her home Lennel House in 1918. Yet he was also convinced that ‘If truth and sincerity are inherent in art, sooner or later that art is recognized.’⁴ Graves, as his dear friend and a fellow veteran, put it differently, and wrote that Prewett ‘felt it his duty to write at the

3 The phrase describing Ottoline Morrell as “the daughter of a thousand earls” is attributed to Lytton Strachey, and was probably meant partly as an insult.

4 Frank Prewett to Clementine Waring, from Garsington, 6 September, 1919, NRS, e2/117.

orders of the daemon who rode him.⁵

What made Prewett's poetry unique was its particular approach to truth. He was prepared to discuss the psychological harshness necessary to survival in war and to acknowledge the horror that haunted the conscious and unconscious mind following proximity to danger and death. He was also prepared to both confront depression and deathly thoughts and to weigh up the possibilities for joy and love in a post-war world increasingly alienated from the rhythms of nature. He stands, therefore, as an early and significant modern poet of trauma. If, for Wilfred Owen (who was fascinated by Prewett and read his work in the trenches) 'the poetry was in the pity', for 'Toronto' Prewett, poetry was an imperfect means to attempt to articulate the trauma that attended the modern soul. He thought of war as a necessary and ageless experience and his literary focus was not upon how it might be prevented in future, but upon how its effects might be coped with in a world increasingly bereft of certainties, subject to large-scale change and unanchored in tradition. His war poetry often had an immediacy, directness and candor that resonates deeply with modern sensibilities in ways analogous and at the same time discrete from, that of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg.

After the war, Prewett did not lapse into romance for

5 See Frank Prewett to Edmund Blunden, 10 Dec. 1921, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, The University of Texas at Austin, (HRC), Edmund Charles Blunden Coll., Recipient series; Robert Graves, who at times had little respect for details like facts, described Prewett in the Introduction to the CFPF in a way that was as descriptive of himself as it was of Prewett. He claimed that Prewett had explained that his daemon "had told him to attempt the simple beyond simplicity, the sensuous beyond sense, the distainment of mere fact.", CFPF, p.viii.

the English landscape as did Sassoon, or at least, he did not do so consistently. Rather, Prewett's focus remained the challenge of living with the legacy of historical trauma and of finding ways to cherish and preserve human relationships to land and to nature in an era of agricultural industrialization.⁶ Although deeply influenced by Sassoon and by Owen (whom he partly replaced in Sassoon's affections at Lennel House), Prewett's aesthetic project was to find a way to get beyond both language and the experience of suffering. He considered words 'not the means, but the obstacles to expression'. The literary and personal challenge of his post-war life was to recapture the emotional immediacy lost by having been a soldier. He wrote in an attempt to restore what had been taken from him in war - a secure internal platform from which to express emotion. 'I cannot write,' as he put it in 1919, 'simply because I experience no deep emotion. I stand still, and the world spins around me.'⁷

6 For examples of fossilized language, steeped in a particular understanding of the 'timelessness' of the English landscape, see Edmund Blunden's *The Face of England*, New York: Longman's, Green & Co, 1932 and Sassoon's *Rhymed Ruminations*, London: Faber, 1940.

7 Frank Prewett, HRC, 17 October, 1919, quoted in Andrew Coppolino, p.38.

NORMAN NICHOLSON AND WARTIME

Andrew Frayn

The Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson might seem an unlikely figure to engage with through the lens of war. If today he is remembered at all, he is probably best known for his acutely observed conversational poems, such as the widely-anthologised 'Rising Five', and his meticulous, evocative descriptions of his home town Millom and the surrounding area in industrial south-west Cumbria, a town founded on the Victorian discovery of a huge seam of iron ore and pointedly excluded from the designation of the Lake District National Park. However, Nicholson was born in 1914, months before the First World War, and that conflict provided many of his formative memories. He began his memoir, *Wednesday Early Closing* (1975), with his mother's death in the influenza epidemic of 1919, an event that shaped his life and which he connected with the war.¹ He came to artistic consciousness as Fascism was on the rise in Europe in the 1930s, and his earliest major publications were during the Second World War: he edited *An Anthology of Religious Verse* (1942), published critical work on contemporary literature in *Man and Literature*, and saw his first sole-authored volume into print, *Five Rivers* (1944). Wartime was a doubly formative experience for Nicholson. A civilian in the Second World War due to the adolescent bout of tuberculosis which kept him in Millom all his life and forced him to earn a living by the pen, Nicholson's work registers the pervasive impact of war on the civilian experience in subtle and interesting ways.

1 Norman Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 11.

Most of Cumbria, in the form of the Lake District, has today been fixed, at least in the imagination, into a perpetual tranquil pastoral. However, Nicholson was conscious of his home county as contested territory: 'In the Lake District proper it is possible to forget that Cumberland is a Border county', he wrote in *A Portrait of the Lakes* (1963).² He repeatedly invokes his middle name, Cornthwaite, and its derivation from Scandinavian ancestry, signifying a clearing among the corn.³ He understands the visceral impact of war and is clear about its violence: 'Farms and churches were burned, cattle driven off and slaughtered, women raped, children impaled on spikes, abbeys plundered, monks murdered, nuns stripped and violated.'⁴ He posits that Carlisle 'still seems to be in an uneasy state of Border truce'.⁵ Nicholson's ability to imagine man's inhumanity to man and the pain of human existence informs all of his poetry. His work always has in mind the relationship between man's imprint in the form of industry and the natural world, and Nicholson is not misty-eyed about the past, even in his guidebooks and topographical works - a view of the Lake District as necessarily connected to its past conflicts and present industry that Charlie Gere has recently put far more polemically.⁶

Nicholson remembered throughout his life the importance of the First World War in forming his childish consciousness. A favoured anecdote was his refusal to

2 Norman Nicholson, *A Portrait of the Lakes*, Second Edition (1963; London: Robert Hale, 1972), p. 81.

3 Kathleen Jones, *Norman Nicholson: The Whispering Poet* (Appleby: The Book Mill, 2013), p. 22.

4 Nicholson, *Portrait of the Lakes*, p. 84.

5 Norman Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland* (London: Robert Hale, 1969), p. 197.

6 See Charlie Gere, *I Hate the Lake District* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2019).

participate in the War Savings scheme, and he recounts ‘clutching my money-box to my miserly chest and howling my eyes out.’ The mature Nicholson, looking back with Pip-esque sagacity at his young self, reflected that ‘looking back, I am glad that I refused to be a War Profiteer.’⁷ In his topographical book *Greater Lakeland*, he asserted that his ‘earliest recollection of anything outside the house’ was of his father being brought home injured from war work at the Millom Ironworks in the company’s car, a novelty in 1918.⁸ The omnipresence of the war, even for a child living his first years through the conflict, was palpable, its long shadow unavoidable: ‘all these early memories are associated with the War, which, even for a child of five, was the weather in which we all lived.’⁹ That weather would endure after the war, as Nicholson’s school bought a wooden hut which had housed Belgian refugees during the war for use as a gymnasium.¹⁰ Nicholson made a career out of careful descriptions of the natural world, and this metaphor is particularly apposite: the miasma of wartime is omnipresent and inescapable: it constitutes the atmosphere and pervades everyone’s experience of the world. These early memories are revealing for the way that they came to shape Nicholson’s life and poetry.

An attack of tuberculosis at the turn of the 1930s radically reshaped Nicholson’s life and career, his poor health being a key reason he never lived away from Millom. He felt an outsider in his home town, unable to labour manually when most of its male population were employed in the Hodbarrow iron ore mines and the Millom ironworks. The family connected his illness with the First World War

7 Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 12.

8 Nicholson, *Greater Lakeland*, p. 18.

9 Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 12.

10 Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 25.

which ‘broke over us, with all its privations and hazards making it a struggle to bring up even a healthy child. My father was convinced that most of the illnesses of my youth and early manhood were due, primarily, to the “war bread.”’¹¹ Illness and weakness must, for them, have a source outside of heredity and the epochal nature of the conflict provides a point of origin. The post-war world is also defined by the conflict, as Nicholson was acutely aware: ‘the War was over and a dull post-war slum was hanging around on the streets like a sour, dirty mist’, and the women of the town ‘in their late twenties or middle thirties who were, I suppose, really casualties of the war, widowed before they were married.’¹² While the myth of the ‘lost generation’ has increasingly been challenged, it was a pervasive narrative in the interwar years.¹³

The link between war and empire is highlighted in an early formative experience that pushed Nicholson towards a career in poetry. Raised a Methodist by his father and stepmother, the young Nicholson was picked to act as compere of the Sunday concert. His party piece was to recite Rudyard Kipling’s poem ‘Big Steamers’ (1911), which was alternatively titled ‘Modern War’, and which at times was misleadingly subtitled ‘(1914-1918)’ due to its popularity in the First World War.¹⁴ The poem depicts the apparently benign exchange of English coal for food from around the world and concludes with the

11 Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 17.

12 Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 41, p. 100.

13 Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), particularly ch. 3.

14 On the publication history see Peter Keating, ‘Big Steamers – notes’, *The Kipling Society* <http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg_bigsteamers1.htm> [accessed 24 January 2020]. The Kipling Society’s website is an excellent repository of works, their histories, and explanatory notes.

dual recognition both that England is reliant on goods from overseas and that militarism is necessary to protect this trade:

‘Send out your big warships to watch your big waters,
That no one may stop us from bringing you food.

*“For the bread that you eat and the biscuits you nibble,
The sweets that you suck and the joints that they carve,
They are brought to you daily by All Us Big Steamers
And if any one hinders our coming you’ll starve.”*¹⁵

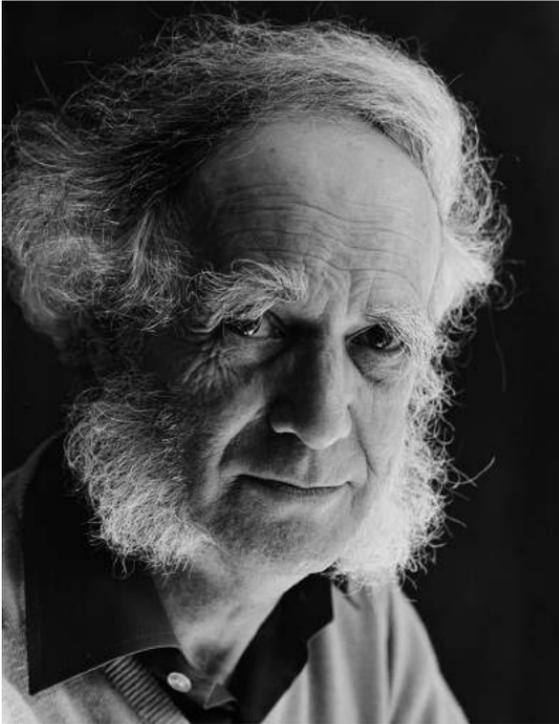
The poem is typical of Kipling’s verse, patriotic but not blind to the problems of imperial trade. The popular appeal of this verse aroused in Nicholson ‘for the first time, the lovely, dangerous, electric power of verse to excite and communicate.’¹⁶ Nicholson’s voice was affected by his tuberculosis but this, in time, would make him a memorable, compelling reader of his own verse, the once-necessary whisper to protect his throat becoming a feature of his readings, and a key factor in his being remembered: Kathleen Jones’s 2013 biography is subtitled *The Whispering Poet*.

Already a young writer with a burgeoning reputation and publication record by the beginning of the Second World War, Nicholson’s poetic reputation was solidified during it by editing the Penguin *Anthology of Religious Verse: Designed for the Times* (1942). The subtitle alludes to, but stops short of articulating, the ongoing conflict which was then in some of its darkest days: that year began with

15 Rudyard Kipling, ‘Big Steamers’, in C.R.L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling, *A School History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), pp. 235-6 (p. 236).

16 Nicholson, *Wednesday Early Closing*, p. 105.

the Declaration by United Nations that formalised the Allies, and saw the German march towards Stalingrad and the Guadalcanal campaign. Religious narratives are themselves rooted in the acceptance of present pain with the promise of future reward, and the enduring power



*Norman Nicholson 1986.
Alamy Stock Photo*

of faith in wartime is evident from the success of this volume, perhaps just as much despite as because of Nicholson's selection. He defends his selection in the brief introduction:

The structure of the book is Christian, in that it deals with the modern man's conception of God, and his life in relation to God. I have not, however, asked any poet to say his catechism before he was admitted to the volume, and the reader will find some who are not professing Christians, but who, in the poems I have chosen, seem to me to express a Christian point of view.¹⁷

The conceptual groupings in the volume (Worship and Praise; Man; Calendar; Christendom; Prophecy; Gloria) would be recognisable to readers looking for reassurance; many familiar and appropriate authors were represented in the collection, such as G.K. Chesterton, Thomas Hardy, Gerard Manley Hopkins and W.B. Yeats. Familiarity is an important aspect of any wartime writing that aspires to reassure and console, and looking to the past speaks the desire during wartime to revert to the previous peacetime state.¹⁸ Some of Nicholson's choices of contemporary poets were friends who were or would become important figures in Christian circles in England. T.S. Eliot had only recently converted to Anglicanism, a shift which was becoming increasingly evident in his work;

Nicholson converted to Anglicanism at the age of 22; Nicholson's close friend Brother George Every, of the Society of the Sacred Mission, appears in the collection and was his closest friend for many years; Nicholson would attend the Society's retreats at Kelham Hall in Nottinghamshire, which was occupied by military

17 Norman Nicholson, Introduction to *An Anthology of Religious Verse: Designed for the Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1942), pp. ix-x (pp. ix-x).

18 For a conceptual discussion of wartime, see Mary L. Dudziak, *War-Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

personnel in both world wars.¹⁹ Also included in the volume was ‘a clergyman called Andrew Young whose poems had caught Norman’s eye in the magazine *New Verse*’.²⁰

Some selections, however, were challenging and even controversial: the grouping by concept allowed Nicholson to take a progressive stance in terms of doctrine and literary form. The avant-garde artist and poet David Gascoyne would not have been an obvious choice for the volume, but most likely to ruffle feathers was his inclusion of D.H. Lawrence. A pariah during the First World War for his German wife, his uncompromising attitude and the controversy surrounding *The Rainbow* (1915), Lawrence also wrote intriguing war verse.²¹ Both Nicholson and Lawrence were concerned with the impact of mechanisation, industry, and industrial decline on people, exemplified by Lawrence’s trenchant essays of the 1920s such as ‘On Being a Man’, his withering critique of the groupthink of those who fought in the First World War.²² That Nicholson saw Lawrence as Christian

19 The correspondence between Nicholson and Every was clearly vital to both men, and highly personal. At some point between the writing of Philip Gardner’s thesis in the late 1960s and Nicholson’s death in 1987, Every and Nicholson agreed to destroy large parts of their correspondence (see Jones, pp. 187-8). A private man with the attitudes of his generation, Nicholson’s reticence about expressing his feelings is evidenced in his generally outward-looking and observational poetry. We are left only with the fragments of this correspondence presented in Gardner’s thesis and the book version, *Norman Nicholson* (Boston: Twayne, 1973).

20 Jones, p. 85.

21 For an accessible count of Lawrence’s First World War and poetry, see Andrew Frayn, ‘Attachments and coping towards the end of the First World War: D.H. Lawrence’s *Bay* (1919)’ <<http://www.ucd.ie/humanities/events/podcasts/2015/wartime-attachments/>> [accessed 24 January 2020].

22 D. H. Lawrence, ‘On Being a Man’, in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert (1925; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 211-22.

is perhaps surprising given his reputation for fleshliness, exemplified by the prosecution of *The Rainbow*, the banning of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and the forced withdrawal of his paintings from the Warren Street exhibition. The poems that Nicholson selects here, however, do not shy away from the bodily, but also demonstrate Lawrence in philosophical mode. 'Shadows', despite being listed by Nicholson as the poem of a 'Pagan' man – one wonders whether this was his own view, or an acknowledgment of Lawrence's controversial reputation – directly invokes a conventionally capitalised God, and an acknowledgment of man's temporariness, with its conclusion that:

I am in the hands of the unknown God,
he is breaking me down to his own oblivion
to send me forth on a new morning, a new man.²³

Indeed, the linking strand with the other work by Lawrence, a series of extracts from 'The Ship of Death' is the reference to oblivion. Lawrence's pessimism about the world feels appropriate for the times, accentuating the fragility of the body in the modern world. 'Piecemeal the body dies,' he mourns, 'and the timid soul / has her footing washed away, as the dark flood rises.'²⁴ Oblivion, Lawrence argues in this poem, will come to us all. His stance is much more fire and brimstone than Nicholson's, but there is no mistaking the religious underpinnings of his work. The recognition of man's impermanence was timely in 1942, but for Nicholson Lawrence's work must have felt doubly pertinent: both poems were written in

23 Lawrence, 'Shadows', in *An Anthology of Religious Verse*, pp. 38-9 (p. 39)

24 Lawrence, 'The Ship of Death (Extracts)', in *An Anthology of Religious Verse*, pp. 55-8 (p. 56).

the last months of Lawrence's life in late 1929 as he was dying of tuberculosis, and published posthumously in *Last Poems* (1932).²⁵

Nicholson's increasing prominence as an editor, critic and commentator facilitated the publication of his own poetry. He was drafted into a three-author *Selected Poems* (1943) alongside Keith Douglas, perhaps the pre-eminent poet of the Second World War, and his friend J.C. Hall (who would become Douglas's literary executor after his death in Normandy in 1944), after their friend Alan Rook contracted a sole-authored collection. Nicholson's contributions were mainly inspired by religion and nature. Eight of the poems published in the collaborative *Selected Poems* reappeared in Nicholson's *Five Rivers*, his first solo collection which was published the following year. The war was proximate even in south-west Cumberland, particularly after the establishment of RAF Millom in 1943. The remoteness of Millom meant that it was ideal for training and storing aircraft; the wartime RAF base is now partly Haverigg prison, and partly has been returned to farmland.²⁶ Nicholson was not fit to serve in the military and did not believe so passionately as Douglas in the value of conflict, but his position as thoughtful observer meant that he was acutely sensitive to the uncanny changes in his environment. Two key new strands appeared in *Five Rivers*: firstly, an acute awareness of the temporary nature of heavy industry and the inevitability of its

25 On the composition of the 'Nettles' and 'Last Poems' notebooks, from which the *Last Poems* (Florence: G. Orioli, 1932) were selected, see D.H. Lawrence, *The Poems*, ed. by Christopher Pollnitz, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), vol. 2, pp. 798-804.

26 'Cumbria's airfields helped win Second World War battle for the skies', *The Mail*, 31 July 2017 <<http://www.nwemail.co.uk/Cumbrias-airfields-helped-win-Second-World-War-battle-for-the-skies-2246d149-4695-43be-a63a-30f0e4cefddd-ds>> [accessed 24 January 2020].

decline which would recur consistently; secondly, the impact of war.

A teenager during the Great Depression, Nicholson is interested from early in his career in what happens when industry leaves areas that have developed because of it. He sees the exploitation of natural resources as part of a much longer history, the ebb and flow of the tide often standing in for the currents of the natural world. In *Five Rivers* he is already conscious of the waxing and waning of the icons of modernity. ‘Whitehaven’ gives a sense of this decline, as ‘Barnacle, cockle, crab and mussel / Suck at the pier’s decaying gristle’. This is rewilding years before George Monbiot, taking place ‘at the Atlantic’s dying edge.’²⁷ The ethical problems of industry and capital come to the fore in the eight stanzas of his poem ‘Cleator Moor’ which illustrate formally the boom and bust, a one-stanza boom in the fourth stanza precipitating a volta towards decline and decay. The wartime context becomes clear, along with the interrelatedness of industry and modern conflict: ‘In Cleator Moor they dig for death.’²⁸ The penultimate stanza jarringly and startlingly adjusts the rhythm to make the point clear: ‘Évery knúckle of sóft óre / A búllet ín a sóldier’s éar.’²⁹ Wartime is for the most part in the collection a looming presence that occupies the mind and happens close by, rather than impacting directly on daily life. The problem is a thorny

27 Norman Nicholson, ‘Whitehaven’, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Neil Curry (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), pp. 18-20 (p. 18). Hereafter *CP*. See also Andrew Gibson, ‘“At the Dying Atlantic’s Edge: Norman Nicholson and the Cumbrian Coast”, in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, ed. by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 77-90. George Monbiot, *Feral: rewilding the land, sea and human life* (London: Penguin, 2014).

28 Nicholson, ‘Cleator Moor’, *CP*, pp. 16-17 (p. 16).

29 Nicholson, ‘Cleator Moor’, *CP*, p. 17. Scansion marks by the author.

one for Nicholson, given his Christian faith: industry enables the towns themselves to survive as communities, but it also enables the killing of vast numbers of people.

Nicholson registers the war strongly in its relative impact on the natural world. Several poems in *Five Rivers* invoke the war in their titles, such as 'Bombing Practice'. In a Nicholsonian device, the title event is overtly represented in only one of the four stanzas of the poem. The early stanzas describe the tranquil scene in the estuary, the haze of a summer's day punctuated only by birds flying and calling, before the larger mechanical birds become the focus. The final couplet of the second of four sestets shifts the subject through its jarring half-rhyme: 'A curlew flies crying along the gullies; / A faint rainbow of oil is clogged in the thin rushes.'³⁰ The particularities, however, are only in the naming of the machine:

The swinging aeroplane drops seed through the air
Plumb into the water, where slowly it grows
Boles of smoke and trees
Of swelling and ballooning leafage'.³¹

Violence is represented only metaphorically; it is observed rather than experienced. Similarly, 'Stalingrad: 1942' represents obliquely its message about horrors and privations of the siege, focusing instead on forbearance and perseverance. The metaphor of natural strength is a longstanding motif for dealing with oppression and hardship with precedents in, for instance, Chartist poetry.³² As in 'Bombing Practice', the poem turns at the

30 Nicholson, 'Bombing Practice', *CP*, p. 28.

31 Nicholson, 'Bombing Practice', *CP*, p. 28.

32 Michael Sanders, 'Poetic Agency: Metonymy and Metaphor in Chartist Poetry 1838-1852', *Victorian Poetry*, 39.2 (2001), 111-36.

mid-point, here of four quatrains, towards the city itself:

Stalingrad now has stood the flood of fire,
Three moons of tide, for more than eighty days;
And this for more than eighty hundred year
Has borne the barrage of the western seas.³³

Nicholson is keen to assert that the city will endure, the wartime context bringing urgency to his beliefs about the relationship between man's evanescence and the permanence of the natural world. What it is called may change, the buildings may disappear, the landscape may shift, but the earth will remain: 'the city will not change, though blood / Settle like ore in the red veins of rock.'³⁴

Nicholson's landscape in this volume is suffused with war. It pokes through in occasional lines or stanzas even when the poems are not focussed on the conflict, a distant factor whose imprint cannot be escaped. A repeated motif for Nicholson is the calendar and its relationship to the natural world, which he picks up in his anthology to point to the cyclicity of existence. In 'Shortest Day, 1942', 'the town huddles beneath a dark / Drizzle of misery, and the wind / Flings down sleet from the frozen fells of war.' The effects of the winter weather are conflated with the impact of distant artillery, as 'The wind blows holes in the sky; the rain / Shines on the road like tin'.³⁵ The war comes directly into view in 'Waiting for Spring 1943', which desires the shoots of recovery that come from the turning of the seasons:

33 Nicholson, 'Stalingrad: 1942', *CP*, p. 52.

34 Nicholson, 'Stalingrad: 1942', *CP*, p. 52.

35 Both quotations Nicholson, 'Shortest Day, 1942', *CP*, p. 65.

So also we
On the perimeter and fringe of war,
Open to the sunlight and the wind from the western sea,
Wounded by the knife of winter, still
Feel the bright blood rise[.]³⁶

The ongoing conflict is depicted as a physical wound, and Nicholson goes on in subsequent stanzas to acknowledge the pain of loss, echoing his inspiration and mentor Eliot in the recognition that ‘To those defeated by the winter’s cold / Spring is a terrible season’.³⁷ Where spring is usually the marker of rebirth, here there is little respite.

Britain was notionally at peace for the remainder of Nicholson’s life. However, for much of that time the threat of the Cold War was omnipresent. The presence of nuclear power is portrayed powerfully in the frequently-anthologised ‘Windscale’. Reflecting on a radiation leak at the plant now known as Sellafield, Nicholson registers the awful problem of ‘a land where dirt is clean, / And poison pasture, quick and green’.³⁸ His late poem ‘There’s a War On’ looks back to the Second World War.³⁹ The first stanza remembers the proscription of waste during the war, and turns to a second stanza that begins ‘No war now.’ The irony is obvious: Nicholson sees acutely the ongoing political unrest that results from the so-called Troubles in Northern Ireland, and civil disorder resulting from unequal conditions:

36 Nicholson, ‘Waiting for Spring 1943’, *CP*, pp. 50-1 (p. 50).

37 Nicholson, ‘Waiting for Spring 1943’, *CP*, p. 51.

38 Nicholson, ‘Windscale’, *CP* 282.

39 The poem was first published in *New Angles*, ed. by John Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); presumably it had been composed some time previously.

Bombs in the Market Square;
Girls, old men, soldiers, faces hot
With anger, presidents shot;

At stake here are wider social issues of inequality. Far from a Socialist, Nicholson recognises that this can only lead to conflict, concluding: 'There's a peace on! / Has nobody told them?'⁴⁰ What these poems reveal, along with Nicholson's work throughout his oeuvre that charts the rise and fall of his home town, is that he is often miscategorised as a nature poet. His work also exhibits a strong social and political consciousness, which is given a particular focus in his early work by the experience of life in wartime.

40 All quotations Nicholson, 'There's a War On', *CP*, p. 434.

KAMEN KASHIRSKY, WHITE RUSSIA, 1943
Roger Turner

The wind trembles in the birches tonight.
In the small wooden houses the boards creak
with fear. Rebecca, Shlomo and
Shmuel are asleep, their narrow faces
pale on the thin white pillows. If they are
dreaming, they dream of summer by the lake
or of running from the farmer's angry dog.
In the next room, on a plain wooden chair,
lie father's heavy coat, his broad black hat,
his white shirt and plain woollen stockings.
Mother has washed her face and thin white arms
with water from the well, cold and still
in the white china bowl on the washstand.

Father has prayed and put his fears to bed,
has laid aside the news that creeps in
every day from every side, and sleeps now,
his head beside her head, not knowing
if tonight the men will come.

Not everyone is favoured like my father
who lay down quietly and suddenly
and died surrounded by his friends
and family, or like my cousin who slipped away
one morning kneeling beside his bed.

No, for some there comes the abandonment
of everything once known and loved, loss
of every known face, the loss of hope of
any human kindness, beatings, burnings,
nakedness and terror.

Between the birch trees glints the early sun.
Between the wooden shutters the cold light

shivers. The wind has ceased to stir the leaves.
In the dark forest all is still. Along
the shadowy road no lorry passes,
no footsteps, no sound of rough boots is heard
below the window, no guns, no voices.
As dawn breaks, only a few birds sing.

Sleeping with one eye open, Father sees
the pale light slanting across the room.
He stirs. Another day. They did not come.
Whispering a prayer he drifts back into sleep.

THE FERRYMAN

Antony Owen

I often think of that unnamed road in Nagasaki
where the zero of her breast remained untouched
by fire
as her daughter suckled to live through Fat Man's
crucible.

I often think of the man who found them as
Pompeii ornaments
standing there knowing he would soon pay Charon
at the shore,
as he drifted away from *Sake* and a sword born of
fire and water.

I often think of Nagasaki mothers as sheets for
their babies.
We are going to sleep in a manger of weird flames,
death will display us like screaming white logs.

I often think of those things the bomb breathed
upwards –
tatami mats and doormats found high in mountains,
dentures welded to the bones of a charred umbrella.

I choose to forget the image that made Charon weep –
East of the river Ota when he suckled at the banks,
he saw a manger of skulls weeping crayfish.

Antony Owen's new collection, *The Unknown Civilian* (Knives
Forks and Spoons Press) was launched at Coventry Cathedral on
Remembrance Sunday 2019.

'IN FLANDERS FIELDS': THE AFTERMATH

Merryn Williams

John McCrae's poem 'In Flanders Fields', published in December 1915 and only fifteen lines long, instantly became famous and is still one of the most celebrated poems of the First World War. The author, a doctor stationed with the Canadian forces, was aware of its huge popularity but did not live to see the Armistice, dying of pneumonia in January 1918 aged forty-five. He is recorded as saying, 'All the goddam doctors in the world will not win this bloody war, what we need is more and more fighting men'. But his real contribution was his poem, which was used in countless recruiting campaigns with particular emphasis on the last verse:

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

He would be satisfied, he is thought to have said, 'if the poem enabled men to see where their duty lay'.

Canada was particularly proud of him. In 1917, when voluntary recruitment was slowing, there was a bitter debate about whether to bring in conscription and it became the main issue in the general election of December 1917. This was the first election in which Canadian women were allowed to vote – not all women, only those who were the wives, mothers or sisters

of soldiers, and it is not very surprising that most of them voted for the Unionist, pro-conscription party, which won. The poem was quoted ad nauseam in their campaign and in the United States:

Fear not that you have died for naught.
The torch ye threw to us we caught

was one spin-off. McCrae was delighted by the election result.

We can get some idea of his impact within Canada from *Rilla of Ingleside*, a 1921 novel by Lucy Maud Montgomery, the author of *Anne of Green Gables* whose work reached and still reaches a vast audience of teenage girls. It is written from the viewpoint of women on the home front and depicts the war as a titanic struggle between good and evil. The heroine has a brother, Walter, a gentle sensitive genius who volunteers, to her distress, after a long struggle with his nerves. When he gets to the front, and before he is killed, he writes and publishes a wonderful poem, which exhorts people not to 'break faith' with the dead. We don't read it, of course, but Montgomery was aware that McCrae had not survived the war and this imaginary poem has to be the twin of 'In Flanders Fields':

The poem was a short, poignant little thing. In a month it had carried Walter's name to every corner of the globe. Everywhere it was copied – in metropolitan dailies and little village weeklies – in profound reviews and 'agony columns', in Red Cross appeals and government recruiting propaganda. Mothers and sisters wept over it, young lads thrilled to it, the whole great heart of human-

ity caught it up as an epitome of all the pain and hope and pity and purpose of the mighty conflict, crystallised in three brief immortal verses. A Canadian lad in the Flanders trenches had written the one great poem of the war.

Easy to snigger at the high-flown language, but, as Paul Fussell wrote in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), 'I have not broken this butterfly upon the wheel for no reason'. His point was that, much as we all love the first two verses, the last is 'a recruiting-poster rhetoric apparently applicable to any war'. If I assault the butterfly which is *Rilla of Ingleside* that is because it is telling young women that, however upset they are when men go to war, they must stand behind them uncomplainingly, knit them socks and send them sweets, ignore the despicable pacifists, believe in the noble cause. L.M. Montgomery wasn't a sophisticated writer but she was a professional writer and it's likely that her first readers absorbed her message.

The novel is still in print, and the poem's last lines still echo down the generations. 'If ye break faith with us who die' still occasionally appears on posters around Remembrance Day. In 2018, the centenary of the Armistice and also of McCrae's death, Michael Morpurgo published *Poppy Field*, an illustrated novel for children; some of the profits will go to the Royal British Legion. While *Rilla* contains much that is confusing for a child who knows little about the First World War, *Poppy Field* is narrated in the voice of an eleven-year-old boy, our contemporary. Martens is Belgian, living on a farm near Ypres, where poppies grow in millions and he cycles past cemeteries on his way to school. 'That same war killed

my father', he says, '...that's 87 years after the war ended'.

Four generations of his family have lived in this now peaceful landscape. The story begins when Martens' great-grandmother, a little girl who sold eggs and gave poppies to soldiers, comes across John McCrae working



John McCrae, c. 1914

on his poem. He throws away a first draft (and we know that he did write several drafts), she takes the bit of paper home and the family treasure it for the next hundred years. 'I think these are precious words', they say. The really interesting thing is that only the first two verses are illustrated. In the picture on page 10, the poem simply

ends 'And now we lie in Flanders fields'.

Nothing about torches or taking up quarrels. The child grows up and marries, the family memorise the poem and look after the poppy field near their home 'because of all that had happened in that valley a long time ago'. But Martens' father (the grandson of the little girl) is killed 'ploughing the land he loved, ploughing Poppy Field. His tractor drove over an unexploded shell'.

Morpurgo - who is also the author of *War Horse* and *Private Peaceful* - sees the First World War as a universal tragedy. None of the soldiers who lie in the cemeteries around Ypres are, for him, 'the foe'. 'They came here, to fight on one side or the other, depending simply on where they were born'. His poppy field is a sacred place because each flower represents someone who died there and it was also the scene of the famous meeting between two armies on Christmas Day 1914.

The author just notes the existence of the last verse; the poem is printed in full on another page. McCrae was not for peace. However, in an Afterword, Bishop Nigel McCulloch expresses the hope that there will be universal peace someday and discusses the ethics of wearing a poppy. He says it has 'nothing to do with what might be the rights or wrongs of a particular war', and that nobody has to wear one. I expect the arguments to go on, each November when countless red, white, plastic, ceramic and paper poppies are on display.

ROBERT GRAVES'S FAVOURITE POEM? THE ONE THAT SAVED HIS LIFE

Paul O'Prey

Along with a great many people around the world, in March 2020 I was struck down with the coronavirus and was forced to spend a number of days quarantined in a spare room until the illness ran its course. While unwell I was buoyed by kind messages from family and friends, including a get-well email from Lucia Graves, Robert's daughter, with 'The Troll's Nosegay' attached for me to read. She said how she often thought of this poem during the dark and disconcerting days of the current pandemic, and of how she owed her very existence to it.

Robert had written the poem in March 1919, exactly a hundred and one years ago, while he was fighting for his life against Spanish flu. Indeed he had written it on his sickbed just a few hundred yards away from where I was now reading it during my own struggle with a global virus. He later said that a determination to get the poem right – he took it through thirty-five drafts before he was satisfied – was what kept him from succumbing to the illness that for him had developed into a dangerous case of septic pneumonia. He was twenty-three years old.

The Spanish flu took hold in the final months of the First World War and quickly spread around the globe, infecting roughly a third of the human population. It proved to be more deadly even than the war, with some fifty million dying from the disease compared to ten million killed in the war. Despite its name the disease did not originate in Spain, where in its early stages it was nicknamed 'the soldier from Naples', after a popular music hall hit at the time that was also very catchy.

Robert initially developed symptoms while he was stationed with his regiment at Limerick. He was a Captain with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and had been so badly wounded at the Somme that he was initially left for dead in a corner of a field dressing station. His main injury was caused by a piece of shell that hit him in the chest, leaving him with a damaged lung that made him particularly susceptible to the pneumonia that was a common complication of the Spanish flu. Feeling unwell and desperate to get home he managed to secure his demobilization by rather recklessly by-passing the official channels, and he set off across the Irish Sea to join his wife Nancy and their baby daughter Jenny who were in Hove.

Robert and Nancy Nicholson had married just over a year before, in January 1918, at St James's Church in Piccadilly. George Mallory, the mountaineer who later died on Mt Everest, was best man and other guests included his fellow soldier poet Wilfred Owen. Nancy's father was William Nicholson and her brother Ben Nicholson, two highly successful and renowned artists. Nancy served as a Land Girl during the war and was herself a superb illustrator. One idea she and Robert had for making money was for her to illustrate some of Robert's poems. This produced a series of whimsical and witty poems from Robert which were strikingly visual and evocative of themes such as innocence and love in a pastoral setting – the diametric opposite of the poems about his experience in the trenches, which he was now trying desperately to leave behind him.

In their definitive edition of Graves's poems, Dunstan Ward and Beryl Graves (Robert's second wife) tell us that one such poem, 'Love Without Hope', was inspired by a sketch by William Nicholson which he sent to them as an



Robert and Nancy, Maesneuadd 1918
Courtesy of William Graves

idea, being ‘just the thing’ for a Robert poem illustrated by Nancy. Nicholson’s sketch showed a portly but audacious bird-catcher lifting his hat to a beautiful lady (‘the Squire’s own daughter’) who wears a flowing dress and carries a parasol. As the bird-catcher bows to doff his top hat, larks ‘escape’ from beneath it and fly singing around the startled woman’s head.¹ ‘The Troll’s Nosegay’

1 Robert Graves *Complete Poems Volume 1*, Edited by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Carcenet 1995), pp 402-3

would seem to be another such poem on a similar theme, though the troll came first, pre-dating the bird-catcher by some two years. A capricious lady is courted by an audacious troll who although ridiculous in his presumption, startles the object of his devotion by conjuring up a bouquet of summer flowers in the depths of winter.

In January 1919 Robert and Nancy had yet to set up permanent home together. William Nicholson offered to rent a house for them in Hove so that their baby would come into a world of healthy fresh air. He himself had a house and studio at the other end of Brighton beach next to where Rudyard Kipling had lived until 1902. The house he rented for them was 11 Seaside Villas on Western Esplanade, one of an exclusive row of eleven newly-built houses next to Hove Lagoon. Eight years later, fellow Royal Welch Fusilier poet and artist David Jones was to spend the summer at number 5, where, thanks to the remarkable light and the continuous influence of the sea, he felt he had produced some of his best paintings.² In more recent years this short row of houses has been home for a number of musicians, writers and celebrities, including Adele, Fat Boy Slim, Zoe Ball, David Walliams and Heather Mills, wife of Paul McCartney. The houses come with their own stretch of private beach which in January would have provided a bracing environment for Robert and his family, with a reliably strong wind blowing off the English Channel and waves pounding the shingle outside their windows.

Nicholson's hope for a healthy environment for the baby ended abruptly when she was four weeks old and her father arrived home, seriously unwell and highly

2 Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* (Jonathan Cape, 2017) Part Three, 'Wonder Years', Chapter 7

infectious. When Robert entered the house the first thing he saw was the ghost of Nancy's mother, who had died of Spanish flu a few months earlier. He was already delirious. Nancy soon started to feel unwell and the rest of the household also went down, including an aunt and a family friend. Fortunately Jenny and her grandfather were not affected.

Finding medical help in the pandemic was difficult but Nicholson managed to engage two ex-nurses to help look after those who were unwell. One was competent



11 Seaside Villas is the first house looking from the west

but frequently drunk, the other was incompetent but at least sober and would irritate them all by standing at the window, spreading her arms and declaiming: ‘Sea, sea, give my husband back to me.’ Apparently her husband was not drowned but unfaithful.³

A doctor visited and told Robert that pneumonia in both lungs had developed into sepsis and his chances of recovery were low. Robert was however determined

3 Robert Graves, *Goodbye To All That* (Jonathan Cape, 1929) p. 350

to survive and put all his energy and concentration into writing and perfecting ‘The Troll’s Nosegay’.

The poem presents a comic scene with vivid economy. A troll is in love with a lady who wants a bouquet of flowers, even though it is winter. If he really loved her, he would find her flowers somewhere. She begins to cry which the troll finds intolerable and he swears to give her all the flowers she could ever want, enough to satisfy even ‘a China Queen’. Trolls at that time were rare creatures in English literature and this poem is one of the first sightings of the mythical creature in British poetry. Robert would have come across trolls primarily in the Brothers Grimm story of ‘Three Billy Goats Gruff’ and a number of Hans Christian Andersen’s stories, notably ‘The Ice Queen’ and ‘The Travelling Companion’, in which a troll bewitches a beautiful and capricious princess who sets impossible challenges for her suitors.

There are many types of troll in Scandinavian legend, from giant, violent ogres to dwarfish woodland spirits who are spiteful, mischievous, ugly, and good at magic (in some stories ‘troll’ is translated as magician)⁴. Robert’s troll is of the latter kind and derives from the Andersen stories, but I also suspect that the idea of the ungainly but presumptuous troll courting the beautiful, unattainable lady may owe its provenance to a set of famous troll illustrations by the Swedish painter John Bauer, who had died in 1918. One of Bauer’s most famous troll pictures, published in 1913, shows a beautiful fair maiden with golden hair and a flowing white dress, with two small, comically misshapen, grotesque, slouching trolls. Bauer’s extraordinary success with these illustrations may well

4 For a full survey of trolls in literature and art see John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (Reaktion Books, 2014)

have given Robert the idea of a poem for illustration by Nancy that might have a similar popular appeal.

The troll in the poem uses his magical powers to conjure up an impressive bouquet. Robert and his contemporary readers would have been familiar with the 'language of flowers' which was such a part of Victorian and Edwardian popular culture, in which a bouquet would convey a number of coded messages. In *The Language and Poetry of Flowers*, one of the most popular 'flower dictionaries' of the time, the 'intelligent reader' is promised that 'under the guidance of this little volume, many a bright nosegay may exchange hands, and tell, in its fitting and intelligible language, a welcome message to a fair lady's ear.'⁵ The troll's nosegay contains lilies for pureness, roses for love and mignonettes for 'your qualities surpass your charms'. A conventional message on the face of it, but these flowers are not what they seem. The white lily is only 'drawn' and not with a pencil but with a cold and misty fog. The rose is pale rather than red and formed of 'mist-magic'. The mignonette is 'elvish' and 'unsubstantial'. Along with other 'vague' blooms conjured from 'wandering dreams' these flowers are set not in a vase but a cauldron, which suggests witchcraft. The troll's flowers are remarkable not for their beauty but for their coldness, paleness and illusory nature. The message hidden in the troll's nosegay is not to be trusted.

The lady takes her nosegay and she is again moved to tears but this time she cries because she is so charmed by the magnificence of the gesture and confused by the magical appearance of such wonderful blossoms. Then the last line turns from gratitude to petulance. Like the princess in Hans Christian Andersen, she had set her

5 *The Language and Poetry of Flowers* (I. Nelson and Sons, 1857) p. iv



John Bauer, *The Princess and the Trolls*, 1913

suitor an impossible challenge, expecting him to fail and be found wanting. When he surprised her by succeeding in his task, this turned out to be really rather annoying.

Robert's biographer Richard Perceval Graves suggests that 'The Troll's Nosegay' is an early hint of trouble to come in Robert's marriage to Nancy. She apparently had a 'strongly capricious streak' but Robert was so much in love that for a while at least he responded lovingly to her whims.⁶ The critic Peter Sanders has seen in the poem evidence of 'a curious ambivalence' in Graves's attitude toward love, 'a reluctance to give himself up to love entirely.'⁷ Others may find in the poem a harbinger of another relationship that was to obsess Robert in later years, that between a poet and his muse, in which with 'a

6 Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895 – 1926* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986) p. 208

7 Peter L. Sanders, 'Robert Graves – A Poet's Quest for Meaning', *The English Journal* Vol. 59, No. 1 (Jan., 1970), p. 24

boy's presumption' he sought 'to court the queen in her high silk pavilion' ("The Face in the Mirror") by conjuring up a world made of words.

'The Troll's Nosegay' was for Robert a rare experiment with the sonnet. There are fourteen decasyllabic lines but they do not resemble any of the more common sonnet rhyme schemes. The first two quatrains follow the English or Shakespearean rhyme scheme: ABAB CDCD. The first quatrain sets the test of love: the lady demands a nosegay of summer flowers in winter as proof of love. The second is the acceptance of challenge. This is followed by a sestet with an unorthodox rhyme scheme, EFFEFE, which suggests trollish confusion and disruption. Here the troll meets the test but the lady is not wholly won, for she is both charmed and piqued by his success.

Each section marks a twist and a turn in the tussle between the presumptuous suitor and the capricious lady. The opening line sets the tone of cut and thrust with a demand, an exclamation, a hard caesura, and then a question: 'A simple nosegay! Was that much to ask?'. The poem does not end with the rhyming couplet expected in an English Sonnet, which would bring resolution to the affair or point to triumph for one or other of the adversaries. Instead the penultimate line steps gradually down the page, breaking into five separate lines, drawing out the sense of exasperation at such capriciousness, leading into the final line where the rhyme scheme is turned back on itself. No one wins this particular courtship contest, it's a draw.

Robert Graves was rather ruthless in omitting his early poems from later collections of his poetry. 'The Troll's Nosegay' is however one of the relatively few survivors of 1919 to make it all the way through to his *Collected Poems 1975*. Whether this is because he truly thought it to

the obstinate intention of getting my poem right. It had already gone into several drafts, and I wasn't going to be beaten by it. The technical problem was how to make a sonnet read as though it were not a sonnet, while keeping the rules. By the thirty-fifth draft I had all but solved this, and was tottering about on a stick. "The Troll's Nosegay" saved my life, and I'm grateful. It has since gone into a thirty-sixth, perhaps semifinal, draft. No poem is ever perfected'.⁸

⁸ Robert Graves *Complete Poems Volume 1*, pp. 364-5

JUNE 1942

John Lucas

How graceful the small before danger

Theodore Roethke

Midnight, and in a rented house a woman
once again wakes to hear the muffled thud,
distant but steadily nearing, like a herd
of minatory beasts scouting for blood.

She runs to her dressing table, rummages
for a few, loved jewels, chooses her best dress,
then, with the most exquisite concentration
seated at a mirror to keep distress

from foiling her, prepares for what's to come.
Of course by the time she's beautified, they've gone,
the bomber's moon directing them elsewhere.
Of course she doesn't think that what she's done

might shield her children, knowing no plea of hers
could be of any use, and in extreme
old age confesses to her ageing son that why
she chose that action haunts her like a dream

she's never understood; and yet, 'what else
was I to do', she claims, making the case
for all who offer nothing against violence
but instinct of a pure, unsaving grace.

WALKING WOUNDED: THE WAR POETRY OF VERNON SCANNELL

Merryn Williams

Vernon Scannell (1922-2007) is not usually thought of as a Second World War poet, because he survived, and because he wrote about many other subjects. To me, he was one of the very best English poets of our time, but he was shamefully excluded from several anthologies in favour of people half his age and with much less than half his talent. As he noted, ‘there are two kinds of poets writing today: the first seeks the approval of the loftier academic criticism and ignores the needs and possible limitations of the common reader, and the second, as Thomas Hardy put it, wishes to “touch our hearts by showing his own and not to exhibit his learning, or his fine taste”.’ No doubt about which group he belonged to, but most people who write ‘from the heart’ do not possess his formidable skills.

The name he was born with was John Vernon Bain. Desperate to get away from home, where he had had a dreadful childhood, he enlisted in 1941 and from then on repeatedly went AWOL. The army summed up his general conduct as ‘Bad’. By 1942 he was in Egypt, saw action and had some sort of breakdown when he saw his companions stealing from dead bodies, British and German. (This experience was revisited in ‘The Bombing of the Café de Paris, 1941’). He walked away. He was soon picked up and spent the next six months in a military prison, as described in *Argument of Kings*. But men were wanted for the invasion of Europe, so he was freed and took part in the Normandy landings. He endured a terrifying bombardment, his best friend was killed and he

saw things which left an indelible impression, like dead cows with legs sticking up in a field of blood and long lines of injured, exhausted men staggering down a country lane.

Wounded in the leg, he was sent back to England and knew that he was unlikely to have to fight again. But he walked out anyway, in May 1945, and spent the next two years living from hand to mouth under the name Scannell. That was when he began to study literature with the help of friendly academics from Leeds University. But the authorities caught up with him and he was again court-martialled:

I said that I had spent almost five years in the army and had found the life, both in and out of action, totally destructive of the human qualities I most valued, the qualities of imagination, originality, sensitivity and intelligence. I had felt whatever traces of these qualities I might possess being steadily destroyed and I knew, in May 1945, that I would either have to surrender to the extinction of my humanity or escape from the military life.

He was put in a grim psychiatric hospital, like Wilfred Owen before him, and eventually freed in 1947. It would be another forty years before he admitted that he had been a deserter, and by that time, most people were sympathetic. (There had actually been many more desertions – around 100,000 from British forces – than we like to think.) Then began the long, slow process of creating good poems, extraordinary for a man who had left school at fourteen. They weren't all war poems, as I said, but a marvellous one from the early 1960s is 'The Great War' – his brutal father's war, the war of Owen and Sassoon:

Whenever war is spoken of
I find
The war that was called Great invades the mind
And I remember
Not the war I fought in
But the one called Great
Which ended in a sepia November
Four years before my birth.



Vernon Scannell in army uniform

And soon after that came 'Walking Wounded', one of the greatest poems of the Second World War. He had really seen the lines of wounded men, in France, who could just about walk, but it is also about wounded minds:

A humble brotherhood,
Not one was suffering from a lethal hurt,
They were not magnified by noble wounds,
There was no splendour in that company.
And yet, remembering after eighteen years,
In the heart's throat a sour sadness stirs;
Imagination pauses and returns
To see them walking still, but multiplied
In thousands now. And when heroic corpses
Turn slowly in their decorated sleep
And every ambulance has disappeared
The walking wounded still trudge down that lane
And when recalled they must bear arms again.

Throughout his life he went on writing about invisible wounds. There is the early 'Gunpowder Plot', in which a firework party brings back horrible memories, and the late 'Casualty – Mental Ward' with its refrain, 'Something has gone wrong inside my head'. I have mentioned only the finest poems but there were many others, and prose accounts too, written in the voices of working-class men and giving a worm's eye view of army life. Charles Causley, another poet who had not been an officer, wrote approvingly, 'His account, quite unvarnished, is that rarity, a voice from the ranks. The military machine is observed, as it were, from the lower depths.'

The great First World War poets, Wilfred Owen especially, had become very popular in the 1960s. But Scannell

believed that his own war had also thrown up some remarkable poets, and that there was ‘massive public ignorance’ of their work. His critical study *Not Without Glory: Poets of the Second World War* (1976) was one of the first to make a case for them. ‘The poets who served in the armed forces of Britain and the United States during the war against Hitler produced a body of poetry which is of a very high order indeed and can compare favourably with the best work of the Great War’. He gave pride of place to Keith Douglas.

And finally, in *Argument of Kings* (1987), he told the world about how he had walked away from the war zone. Some people, including Kingsley Amis, attacked him, but by that time another generation had grown up and attitudes had changed. Scannell himself suspected that he was a coward, but surely deserves as much respect as anyone else who took part in the Normandy landings. ‘Courage is like/ A bank account; you keep on writing cheques/Until the day comes when there’s nothing there’ (‘Any Complaints?’).

I never met him, but we spoke on the phone and exchanged letters in the 1990s when I was editing a little magazine, *The Interpreter’s House*, and the newsletter of the Wilfred Owen Association. He was always friendly, gave me some splendid poems and had none of the airs of an important man. ‘Love and Courage’, first printed in 2000, reflects on his desertion:

Ten years later, when war’s thunder rolled
and cloud-sacks spilled fierce hail of fire and steel
he was compelled to put on uniform
and learn to dish out death. He could conceal
his terror till his company was called
to face real battle’s homicidal storm.

He chose desertion, ignominy and jail.

And here is another one I got out of him:

November 11th 1997

Again the grey survivors try to call
Back from the dark the dead who have now lain
Too long in heedless dust to entertain
Much hope of resurrection in this Fall.
The damp and jaundiced leaves will soften all
The studded noise of marching feet. The stain
Of crimson on the gauze of mist and rain
Will never lure them from their vaulted hall.

I see two friends as they were long ago,
Images the heaped years can't displace,
Bill Gray, whose guts were splattered in the snow,
Jim Rennie, picked off by a sniper's shot.
At least they have escaped what we now face:
You'd think this might console, but it does not.

He told me that he had throat cancer, but expected to be around for some time. In fact he survived for almost ten years, writing wonderful poems to the end. 'Missing Things', published in the *Spectator* only three months before he died in November 2007, made an extraordinary impression on friends and strangers:

I'm very old and breathless, tired and lame,
and soon I'll be no more to anyone
than the slowly fading trochee of my name
and shadow of my presence. I'll be gone.
Already I begin to miss the things
I'll leave behind, like this calm evening sun

which seems to smile at how the blackbird sings.

His centenary comes up in two years, and I hope will be properly celebrated.

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CHILDHOOD (1937-1944)

John Powell Ward

We were too young, too new (thank God) to fight.
Hitler was the black man in the night.

All that he did was bad, all we did, good.
We crept into corners, numb to Englishmen's blood.

Evil is wrong, but nothing must be hurt.
I wiped these grubby hands across my shirt.

The bombs are silenced, everything's quiet now.
Something called "Peace"; you think now, even grow.

We stop on a hard-baked soil here, drawing breath.
It rips you to bits, that fatigued highway to death.

CECIL JAMES SIDNEY WOOLF (1927-2019) **Jean Moorcroft Wilson**

It is impossible to do justice to such a many-sided man as Cecil, who died at the age of 92 on 10 June 2019. But I shall try to give you at least a flavour of his long life and his many interests. Cecil was born in Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire, on 20 February 1927 and grew up in the country there. And though he spent the greater part of his life in London, he remained a countryman at heart, even after he left home for boarding-school at the tender age of six, first the Dragon Prep. School in Oxford, then Stowe. To be with him in the country was a revelation.

As his schooldays revealed, Cecil had an exceptional mind, not only taking the equivalent of A-levels a year early, for example, but also gaining top marks in the whole country in the English Literature paper. This was during the Second World War, however, and instead of going on to Oxford or Cambridge as expected, he enlisted in the Army at the age of sixteen. Entering as a private in the Tank Regiment, he was quickly promoted to the rank of Captain, fighting in the tail-end of the war in Italy, where he promptly learnt to speak fluent Italian – ‘it’s so like Latin’, he would explain modestly – and Palestine. Italy, Venice in particular, became for him the ‘great good place’.

After demobilisation in 1947, Cecil joined the stock-broking firm of Woolf, Christie, founded by two of his childless uncles, who wanted him to carry on the family business. Though he rapidly mastered the various branches of the trade, he left after only a few years to start his own antiquarian book business, willingly forfeiting the guaranteed money and security of his City job

for the challenges and independence he anticipated as a freelance writer and bookseller. It was typical of him that although his aunt, Virginia Woolf, was becoming recognized as one of Britain's greatest novelists by the 1950s and 1960s, he never traded on his relationship to her and remained modest and unassuming throughout his life, almost to a fault.

Likewise, though he had grown up in a house built by Cardinal Wolsey on James de Rothschild's Waddesdon Estate and was related to Jimmy through James's wife, Dorothy, he never boasted of the fact or used it to his advantage. And he never tried for popular fame, though he was clever enough to do so; he preferred a less obvious route. As a writer, his bibliographies of Norman Douglas and Baron Corvo, together with his editions of Corvo's novels, short stories, poems and letters are models of their kind.

The same year that Cecil mounted a highly successful Corvo exhibition, 1960, he also founded his own publishing house, inspired undoubtedly by the example of his aunt and uncle, Leonard and Virginia Woolf, whom he had helped at the Hogarth Press from an early age. His encouragement of young – and not-so-young – writers, like Leonard's, became legendary. (Without Cecil's belief and encouragement I doubt whether I, for instance, would have dared to have faith in myself as a writer.) A list of the books Cecil published in those early days shows how eclectic yet wide-ranging his tastes were and how creative and pro-active he was:

- When he got to know Colin Wilson in the old Reading Room of the British Museum shortly after the success of Wilson's *The Outsider*, for example, he suggested that, young as he was,

he should write his autobiography and Wilson's *Voyage to a Beginning* became one of Cecil Woolf Publishers early hits.

- And he nursed Quentin Crisp with endless crates of Guinness through the conceiving and writing of the book which followed Crisp's *The Naked Civil Servant*, ie. *How to Have a Life-Style*, another best-seller which went into at least four editions and became a one-man show.
- There were also more scholarly books, such as *William Morris*, Joyce Tompkins's masterly 'approach to Morris's poetry', or Harold Brook's *T.S. Eliot as Literary Critic*, or an edition of J.M. Barrie's unpublished play, *Ibsen's Ghost*, as well as biographies of Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Hamilton Sorley and editions of their poetry and letters.
- His own edition of Corvo's *Venice Letters* was one of the Press's greatest successes of this period.

As if that weren't enough to keep anyone busy, shortly after we moved in together in the 1970s, our first child, Katie, was born and Cecil became (as the children often called us) 'Mummy/Daddy'. (His greatest boast was that he had changed more nappies than I had!).

Cecil had wanted to call Katie 'Virginia' when she was born – I thought that 'Virginia Woolf' might be something of a burden for a child and it eventually became her second name – but his attitude towards his illustrious aunt and uncle was not entirely straightforward. (He spent our first dinner together telling me how much

better D.H. Lawrence was as a novelist than Virginia.) But he was evidently proud of the connection at some level and would later publish one of our most successful series in the Press, the Bloomsbury Heritage monographs about the life, work and times of the Bloomsbury Group, Virginia in particular.

Our second child, Philip, was born two years after Katie, while I was working on a biography of Isaac Rosenberg. Cecil had a great admiration for that First World War poet, whose sister, Annie Wynn, he had got to know. Like her, he thought Rosenberg shamefully neglected and had promised her that he would publish a biography of her brother. I rashly offered to write one for Cecil Woolf Publishers instead. It was the start of my career as a War Poets' biographer, though I didn't know it. It was also the origin of our series on the subject.

Though Cecil came to fatherhood relatively late, he did nothing by halves and an early fiftieth birthday present was our third child, Emma, born two years after Philip.

A third publishing child, a little later, would be a third series of monographs, this time on the Powys brothers, with the main focus on John Cowper Powys and editions of some of his letters. As one of the authors and editors of the Powys books, Anthony Head wrote in the Powys Newsletter shortly after Cecil died:

His passing marks the end of a period of publishing in this field that is unlikely ever to be equalled. The Powys Society owes Cecil an enormous debt of gratitude. From the time he began to publish volumes of JCP's letters in the early 1980s, his interest never wavered and where large publishers would steer well clear of them, Cecil was willing to commit the effort and money to publishing letters,

diaries, essays, monographs and all sorts, despite their limited popular appeal and the near certainty of financial loss. No other publisher has done more over such a span of time to maintain the profile of the Powyses and encourage interest in them . . .

The start of the Powys Society Series was sandwiched between our last two children, Alice and Tristram.

The 1980s revealed a quite different side to Cecil, his interest in politics, which resulted in The Men and Document Series. When I first met Cecil he had been co-editing a book for Cape called *Authors Take Sides on Vietnam*, for which, incidentally he had successfully solicited his uncle Leonard's contribution. It was in part Leonard's own involvement in politics which had influenced Cecil, as well as his friendship as a young man with the writer Nancy Cunard, who had edited *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* in 1937 (to which Leonard also contributed, but not, alas, Robert Graves) – a book we re-issued in our own list later.

When the Falklands War broke out in 1982, Cecil asked me if I would edit an *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* with him. I agreed. Well-aware of Cecil's leisurely view of time, however, it was with the proviso that we got it out quickly. (In the event, after an astoundingly large order from W.H. Smith's if we could have it ready in another fortnight, we managed it in three weeks from the completed manuscript to bound copies!) *Authors Take Sides on Iraq and the Gulf War* would follow and Cecil was working on a projected *Authors Take Sides on Syria* when he died. As Lois Gilmore argues in a paper delivered to the Virginia Woolf Society just days before Cecil's death, *Authors Take Sides* is a significant series, showing how 'a

small press claims a neutral space; provides a forum for multiple voices to express opinions about war, peace, and social justice.’

As a direct result of *Authors Take Sides on the Falklands* one of the contributors, the labour politician, Tam Dalyell, asked if he could write his own book on the subject and this resulted in three more books in the Men and Documents series, Tam’s *One Man’s Falklands* (1983), *Thatcher’s Torpedo* (1984) and *Thatcher: Patterns of Deceit* (1984). The Falklands conflict also spawned three more in the Men and Documents series: *The Sinking of the Belgrano* by Diana Gould, *The Death of a Rose-Grower: Who Killed Hilda Morrell* by Graham Smith and *The Ponting Affair* by Richard Norton-Taylor, about the civil servant, Clive Ponting, who had leaked documents on the war to the press.

The last decade of Cecil’s life was occupied mostly with his work on the Bloomsbury Heritage and War Poets series and he was delighted to be made an honorary member of both the Robert Graves and Virginia Woolf societies, in recognition of his efforts. Another unexpected pleasure was a return to a writer he had admired so greatly as a young man, Norman Douglas. He was thrilled to be invited to participate in the Norman Douglas Symposium in Bregenz, Austria, every two years until his death.

There are so many other sides to Cecil, so much more to say, but no more time to say it. I am reminded of a scene from Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, in which Thomas Cromwell the great statesman, politician and shrewd businessman, is shown at home with the wife and children he adores. He has just devised some wondrous fairy-wings for the younger of his two daughters, Grace:

The year that Grace was an angel she had wings

made of peacock feathers. He himself had contrived it. The other little girls were dowdy goose creatures and their wings fell off if they caught them on the corners of the stable. But Grace stood glittering, her hair entwined with silver threads; her shoulders were trussed with a spreading, shivering glory, and the rustling air was perfumed as she breathed. Lizzie [Cromwell's wife] said, Thomas, there's no end to you is there?

The same, I believe, could be said of Cecil.



Cecil and Jean unveiling the plaque to Leonard Woolf at Frome Station, 2014

REVIEW

Geoffrey Taylor

Vivien Whelpton, *Richard Aldington: Novelist, Biographer and Exile, 1930-1962* (Lutterworth Press, 2019).

'But he didn't live very long, did he?' queried a friend of mine upon glancing at the cover of Vivien Whelpton's latest part biography. I wondered if Lutterworth Press were aware that the dates upon the cover, 1930-1962, might be the cause of some confusion.

This is the most fruitful period of Aldington's life. The period after the publication of *Death of a Hero*, the novel many scholars believe to be a classic of the Great War, upon which the reputation of Richard Aldington, soldier poet and biographer, rests. But with what incredulous disbelief his readers must have met his declaration that this book amounted to all he would publish upon the subject. Marvellously composed, imaginative and satisfying novels follow: *The Colonel's Daughter*, *All Men are Enemies*, *Women must Work*. I would include *Seven against Reeves* and *The Romance of Casanova*, as these latter convey the extensive range of mastery in his abilities. It is by this fruitfulness that the student should judge the writer. Whelpton includes a synopsis to the story of these titles.

It is my contention that a literary biography fails if it does not whet the appetite to read more of the writer's opus. However, collecting Aldington's novels can present the reader with a considerable difficulty - even the author bemoaned that his books were going out of print as early as 1950. This is the time which ran up to his 'Lawrence saga,' where he produced two biographies which aroused a furore in the literary world. There will be more to say

on this later.

The student can also judge a man by his friends. Take a look at the distinguished circle who would meet at the Bianca restaurant, located in one of those narrow streets that run to the Duomo in Florence. Here, Aldington and Brigit Patmore would meet with Frere, a director at Heinemann; Norman Douglas, the travel writer whose work makes for a learned and witty read, who, as Aldington wrote, had an 'adult mind'; Frieda Lawrence, and the Florentine publisher Orioli. With Douglas's passion for Italy, and Aldington based on the Riviera, I always thought of them as quintessential Europeans in that they shared an intense aversion for any kind of nationalism. Witness the gruelling agony Douglas had to endure in obtaining a visa for a tour of Tuscany, as documented in his book, *Alone*, while Aldington moved to America before the war upon encountering an incongruous and fascistic Europe.

It is a surprise to learn from Whelpton's book that he stayed at Hollywood and Florida for seven years. Long enough, I suppose, for his daughter Catherine to develop an American accent. Whelpton illustrates in documenting his relationships that poets don't always make the best husbands - although it is not for a want of devotedness, since he remained respectful and affectionate toward HD, the poet, his first wife. For want of society while domiciled at a lonely bay, he found his inspiration for new novels had dried up. And so, after the war, he returned for a spell in Paris, at Boulevard Montparnasse, before migrating south to St Clair, Le Lavandou.

I've never read any of the biographies Aldington wrote. But with the impetus for novels lost, writing the chronological history of significant writers would seem a natural

progression. We all know that often it is sensationalism which gets a new book noticed. The Lawrence saga landed Aldington in the soup. With jealous cliques such as the Seven Pillars of Wisdom Trust looking to prosecute him for libel, it was crass of Aldington to expose T.E. Lawrence (whom he revealed as illegitimate while his mother was still alive).



Richard Aldington, 1937
National Portrait Gallery London

But Aldington was constrained by a dearth of royalties from previous works, like *Rejected Guest*, and *Very Heaven*. He was now a single parent too. He took on the wrath of establishment figures, as well as Robert Graves, another war veteran; Whelpton summarises the episode under the

chapter title 'The Public Face'.

Aldington spent the last five years of his life at a bungalow among the Sancerrois vineyards, at a sequestered hamlet in the mid-Loire. As I write these lines, dust from an engraved stone is falling from chiselwork over the atelier in Rabastens. This stone will be laid at his grave. It is intended to mark the spot for the student and for posterity. The lettering on the present stone is fading, and I would defy anyone to find it. The soldiers who fell at the Somme and Flanders have immaculately kept graves in the cemeteries there. Yet for Aldington, who survived and went on to write a classic about the conflict, there is no such honour.

It is extraordinary that any recognition for all his hard work came from a direction which he probably never considered. In his seventieth year he was invited to Russia on an expenses paid trip, treated as a celebrated guest, and interviewed on television. However, the strain proved too much for him and he died a few weeks later. The local vine-dressers held a vigil.

Here, I think it necessary to pay homage to his hosts – spanning his life at Noeux les Mines, at Paris, on the Riviera, and lastly, at Sury en Vaux. To quote Aldington, 'France has evolved the most nearly perfect way of life; the instinctive respect for the natural aristocracy of talent, its balance of industry and agriculture, its avoidance of reckless overpopulation'.

REVIEW

Meg Crane

Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer, *The Remembered Dead: Poetry, Memory and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Memorialising, say the authors of this stimulating and demanding book, is more than *remembering* - the word *remembrance* perhaps bridges the gap. In a substantial Introduction, Minogue and Palmer consider the forms and effects of remembrance. *Remembering* can be solitary, spontaneous and involuntary; *memorialising* is deliberate and crafted, a form of elegy: it supposes an audience; and one of its effects (and purposes) is to remind the elegist and his audience that they too must die. In the Great War, this normal human awareness of mortality was intensified many times over by the suddenness and ubiquity of death: memories and re-creations of the Great War - and other wars - also bring the living closer in imagination to the dead.

One effect of sudden death is 'the suspension of full belief' - the lingering feeling that it must somehow be possible for us to remain in contact with the dead. In the literary form known as *prosopopæia*, we address them, or they address us (as with 'The Dead' of 'In Flanders Fields' - 'Take up our quarrel with the foe ...'). Trying to keep the dead alive, or to believe that we still communicate with them, is an ordinary human response, and also part of the literary elegiac tradition: so too is the desire to preserve, and thus to pass on, some of the feelings which the elegist had for the dead one.

The elegiac tradition in English literature comes down

from the classics, continued and to some extent modified by Milton and the Romantics. At a tangent lies the work of Walt Whitman, one of whose poems from the American Civil War introduces this book. (A number of Great War poets - Edward Thomas among them - acknowledged Whitman as an influence.) Some poets of the Great War clung to the safeties of the traditional forms, the consolations of the literary-elegiac tradition – for example the trope of the corpse being reborn as flowers. Others were led by ‘the mismatch of subject and form’ which was presented by the potential poetry of the trenches, to write more experimentally. A recurrent argument of the book is that many of the war poets, with their ‘alienated consciousness’, are much closer to Modernism than has been acknowledged – on a continuum with rather than in opposition to it.

The literature of the Great War is now profoundly embedded in our collective memory. Palmer and Minogue offer a distinction between ‘communicative’ and ‘cultural’ memory. Communicative memory, based upon direct experience, cannot last much beyond a hundred years, or the longest possible life-span. Cultural memory can survive when no first-hand memories are left: it is kept going ‘through texts, rites, monuments ... *lieux de mémoires*’. Through this process, memory becomes a social and collective phenomenon ‘shaped by ideological forces, even when it appears to be individual and personal’.

The cultural memory of modern war is shaped in part by war memorials, which have their own code: agreed symbols, word-choice and design; and this can also be true of war poems.¹

1 For example the frequently-found quatrain: ‘True love by life, true love by death is tried:/Live thou for England – we for England died’ ... and, of course, the recurrent ‘*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*’

Some of these poems helped to form the early cultural memory of that period – others subverted it. In Britain, the cultural memory of the Great War owes a considerable amount to anthologies: this is especially true of the 1964 collection *Up the Line to Death*,² which made a number of editorial choices that have influenced the understanding of Great War poetry ever since. An editorial view necessarily represents a choice, and that may have a distorting – certainly a subjective – effect on collective understanding. Palmer and Minogue argue that the effect of editorial choice and control may now also mean that readers have come to over-simplify the canonical poems – which became canonical in the first place through the anthologies. The ‘utilitarian agenda’ of the way in which war poetry is taught in schools³ reinforces the drift to over-simplification, as the War itself recedes from even the longest human or ‘communicative’ memory. (All the same, in certain other ways our understanding has deepened and expanded as memorialisation has stretched out – there is, for example, a greater recognition of the homo-erotic element in so many Great War poems.)

A natural progression from the idea of canonical poems and their load of memory leads the authors to begin their first full chapter with a close focus on Brooke’s *Sonnets*, which combine many of the key ingredients of

2 Brian Gardner: *Up The Line To Death: The War Poets 1914–1918* (London: Methuen 1964). The anthology has appeared many times on school examination syllabuses, and has been much criticised for its limited editorial viewpoint (for example, no women writers are represented). It does, however, provide access to a number of poems which were referenced by critics, but which had been long out of print until the publication of Gardner’s volume in the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the War.

3 ‘Is this poem pro-war or anti-war?’; ‘Give three examples of metaphor found in this poem’; ‘How do you think the poet was feeling when he wrote this?’. These are all genuine examples of GCSE questions.

memorialisation:

... elegy is founded upon certain Classical values and tropes, embodying an inherently consolatory and redemptive attitude to death and mourning; and the sonnet is the axiomatic English lyric form, contained and controlled but expressive of deep personal emotion ... Brooke was responding to a precise ideological moment, as were those who constructed his myth.

Classical, medieval and Christian imagery were a common inheritance amongst public-school poets at this time; and for the Gallipoli poets there was the added factor that in the Dardanelles they were fighting over the ground of the Trojan War, the first war in Western literature. Even those who could see beyond the myth found it hard to deconstruct it – but Charles Sorley, with a very similar cultural background to Brooke's, turns all this on its head in another sonnet, 'When you see millions of the mouthless dead', which derives some of its tone and imagery from the most tragic sections of the *Iliad*, but subverts the later uses to which the myth had been put.

By way of a chapter on the 'radical myth-making' of David Jones and Isaac Rosenberg, the authors present their 'pivotal' chapter, entitled 'Memorial poems and the poetics of memorialising' – a chapter about physical memorials and the poetic response to them. Memorials are an expression of grief and an attempt at consolation – but they also constitute a political statement, and may be seen as an attempt to exploit and manipulate what the late Alistair Cooke once described as the 'decent grief' of the bereaved. A forceful example of the more cynical interpretation is found in Sassoon's 'On passing the new Menin Gate' (1928) – Sassoon sees the Menin Gate



Unveiling the Cenotaph, 1920
Alamy Stock Photo

as the embodiment of hypocrisy, a ‘sepulchre of crime’, and acknowledges no other function for it. The gentler interpretation – that memorials, for all that they *cannot* do, may be genuinely consolatory - can be found in Kipling - who did so much in the cause of war memorials, but is nonetheless too honest a writer to claim more than a certain amount for them. Although he himself was the author of many of the ‘consoling mantras’ to be found on Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorials, he rejects easy or rhetorical consolations. In the poem ‘London Stone’ (the Cenotaph) his reply to St. Paul’s ‘O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?’ is ‘Grave, this is thy victory;/And the sting of death is grieving’. His best claim is that memorials may at least ‘ease’ the grief of loss by drawing attention to the fact that that grief is shared, and therefore brings sufferers together.

Charlotte Mew, in ‘At the Cenotaph’, is more ambivalent

than either Kipling or Sassoon: the speaker in her poem *wants* to believe that something of worth and beauty has been saved, but by the end of the poem her fears are that even in the presence of a *memento mori*, people will continue to ‘lie to one another’ and to live life as though everything is for sale. When she asks whether the memorial in ‘our Market-place’ will remind the ‘whores and hucksters’, who go about their business there, to see or honour ‘some, young, murdered face’, she seems to expect the answer ‘No’. Mew, like others unable to play a direct part in the combat, ‘can represent some of the confusions and strains in both being a mourner and imagining the mourned, in the experience of confronting a memorial intended to act for both’.

Memorials, then, from their earliest days, produce powerful emotions which are not always the obvious or intended product of the objects themselves. From this consideration of poems dating from the aftermath of the Great War, the chapter moves on to three much more recent memorial poems, or rather poems about memorials. They are Robert Lowell’s ‘For the Union Dead’ (1965)⁴, which remembers the American Civil War in a Cold War setting; Seamus Heaney’s ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’ (1979)⁵, commemorating an Irish poet of the Great War against the background of the Northern Irish ‘Troubles’ of the late twentieth century; and Yusef Komunyakaa’s⁶ ‘Facing It’ (1987)⁷, about the inheritance of the Vietnam War. I wish that copyright

4 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57035/for-the-union-dead>

5 <https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/in-memoriam-francis-ledwidge/>

6 Yusef Komunyakaa (b.1947) is an African-American poet, originally from Louisiana. As an adult, he reclaimed his grandfather’s African name.

7 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47867/facing-it>

restrictions would allow us to reproduce them here, but all three are readily available online (see footnotes) and it is an enriching experience to meet them.

Of these three poets, only Komunyakaa has had direct experience of combat, though both Lowell and Heaney spent their maturity against a background of war or the threat of war. A summary is no substitute for the subtle, wide-ranging analysis of Palmer and Minogue, but the kernel of their argument is that in every case there is an interplay between the poet who looks at the memorial, and the dead who are memorialised; and in all three cases the reactions of poet and reader are kept ambivalent or unfixed. Lowell and Heaney, contemplating a conventional, heroic-mode memorial topped by a human figure made of stone, remember their reactions as children as well as noting their present reactions as adults; and both try to re-imagine the stone figure as human. Lowell's Colonel Robert Shaw remains enigmatic, 'suffocat[ing] for privacy'; for Heaney, the figure on the Portstewart memorial calls up the 'haunted Catholic face' of the poet Francis Ledwidge, yet at the same time represents the archetypal Protestant Unionist soldier whom the memorial celebrates, 'though all of you consort now underground'.

Komunyakaa is regarding a rather different kind of memorial, the wall of remembrance in Washington to the dead of Vietnam. This was conceived as a sign of mourning rather than of celebration: it is made of polished black stone, and visitors are encouraged to touch the engraved names of the fallen. The poet sees his 'black face' reflected in the black wall, and touches the engraved name of 'Andrew Johnson' – evidently a comrade in arms, but also of course the name of the unheroic President who

succeeded Abraham Lincoln (and in part the name of the luckless President who waged the Vietnam war). As the poet engages with the reflective wall, others are gazing into it too, and their reflections gaze back at him; but all those reflections are tantalising and misleading – one spectator seems to have a missing arm, but is that just the reflection or is it reality? A woman seems in the reflection to be trying to erase the names, but in reality she is just brushing her child's hair. The past and the present, like the visitors and their reflected images, vie with one another for 'reality'. And present-day reality, as in the poetry of Edmund Blunden, becomes imbued with the terrors of the past: as the poet touches the name of his friend, he experiences again the flash of the booby trap that killed him; a bird in the sky becomes a war-plane.

A further chapter goes on to analyse three poems which deal with photographs – a frailer and more emotive form of memorialisation. Again, time and tense slide around, reciprocating one another. Ted Hughes, in a 1957 poem, sees 'Six Young Men' in an old photograph. All of them died, one way or another, in the Great War. Hughes's father, whose friends they were and who survived the War, is the link between the young men and the poet who is now looking at the photograph. The scenery in the photograph, which is still familiar to the poet, has long outlasted both his father and his father's friends. The young men in the picture are simultaneously alive and dead: their deaths are in their future, but in our past – and the image is present in both.

Philip Larkin's classic 'MCMXIV' poem (1965)⁸ draws upon the photographic images of 1914 which we all know - the recruitment queues, the summer landscape

8 <https://www.poetrybyheart.org.uk/poems/mcmxiv/>

with its untamed grasses, the old-fashioned shop-fronts – to evoke a similar sense of parallel worlds and time-shift, and a fleeting moment or detail or turning-point – a *punctum* – unseen at the time, but revealed by the photograph. Not only would there be ‘never such innocence again’ – neither had there ever been such innocence before ‘As changed itself to past/Without a word ...’.



Volunteers queue to enlist, London 1914
Alamy Stock Photo

Douglas Dunn’s ‘Portrait Photograph, 1915’ (published in 1979)⁹ is spoken in the first person (and therefore out of time) by a common soldier of the Great War. He describes himself as one of those who were photographed only ‘in multitudes/Rising from holes in the ground to fall into smoke/Or is it newsreel beyond newsreel’ - except for the one occasion, when each of them had an individual photograph taken before embarkation:

⁹ <https://blackcapsule.org/tag/douglas-dunn/>

a photograph which would have to do duty in future years for the man himself. In all of these poems the reader, as well as the poet, has the sensation of interacting with 'the remembered dead' through their pictures, rendered into words, as the 'cultural memory' of the 1914-18 war is activated and added-to, in forms of remembrance which may at times seem a long way from the original impulse to memorialise.

Another form taken by 'the remembered dead' is that of the unburied corpse, the subject of a chapter to itself. The final section of the book discusses one of the most recent memorials to Wilfred Owen, the Forester's House outside Ors. A project paid for with French planning and money, and executed by a British artist, the Forester's House pays no tribute to conventional war memorials, and focuses on the work rather than on the name or the image of the poet. As with Komunyakaa's Vietnam memorial, evanescence and insubstantiality meet substance and permanence: the projected poems come and go on the walls, but always return, and as visitors read the words aloud, the building's echo returns them. An extract from this chapter will appear in a future volume of the *Wilfred Owen Association Journal*.

The chapter concludes with a close reading of 'Dulce et decorum est' and certain other Owen poems. Owen in his draft Preface acknowledged that his poems were 'elegies', but elegies without (or mostly without) the traditional element of *consolatio*. In 'Apologia pro Poemate Meo' and 'Greater Love' he warns his civilian readers not to imagine that they can share or understand the experience of the soldiers of the Great War. Palmer and Minogue suggest that, rather than describing Owen's work as elegy or anti-elegy, it might be closer to the truth

to describe it as ‘meta-elegy’ – elegy which discusses elegy. This is perhaps as close as Owen himself will let us come: Palmer and Minogue’s concentrated, resourceful work brings a new, deep understanding of the processes by which poetry makes its way into our individual and collective consciousness.

Nearly thirty years ago, when this reviewer was on her first battlefield tour, with the admirable Major and Mrs Holt, the group visited the dark, haunting, haunted German cemeteries at Langemark and Neuville St.-Vaast, with their black metal grave-markers and brooding trees. Valmai Holt suggested then that, if Germany had won the war, the cemeteries would have had a different appearance and atmosphere. It is more complicated than that, of course – black grave-markers are found in ordinary civilian cemeteries in Germany itself; and forest trees are a constant symbol in German culture. But there is something in it: when we ‘remember’ the war dead, what we remember is our construction of them and of their war; and when we read sensitively and alertly, the constructions of the past and present inform our response. German, French and Italian war cemeteries must embody different cultural memories again. This may well be as close as readers can get now that the communicative memory of the Great War has gone for good. Presumably the cultural memory of that war will not stand still, but will go on shaping and reshaping itself - simplifying in one place and adding shades and nuances in another, for as long as the memorials of the Great War, on paper and in masonry, exist.

