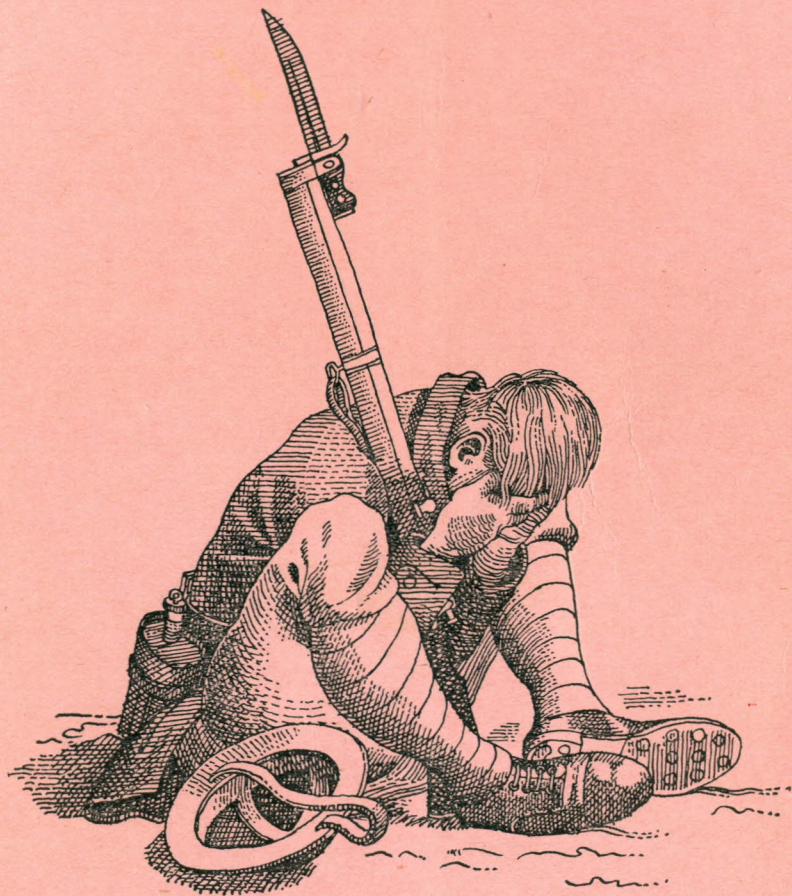


A TRIBUTE TO
WILFRED OWEN



Compiled by
T. J. WALSH

Wishing the Wilfred Owen Story and
Gallery every success in the future.

Jeffrey Walsh
March 2011



Wilfred Owen in Military Uniform.

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INTRODUCTION

By T. J. WALSH

THIS magazine commemorates the opening of the Wilfred Owen Memorial Library and is a tribute from his friends to Wilfred Owen, the distinguished poet, who attended Birkenhead Institute from 1900—1907, and who was killed in action, aged 25, on 4th November, 1918.

The poetry of Wilfred Owen is honoured, not only in Great Britain, but in many other countries, notably Canada, France and the United States of America. At the University of Texas, a collection of war poetry is dedicated to him and is called The Wilfred Owen War Poetry Collection. In Great Britain Wilfred Owen's poetry has been loved and admired since 1920 when Mr. Siegfried Sassoon, his friend, first edited his poems. It is significant that Wilfred's work has been edited by three poets, which testifies to the admiration among writers cherished for his poetry. His two other editors were the poets, Mr. Edmund Blunden (1931) and Mr. C. Day Lewis (1963) whose edition incorporates material previously unpublished.

Two other happenings have recently helped Wilfred Owen's poems to reach a wider public. In May, 1962, Mr. Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" was performed. This majestic work because of its theme repudiates war and seeks pity for those killed. Appropriately it was commissioned for the Festival to celebrate the Consecration of St. Michael's Cathedral in Coventry. Mr. Benjamin Britten has set many of Wilfred Owen's poems to music in "War Requiem".

Apart from Mr. Edmund Blunden's **Memoir** in his 1931 edition little had been known of Wilfred's life. Now this has been rectified by Mr. Harold Owen, Wilfred's brother, who is an artist. He has written his autobiography, "**Journey from Obscurity**", and so enabled readers of Wilfred Owen's work to read of the talented Owen family, and to understand better the growth of Wilfred's mind.

It is appropriate that Birkenhead Institute should honour Wilfred Owen in a practical way. In one of his poems, "To My Friend", he wrote poignantly of how, if he died, he wished to be remembered. Through this means he made clear his dislike of insincere words which he referred to as "florid screech". Rather, he wished,

"Let my inscription be this soldier's disc."

The Wilfred Owen Memorial Library, with its close identification with youth, will be a useful way of remembering one of Birkenhead Institute's greatest old boys. In the quiet of the library boys will remember Wilfred whose life was so sadly cut short and whose work, like that of his admired Keats, has such originality and wisdom. Parents, old boys, present pupils, and friends of Birkenhead Institute have subscribed towards the cost of the Library. Its purpose is to honour the poet by displaying any records of his life and by keeping a collection of his works and others pertaining to war poetry. The appeal which was made in 1959 to provide a memorial has not yet reached the amount envisaged, perhaps others may feel now that it has a worthy purpose. Books for the library and souvenirs of the First World War would also be welcomed.

In the display several items are of particular interest. Mr. Harold Owen presented a prize book Wilfred received at school and two copies of his own autobiography, and Mr. Benjamin Britten, Mr. C. Day Lewis, and Mr. D. S. R. Welland have kindly given autographed copies of their works. Mr. Don Richards, former youth officer of Birkenhead, donated a beautiful set of coloured photographs of Wilfred's grave at Ors. Mr. George Darbyshire, Military Historian, sent valuable accounts of war service. Articles have been received from Mr. D. Masson, Asst. Librarian of the University of Leeds and Mr. Joseph Cohen of Tulane University, New Orleans. Mr. A. S. Paton, Wilfred's school-friend, allowed us to photograph many important documents in his possession.

The University of Texas is up to now the only establishment in the world to provide a permanent memorial and collection of Wilfred Owen material. It is hoped that the publication of this magazine and the establishment of the Wilfred Owen Memorial Library will encourage more people, particularly the young people of Birkenhead where Wilfred was educated, to read his poems and consider his warning.

THE LIFE OF WILFRED OWEN

By T. J. WALSH

IN "Journey from Obscurity" (Vol. 1) Mr. Harold Owen, Wilfred's brother, tells the story of Wilfred's early life. The Owen family lived at Plas Wilmot, Oswestry, where Wilfred was born on March 18th, 1893. Those early years, described by Harold as "protective and benedictory", served Wilfred as a store of graceful memories; the countryside and the harmony of his family life made his childhood peaceful.

When the Owen family moved to Birkenhead Wilfred became a pupil at Birkenhead Institute in 1900. He liked school and was "a very favourite pupil indeed". Even in these early years he was "obsessed with the necessity to equip himself scholastically" in order to release a power within him. He was dedicated to poetry in his school days.

The Owen family abhorred Birkenhead after their country life in Shropshire. Only Wilfred seemed fully happy. He was proud of his school, and when it was suggested that his brother should also attend Birkenhead Institute, he was rather piqued. Harold had no wish to follow his brother, for to a small boy "the prison-like building with its cold stone and the bare asphalt playground that surrounded it" was frightening.

Wilfred excelled at school where he read widely, being intellectually mature for his years. He made good friends there, too, the chief of whom was Alec Paton. It is amusing to read in "Journey from Obscurity" of the occasion when Wilfred was disgraced by his brother, Harold, who became involved in a fight, and whose pugnacity earned for him the title of "The Birkenhead Bullfighter". To Wilfred's later mortification his brother had the ignominy of being told by the Headmaster "the Institute is not a training school for prize fighters". In the Owen family circle Wilfred impressed his personality; he revealed a strong sense of drama, and frequently he lectured his younger brothers and sisters. His interest in the arts, particularly in music, was always evident, and he seems also to have been fascinated by religion — he often conducted religious services at home.

When they left their home in Birkenhead the Owen family moved to Shrewsbury where Wilfred attended Shrewsbury Technical School. After leaving school he wanted to read for a degree at the University of London. To prepare himself for this he became a pupil of the Rev. Herbert Wigan, an erudite clergyman of Dunsden in Oxfordshire. The Rev. Wigan tried to persuade Wilfred to become a clergyman, yet Wilfred rejected this course—he knew that he should try to gain his degree, although, as time passed, this objective grew more remote. At Dunsden Wilfred learned, in the privacy of his room, to write poems in overcoat and gloves, a technique that was to serve him well in the Trenches later. While he was doing parish work he was able to practise the altruism that was his vocation. At this time he wrote many poems, being inspired by the poetry of John Keats. In 1913, after he had been ill, Wilfred took up a post in France as Tutor in English with the Berlitz School of Languages. While in France he made the acquaintance of the French poet Laurent Tailhade whose work may have influenced him.

When his military career began Wilfred's poetic gifts were soon put to use. His mind, sensitive and gentle, was appalled by the conditions at the Front—in 1917 he received medical attention for his nerves. The carnage shocked him into greatness and his poems became full of pity for the men who died. When read in conjunction with the letters to his mother and family Wilfred's poems serve as a profound commentary upon his war service.

During these years when his genius matured several occasions assume especial significance in retrospect. After his treatment for neurasthenia in 1917 he chose courageously to return to the front line, thus helping his men by articulating their protest. The splendid officers of these years typified by such as Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, Edmund Blunden and Wilfred Owen himself were devoted to their important task. While they tried to alleviate hardship they also performed another role as advocates. By pleading for their men they drew attention to the reality of what was happening in terms of spiritual and physical destruction. The creative writers were stunned into disgust; they might have echoed Hamlet's words,

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away.

While others were complacent, the war poets were watchers of the age, expressing their compassion and bitter sense of injustice.

In August 1917 Wilfred Owen met Siegfried Sassoon, who was already established as a distinguished poet, and who gave him encouragement by displaying interest in his poems. Through Siegfried's friendship Wilfred came to know Robert Graves who records in "**Goodbye To All That**" how Wilfred Owen's death grieved him. A month before his death Wilfred was recommended for the Military Cross on October 1st, 1918, which was awarded subsequently. While guiding his men across the Sambre Canal, near the village of Ors Wilfred Owen was killed. It was November 4th, 1918; the Armistice was just a week away!

Wilfred Owen — His Childhood in Birkenhead

by A. S. PATON

THE archaeologist studies scraps of pottery, pieces of rusty iron, an odd bone or two still surviving from the distant past, and tries from these relics to build up a picture of life as lived from day to day by prehistoric man.

Looking back over a period of nearly 60 years to one's boyhood is a somewhat similar process. Nothing but scraps and pieces — scraps of incidents — small pieces of experience — a few stray but vivid flashes from the changing pattern of everyday existence — these are all that survive. And even these are broken and decayed in the memory by the passage of time, so that one has to try to clean and polish them up as best one can. I hope this will be borne in mind by those who read these few recollections that I have of Wilfred Owen and of the times we spent together both at home and in school.

Wilfred was the only close friend that I made while at the Birkenhead Institute, so that I have many memories of him, chiefly of a trivial and unimportant kind which happened to impress themselves on the mind of a schoolboy. I was at the Institute from 1903 till 1907, that is, from the age of eleven to fifteen, and during my later years there Wilfred and I were rivals — always friendly — for the position of first in the form. In the schoolboy language at the time we were both "swots", and were subjected to a certain amount of "ragging" by many of the boys, who took as their heroes the ones who excelled at games and tended to look down on the bookish prize-winners. Wilfred was small and neat in personal appearance, with a round, serious, little face. As a contrast I was tall and lanky, so that the masters jokingly called us "the long and the short of it".

Games were not part of the school curriculum in those days and neither of us played football or cricket, but we used to join in with others in the old game of "tag" or "tic", as we called it, in the school asphalt playground during morning break or at other free times. On Saturday mornings our form had a regular period at the Argyle Street Swimming Baths where we both learned to swim, and also, out of school time, we often went to Livingstone Street Baths where Wilfred became quite an efficient swimmer. During the various outings we had together I discovered, too, that he was very good at horse-riding. This was when we had a gallop on New Brighton sands. I was hanging on like grim death to any part of the horse available while he was quite at his ease and enjoying the invigorating activity.



Wilfred Owen with the yacht his father made for him and which is now in Harold Owen's possession.

My classroom memories centre especially on the English lessons which he and I much enjoyed. Mr. Bennett's lessons are the ones which come most vividly to mind and pieces like Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man", and Scott's "Marmion", and especially Dickens's "Christmas Carol" which we read and studied with him. Wilfred and I evolved a "word" game which consisted in reading downwards the words on the extreme right hand end of the lines of print on a page and making some ridiculous sense or nonsense out of them. This "pastime" caused us much unauthorised merriment and occasionally a reprimand or punishment from the master. Another similar game was the invention of names for people we met on our way home from school. One such was a young man with large dark eyes whom we nicknamed "Nigoc" from the Latin "niger oculus". On one occasion we were enjoying our joke as he was passing and, assuming we were laughing at him, he stopped and boxed Wilfred's ears.

Words interested Wilfred very much and later, when he paid me a visit from Shrewsbury, he and I got into a discussion on figures of speech such as "hyperbole, tautology, zeugma" etc. This interest developed at quite an early age, as is shown by a postcard sent to me from Cornwall when he was aged thirteen, in which he writes as a postscript "There are plenty of 'we's' in this".

He was a sensitive, quiet little boy and, like all shy people, was easily abashed by any incident which involved him in a clumsy or ridiculous situation. I recall a visit we made to our Sunday school teacher — a Miss McHutcheon. We had knocked on her front door and were waiting for her to open it. When she did so, Wilfred, in his eagerness to greet her, took a quick step forward, tripped and fell full-length on the mat in front of her! Such was his confusion that a deep blush spread all over his face and for the remainder of our visit he stammered out his replies with difficulty and could hardly find words to express himself clearly. I speak of our Sunday school teacher here because I attended the same Sunday school (the one held in Christ Church, Cloughton) for some time with him. We belonged to a Bible-reading group in the Church. Each member of the group had a small printed card on which certain chapters from the Bible were marked for reading each day. Wilfred was very conscientious over this and during a holiday in Wales which he spent with me and my family he never once missed taking out his Bible when we were both in bed at night and reading the marked passage by candle-light.

I still recall with pleasure this summer holiday with him in Wales. Our stay was at an old farmhouse in the Vale of Clwyd and we two boys had a wonderful time together. We played games among the hay on top and around the haystacks; we climbed trees in the orchard and discovered one in particular which we frequently sampled; we went walks exploring the country lanes and fields, but chiefly we played by the River Clwyd which flowed along within fifty yards or so of the farm. What fun we had down by the river! — finding stepping stones to lead to an island in midstream from where we could throw stones into a deep pool to listen to the “ploops” — using our handkerchiefs for boats to float down in the current while we dashed madly downstream to retrieve them before they sank waterlogged to the bottom — or simply taking off our shoes and socks to wade in the cool refreshing water. Then in the evenings we would join the farmer's family in the big kitchen lit by oil-lamps and by the flickering glare from the wood-fire. Gathered round the great open fireplace we would try, greatly to the amusement of our hosts, to pronounce correctly some of the common words of the Welsh language. It says much for Wilfred's sense of duty and will-power that, in spite of all these pleasurable distractions and the healthy tiredness induced by them, he still persisted in his Bible-reading each night. This strong religious background to his character was mainly due to his mother, and undoubtedly she was the one who had most influence in the moulding of his personality throughout his childhood days.

I have other memories of Wilfred, but have chosen here these few as being the most illuminating in the light they throw on his character and promise of poetic achievement.

The effects of war and of the awful and horrible sights and sounds of battle on a sensitive, imaginative mind such as his can well be appreciated. His mother told me that when he came home on sick leave in 1917 his hair had turned quite white. His decision to rejoin his regiment at the front again in spite of these experiences speaks much of courage and determination.

WILFRED OWEN'S MILITARY CAREER

Enlisted into the 28th Battalion, The London Regiment (Artists Rifles)	21.10.15
Appointed to a commission as 2nd Lieutenant The Manchester Regiment	4.6.16
Sailed to France on active service attached to Lancashire Fusiliers	29.12.16
Returned to England on sick leave	June 1917
Promoted Lieutenant	4.12.17
Returned to France for active service	1.9.18
Awarded the Military Cross	1.10.18
Killed in action (France and Flanders)	4.11.18

M.C. Citation: "For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty in the attack on the SON/SOMME Line on October 1/2nd 1918. On the Company Commander becoming a casualty he assumed command and showed fine leadership and resisted a heavy counter-attack. He personally manipulated a captured enemy machine gun from an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly."

IN SEARCH OF WILFRED OWEN

by *DON RICHARDS* Former Youth Officer in Birkenhead.

WE were a small group standing around an American Torpedo Assembly line in Bridgeport, Connecticut, when the news came through that one of our products had "downed" a Japanese transport. There was jubilation all around, but to me the momentary feeling of satisfaction was marred by the picture of young men struggling amidst water, oil, and flames, young men I did not know, could not hate, and yet quite impersonally I had helped to destroy. My mind went forward to the telegrams, the letters, the broken-hearted families, and the utter stupidity of war, the killing without hatred, the criminal waste of young life; these were the thoughts that flowed over me.

My best American friend was an erstwhile Birkenonian Frank Woodward, who often sat with me, and eagerly swapped yarns about the Old Country. Frank was a well-read man, and he talked about his home town with knowledge and yearning, and according to him Birkenhead was famous for two things, it had produced two famous men—Charles Lord, who had been educated at Springfield, Mass.; and Wilfred Owen who had written a book of War poems.

I read the book of war poems and the thought which had come to me that night when we heard the news of our Japanese success was epitomised in Owen's poem "Strange Meeting". Here in this poem was all the revulsion and pity of one man killing another without hate and seemingly, without purpose.

After the war by some strange coincidence I was appointed as Youth Welfare Officer to Birkenhead, and on the first possible night I sought out the famous Charles Lord, and looked for the statue of Birkenhead's famous son, Wilfred Owen. Charles Lord, builder of men, was there, breezy and smiling, and even more exuberant than I had been led to expect, but when I questioned Birkenonians—even Birkenhead Institute scholars—I was met with blank stares.

So, the search began. My first experience was to enlist the help of the Secretary of Birkenhead Institute, Miss I. Cojeen. She showed me his name on the school war memorial, and later produced from some deep archive the school year book of 1900, which showed under entry 102, Owen, Wilfred. E.S., 7 Elm Grove,

age 7 years, born March 18th, 1893. This precious book I was allowed to borrow, and by the kind co-operation of Mr. Stratton, Head Librarian, I photographed these entries in case the rather tattered book might disintegrate. I noted that his father, Thomas Owen, had not opted for Gymnastic Instruction which was 6/- extra.

During these years I read and re-read Owen's poems, and the message of the pity and futility of war became more and more impressed upon me, especially so, because at the same time the news of bigger production and better nuclear explosives was reported in the press.

My next task was to photograph his Birkenhead homes at Elm Grove and Milton Road, hoping one day to persuade the Town Council to become more aware of the contribution that Birkenhead's sons had made to science, discovery and the arts, a rather fragile hope, to which the neglect of the priory, and the Della Robbia traditions gave but little encouragement. I found sympathy, and kindred hearts and spirits in a small circle of men. John Cairns, an ex-master of the Birkenhead Institute, W. S. Bushell, Arthur Maddocks, Professor Muir, W. McIntyre, F. W. Venables, Charles Collis, plus the staff of the Borough Library, who wished to preserve these Birkenhead traditions; but much of the work sprang from personal belief in preserving as quickly as possible all information and knowledge of a great poet, rather than from any special official encouragement.

Because time was short and people with personal recollections of Wilfred Owen were becoming fewer and fewer, I quickly sought every avenue to preserve the local connection.

Mr. Frederick Venables — a member of a highly respected Birkenhead family — introduced me to the library chronicle of the University of Texas, where Dr. Harry H. Ronson has assembled the formal organisation of a war poetry collection serving threefold; as a memorial to all writers killed in the war; as a tribute to those who fought and survived to interpret war; and to keep in America an original collection of war poetry. It was an ironic fact that an American University was the first to recognise that this Birkenhead Institute scholar was the foremost single spokesman on war in the twentieth century, and they called the collection "The Wilfred Owen War Poetry Collection". The library of Texas University is the only institution in the world possessing a full set of reproductions; a collection which is to be enriched by donations of original material by the poet's painter brother, Harold Owen.

The collection contains poems by Rupert Brooke, Charles H. Sorley, Isaac Rosenberg, Alan Seeger, Francis Ledwidge, Robert Nichols, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Robert Graves, Herbert Read, Osbert Sitwell, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, whilst World War II contributions include poems by Gavin Ewart, Keith Douglas, Sidney Keyes, and the Welshman Alun Lewis, all killed in action, and of the British survivors, Patric Dickinson, Roy Fuller, Allan Rook, Emanuel Litvinoff, and another Welshman Vernon Watkins, plus the American poets, Randall Jarrell, Richard Eberhart, Karl Shapiro, and Seldon Rodman.

The next step was to visit Plas Wilmot, Oswestry, the birthplace of Wilfred and his sister Mary; at the lovely old Shaw home from where Susan Shaw left to marry Thomas Owen. Here I drank in the atmosphere of the gracious and mellow house. Mr. and Mrs. Ikin and their charming daughters, the present occupiers, gave me full permission to visit every nook and cranny, and I was allowed to photograph the birthroom, which provides a vista of ancient trees set in a wellkept lawn, with the fair wooded fields of Shropshire as a background.

The word 'Plas' in Welsh means a home of the 'uchelwyr' or well born, and Plas Wilmot was truly a fitting home for a Welsh squire.

I wandered through the town of Oswestry drinking in the atmosphere of this historic market town named after Oswald, a Christian Martyr, whose body was torn apart to make a derisive cross by the hordes of the heathen king, Penda. The town is still called in Welsh CROES-OSWALLT, or OSWALD'S CROSS. I tramped through the streets, visited the old Parish Church, once containing one of the rarest altars in Britain, the famous Coach and Dog Inn, the Celtic Earthworks, older or as old as the Roman Empire, because I wanted to be attuned to scenes which shaped the early years of this sensitive boy.

The transition from Plas Wilmot to Shrewsbury and then to Birkenhead must have been a very unpleasant experience, and Harold Owen's description of walking into the "dark beetle infested" home rather suggests how keenly the change must have bitten into the consciousness of this child.

My next task was to find out all about his Birkenhead environment, to walk in his footsteps over the dirty unkempt roads, to photograph the cheerful, dirty, smelly but lovable gamins which still infest the litter clad boozy streets, to walk past Christchurch where he attended Sunday School, and where his father was a

Sunday School teacher, to photograph also some Birkenhead Institute boys outside his home in Milton Road and Elm Grove, to wander through the corridors of the main school and to sit in the home of the school caretakers, Mr. and Mrs. Wiggins, which served in Wilfred's day as the preparatory department; to stand in front of the War Memorial, and look at the plastic poppies and wonder why the inscription did not give his regiment as the Artists' Rifles instead of the Manchester Regiment, to which he had only been assigned; to talk to the present Birkenhead Institute boys and wonder if they, in turn, would need an "Anthem for Doomed Youth".

The group of buildings, halfway up Whetstone Lane; "Beechcroft", the home of Wilson Steer and the Birkenhead Institute, school of Wilfred Owen, together with Hamilton Square, the beautiful Benedictine Priory, the Central Library and the Williamson Gallery ought to be preserved, the rest of the town could fall down without any significant architectural loss, yet these, the Priory, Beechcroft and the Birkenhead Institute have on more than one occasion been threatened with demolition. Birkenhead could well ponder that, some day in the future, the homes and the school of the poet might attract as many visitors as the Bard of Avon.

I questioned several of the older members of staff; only Mr. Harris remembered him as a "very quiet and well behaved boy", but Wilfred had done nothing particularly brilliant or particularly bad to draw attention to himself. Miss M. C. Paton, sister of Wilfred's dearest boyhood friend Alec Paton, and headmistress of Trinity Street Infants' School, allowed me to photograph a copy of Wilfred's handwriting from a book entitled "The English at the North Pole". The inscription reads—"Alec Paton, from his affectionate friend Wilfred, Dec. 1906". Wilfred was thirteen, and the book (1959) was in the possession of Miss Paton. She was also kind enough to make a tape recording of her youthful impressions of Wilfred Owen, which will prove a valuable link with the past.

By now I had followed the child from his birthplace to his Merseyside homes; to his school, had read everything I could about him, including that wonderful tribute from that greatest of word singers, Dylan Thomas, who stated that Owen was the greatest of the poets who wrote out of the Great War, and one of the greatest poets of the century. I wonder if Dylan's grave at Laugharne marked with a simple soldier's cross was a further tribute?

Now naught remained but the last step, to follow his footsteps to France and to visit the place where he fell, and to pay my personal tribute at his grave.

Accordingly I made careful preparations one summer to make a record for posterity of the scenes, then bloody and torn with war, now peaceful and serene.

The scenery had been described as not outstanding but of particular interest for its 1914-1918 Great War associations and towns with names like St. Omer, Bethune, passing Vimy Ridge on the way to Arras, Bapaume, Bellicourt, Le Cateau and finally the little town of ORS, made one think anew of that terrible holocaust of bloodstained mud and leafless, shattered trees that once bore the name of Flair Flanders.

The Highway of Death started at Dover where a bronze figure with uplifted supplicating arms paid "glorious tribute to the people of Dover" who fell in the wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. At Calais was another monument in a different language recording the same grim facts.

As I passed over the poplar-lined roads framed with waving corn, becrimsoned with blood-red poppies, I plucked one or two, and I thought that each grew from the heart of a dead, unrealised boy, a young stem that had no time to bear fruit, only to bear the flower of death. I stopped at the huge cemetery of Cabaret Rouge and looked at the dedication stone which told that this plot which contained four thousand graves had been given by the French people for the perpetual resting place of those of the Allied Armies who fell in the war of 1914-1918 and are honoured here.

The streets of this "City of the Dead" were green and garlanded with roses, but no merry voices were uplifted — all was quiet. As I walked between the rows I thought of Owen's lines in the poem "Futility" "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" Was it for this that boys of eighteen and old war-torn men of twenty two lay in rows for what might well be a fruitless sacrifice to an unworthy cause? It was almost impossible to stop oneself from searching out the mere lads, 18, 18, 19, 18, 19 — boys, who at home would be playing basketball at Livingstone Street, but here, the referee's whistle of death had blown for the end of their pitiful game.

It was fitting that the huge Canadian Memorial at Vimy Ridge, with fingers of mighty stone cleaving the blue sky, bore a figure of a mother weeping for her dead sons. On Vimy Ridge itself the Canadian and German Lines have been preserved, each only a few yards from the other. Between each bloodbathed trench the huge craters, lakes of liquid mud which engulfed thousands of men who were not even wounded, and as I watched these grim sandbagged walls of death pitted with deep dugouts the full impact of what Owen had been trying to say struck me with a terrible unforgettable impact. "My subject is War, and the pity of war, and the poetry is in the pity".

As I passed through the towns, I looked at the huge Gothic churches and cathedrals. Somewhere inside invariably would be a plaque bearing this sad and terrible message

A la gloire de Dieu
Et à la memoire
Du million de morts de
L' Empire Britannique
Tombés dans
La grande guerre
1914-1918
Et qui pour la plupart
Reposent en France.

To the glory of God
And to the memory of
One million dead of the
British Empire
who fell in the Great War of
1914-1918
and of whom the greater part
rest in France.

One million dead! — the Angel of Death at the Passover claiming one out of every two souls out of the population of the whole of Wales!!

With saddened heart I passed through Arras, and then along an undulating road through a succession of newly-built villages, through Bapaume, Sailly Saillsel, and on to another great, sad, and beautifully kept cemetery at FINS. Here I photographed the perfect setting of the theme of "Strange Meeting". Lying side by side were two graves, one bearing the Christian Cross of the British War Graves Commission, and the other bearing the Iron Cross of an equally Christian German Youth, unwilling and unhating enemies in life, and comrades and bedfellows in death.

Onwards through the big towns with cobbled streets, onwards through the poppy bestrewn fields acknowledging the greetings of peasants in shapeless peaked caps and faded blue denims who pulled their horse-drawn carts on to the verges to let me pass; on through Bellicourt and Le Cateau where I forked left on the crossroads guarded by a stone Poilu resting his hand on an upturned rifle. Tension was building up in me; I was approaching the end of a pilgrimage which had taken me seventeen years to complete.

Suddenly at the beginning of a tiny township the word ORS met my gaze. There are many such little market towns in my own beloved Wales. Here was the square, on one side was the little church, on the other the small cafe selling papers, ice cream and bread; a horse drawing a cart with a farmer standing up inside clattered over the cobblestones; there was a smell of hay, manure, and flowers permeating the air. Men with stubble on their chins, and clad in cotton overalls, with their feet thrust into muddy high gumboots passed on their way to the bistro, men who glanced curiously at my obviously British clothes, with faint amusement.

Near the cross roads stood an old farmer; his working days were over and he wore a rough frieze jacket which was wide open showing a small flask of cognac in an inner pocket. His legs were encased in black velvet trousers, with front pockets into which he thrust his horny hands. When I spoke to him he removed his cap, revealing a handsome head of faded blonde hair which contrasted vividly with his ruddy cheeks. Through the medium of my terrible French and sign language I asked him where the British cemetery was situated. 'Oui Oui' he said; he understood all right and leading me to the side of the hedge parted some leaves and showed me the sign. "British Cemetery, ORS, Communal Cemetery". Up this road, then, was the resting place, but strangely now I had come so far I wanted the grave to be the culminating factor of my journey, so I retraced my steps until I saw the sign, Le canal de la Sambre à L'oise. I walked on to the bridge that crossed the narrow canal. Two young French mothers chatted near the kerb, whilst two small girls showing an unusual expanse of white lace peered inquisitively at a Belgian coal-bearing barge which passed below. On the canal bank was a party of people, men, women and children who looked as if they were returning from an angling competition because the men were carrying tiny fish impaled on wires, with labels on them denoting their weight. Yes, this was truly a peaceful scene. A man who goes fishing has peace and quietness in his soul.

I crossed to the other side of the canal where another barge was waiting to pass through the lock gates. On one side of the bank stood a timber yard, and a mill, a scene that reminded me forcibly of Constable's picture of Willy Lott's house.

The Sambre Canal is about 30ft. wide at Ors, banked up rather than dug in. The heaped-up banks are now overgrown with grass and flowers and young trees; new straight trees line its banks, and a narrow sandy footpath; in fact the old horse towpath meanders alongside.

Something innate in the Celt gave me a queer air of expectancy as if I was about to tread on the very spot where Owen's earthbound soul was released for celestial flight by the whirr of the bullets and shells which the hard-pressed German artillerymen and machine gunners were concentrating on the spot where the Royal Engineers had vainly attempted to construct a bridge to allow the Manchesters to pass over. The Germans were on the run; they had to be harried and given no time to re-form; everyone was anxious to get the whole bloody and mad affair over before another winter of mud and stagnation set in. Men tried to cross on wooden rafts and Owen was giving a hand to cross that thirty feet of death when he was hit. His last words were of praise for his men. The praise of an understanding shepherd who leads his innocent and ignorant sheep into the shambles — with pain and pity in his heart.

In that holocaust of shells and bullets no man could stand up and live, so, withdrawing from the sides of the canal the remaining men sheltered behind the banks, to cross eventually over the very bridge at ORS where I had stood watching the children play. Slowly, at funeral pace, I walked the bank until at one particular spot I halted. I was positive that it was here that the object of my seventeen year old pilgrimage had fallen, for was not this poppy more crimson because the earth had been enriched with his red mortality? I stood in silence — in my mind I could see once again the leafless stumps of older trees, the muddy grassless banks; the groans, the stutter of machine guns, a flash, a roar, and he was gone.

The full realization that my quest had ended now fell upon me, but the death, which to me, had only happened a few minutes ago, now made it more imperative that I should walk alongside his body, to mourn for a man who had put into words the terrible, terrible pity of one man killing another, killing senselessly and without hate.

I retraced my steps walking as if behind a bier, stopping outside the church, looking pensively at the village war memorial, and then slowly as though I was an onlooker in a film I proceeded along the cobbled streets, up to a narrow road which read GARE D'ORS.

Two peasants were going in for a drink as I passed the corner cafe, as I walked in imagination with men who were carrying Owen's earthly remains into that sacred spot where the villagers also laid their own dead.

Two pillars of brick on which were fastened yellow painted crosses supported iron gates. Inside the cemetery were the familiar tombs of marble, some with symbolical shattered urns to show that life had leaked away; one family tomb looked like a rusty garden shed, whilst tombs were bestrewn with flowers and photographs of the departed. There was the same confusion and lack of order as befits a nation of individualists, but suddenly in one corner rose a taller cross, on which, like Excalibur stood the long unsheathed sword of the warrior whose last battle has been fought and lost — the battle for Immortality.

Here was order, military order, in death as in life, rank by rank stood to horizontal attention; this sad company of men who fell seven days before the church bells rang around the world proclaiming peace and an end to the madness which had laid them low.

Up against the green hedge in three rows were about sixty graves. On the large cross was an inscription

“Their name liveth for evermore”

but here, already, on these sad graves the regimental badges were slowly disintegrating, and the fine edges of the names were getting blurred — ‘For evermore’.

Slowly, because I was in fact a true mourner for every boy and unfulfilled man who lay beneath that verdant grass, I walked along the rows; all had died on November the 4th. Again it was fitting to this modest man he was not in the first two ranks. As I approached one end of the last pitiful line I saw a name —

“2nd Lieut. James Kirk V.C. 4th Nov. 1918,
Aged 21

“Here is no cause to mourn, only the undone years”

so he lay with heroes, amidst his peers as he would have wished.

This was a group of men from the County of the Red Rose,
The Manchesters and The Lancashire Fusiliers.

It was a red rose tree that tried in vain to hide the last grave
but one in the last row of all. This was the end. Here between
two private soldiers — PRIVATE W. E. DUCKWORTH and
PRIVATE H. TOPPING, Lancashire Fusiliers — lay all that was
crumbling and mortal of he that had been W. E. S. Owen, Military
Cross, of the Manchester Regiment, who fell with his comrades
on November 4th, 1918 and who lies in serried sleep in proper
rank with them whose end, piteous and unwarranted, he told in
deathless verse. Under the cross inscribed on the stone were the
words —

Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth
All death will He annul.

Without a sense of sacrilege I picked a rose, leaving many others
to scent his sleep. As I walked away with the rose resting gently
in my palm, I beheld in the middle of the cemetery, a tall rusty
crucifix, a reminder that the greatest truths can become corroded
if men forget that "God is Love" and that "Thou shalt love thy
neighbour as thyself".

Wilfred Owen lies here beside this rusty crucifix.

Shall we who read his poem "Strange Meeting" forget his
message?

THE POETRY OF WILFRED OWEN

by T. J. WALSH M.A. *English Dept. Birkenhead Institute*

ROBERT JORDAN, the soldier in Hemingway's **For Whom the Bell Tolls**, is ennobled by war. He is changed, not by enmity, but by an awareness of the value of life. Jordan grows to admire the men working with him. When they expose their frailty he marvels at their courage; as they die he longs to preserve life,

"I have the very smallest beginnings of an education. The very small beginnings. If I die on this day it is a waste because I know a few things now. I wonder if you only learn them now because you are oversensitized because of the shortness of the time. I have been all my life in those hills since I have been here. Anselmo is my oldest friend. I know him better than I know Charles, than I know Chub, than I know Guy, than I know Mike, and I know them well."

A similar experience, sharpened by reality, matured Wilfred Owen's work. Refuting attempts to transform the soldiers into illusory heroes, he found a strange beauty in war,

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.

This vision was the product of Owen's experience. The "shortness of the time" acted as a galvanising force upon the poet causing him to be "oversensitized". While he protected the lives of his men he learned to understand both himself and others,

I, too, have dropped off fear —
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,
And sailed my spirit surging, light and clear
Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation —
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation,
Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul.

I have made fellowships —
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By Joy, whose ribbon slips, —
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

The unifying theme in Wilfred Owen's work is the "fellowships" which are "knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong". Consistently he states the soldiers' case while involving the reader in the permanence of their sacrifice.

For the complacent Owen had nothing but contempt. His tough pride is charged with bitterness against those who

.....made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars.

The moving conclusion of **Apologia Pro Poemate Meo** expresses this feeling also;

.....except you share
With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
Whose world is but the trembling of a flare,
And heaven but as the highway for a shell,
You shall not hear their mirth:
You shall not come to think them well content
By any jest of mine. These men are worth
Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.

In one of his letters, Wilfred Owen, returning to the front line, spoke of his vocation,

"I came out in order to help these boys — directly by leading them as well as an officer can, indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can." He spoke of his mission as that of shepherd in another letter, ".....now I am among the herds again, a Hersman; and a Shepherd of sheep that do not know my voice."

The concern he cherished for the welfare of those serving under him is manifested in his poems. Through his testament Wilfred Owen involves us in the business of war; he will not allow us to stand back. In **Exposure**, for example, we are planted in the front line and share the soldiers' feelings. The sense of waiting and the terrible contingency of death are made vivid,

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us . .
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . .
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,
But nothing happens.

The wanton sacrifice of men seemed to Wilfred Owen too profound for conventional elegies written by non-soldiers. Only the soldier, bound to his fellows, was privileged to speak. In his famous dictum "All a poet can do today is to warn" he made an important statement; for at the heart of his work is a warning to his own and to succeeding generations. For this reason his poems should be read with a view to acquiring wisdom. He anatomized war so that readers of his poems could learn from his experience. Those who have misrepresented his work have considered his poems as narrow documents connected with problems and situations peculiar to the 1914-1918 war; his poems reach beyond this. By presenting an analysis of war's effects upon men, Wilfred Owen depicted the soldiers' sacrifice in a wider context. His work is notable because it supersedes jingoism and those negative emotions often generated by war. He transcended the difficulties he faced in battle and was able to relate the happenings in war to those in peace-time. Spiritual betterment is at the core of his work.

Because of happenings after 1918, that proved his prescience, Owen's work has a unique significance. Read in the light of Belsen, Dresden, Warsaw, and Hiroshima, his poetry appears remarkably prophetic. The irony of many of his phrases has unforgettable truth,

But the old Happiness is unreturning.
Boy's griefs are not so grievous as youth's yearning,
Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope.
We who have seen the gods' kaleidoscope,
And played with human passions for our toys,
We know men suffer chiefly by their joys.

His arraignment of mankind is extremely moving.

It is not death
Without hereafter
To one in dearth
Of life and its laughter,

Nor the sweet murder
Dealt slow and even
Unto the martyr
Smiling at heaven:

It is the smile
Faint as a (waning) myth,
Faint, and exceeding small
On a boy's murdered mouth.

In the succinct poem **The Parable of the Old Men and the Young** he forces the question, Why would not statesmen listen to conscience? This confrontation of Europe's people is concerned with a central issue, the carnage that ensued through irresponsible actions,

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

As did Thomas Hardy, Wilfred Owen championed the cause of the unexceptional man. The ordinary soldier, ambushed by evil circumstance, appeared to Owen to be abandoned by those at home. When the soldiers left for battle others did not want to know; at the railway station,

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went,
They were not ours.
We never heard to which front these were sent.

In 1918 Woodrow Wilson spoke in Manchester of the lesson he thought the war had taught men, "I believe that . . . men are beginning to see, not perhaps the golden age, but an age which at any rate is brightening from decade to decade, and will lead us some time to an elevation from which we can see the things for which the heart of mankind is longing".

It is difficult on reading these words not to think of Owen's phrase, "like wrongs hushed up". Wilson, the idealist, betrays by his terminology, his naivete. He had not fully understood the war's meaning nor had many of his generation. Wilson undervalued the suffering by using the phrase "golden age"; he wished to hush up the wrongs. The real meaning of war and the lessons to be learned were apparent only to men like Owen, the true prophets of the post-war years.

Much of the hope and disillusionment of modern history is exemplified in the contrast between the words of Wilson and those of Albert Camus at the end of **The Plague** written in 1947. Rieux, a character in the novel, in his closing words, represents the opinion of Camus, adumbrated in **The Plague** that the history of the twentieth century suggests that the evil of war will continue to exist, perhaps for the improvement of men. "Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know, but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when for the bane and the enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city."

Significantly the tone of Rieux's words is close to Wilfred Owen's prophetic vision in **Strange Meeting**,

Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

Camus, writing of the German occupation of France, like Owen, experienced the fact which the emptiness of phrases such as "golden age" denied.

The facts of war cannot be neglected: Wilfred Owen deals with them unflinchingly. No matter how distasteful, he presents them. The insistent images of the neurasthenic and of the hospital ward permeate his allusions. His poetry, bred in a confined world of trenches, has a wider scope. Resisting didacticism, the poet explores the world of the soldiers. The reader enters the ranks of **Mental Cases** where men sit "like purgatorial shadows,"

Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked.
Stroke on stroke of pain.—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

Robert Graves, who was a coeval of Owen's in the War, attempted in 1961 to explain the characteristics of enduring poetry. He referred to the word BAKARA which means the inspiration that gives the poems its qualities of life, blessedness, and dignity. The BAKARA in Owen's poetry will ensure that his work is prized and loved in many countries; for his inspiration is a sacred one, human life crying out to be preserved.

In the dug-outs Wilfred Owen thought deeply of the men with him. He drew a lesson from their sorrow for succeeding generations. To a world which has had little respite from the threat of war his warning is particularly relevant. His poems help to illuminate the twin obsessions of the Twentieth Century, a desire for peace and a belief in armaments.

Wilfred Owen's warning to our time is a vital one. He asserts the value of the individual life which events such as Hiroshima and Warsaw denied. Because of this he frees the reader from his insularity by arousing compassion for the wounded and suffering of all nationalities. The example of his work shows that men need support from each other. The tendency to regard men as statistics or as members of a race to be eliminated is refuted in Wilfred Owen's work by pity. For this reason it is appropriate that Benjamin Britten used his poems in **War Requiem**, a work which stresses the need for brotherhood.

One of Wilfred Owen's best poems, **Futility**, acts as a conclusion. Devoid of bitterness, the poet appeals to men's humanity. The warrior represents Every Man, for whom we should have compassion,

Move him into the sun —
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds, —
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved-still warm-too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
— O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

T. J. WALSH.

TRIBUTES

FROM MR. BENJAMIN BRITTEN.

(The poems of Wilfred Owen comprise half the libretto of "War Requiem" which is often considered to be the composer's most distinguished work.)

I am delighted to read that Birkenhead Institute is paying a tribute to its old pupil, Wilfred Owen. I have read with interest of his days at the Institute, and feel sure that he owed a great deal to its sympathetic encouragement.

I would only like to add that Owen is to me by far our greatest war poet, and one of the most original and touching poets of this century.

* * * *

FROM PROFESSOR EDMUND BLUNDEN (Formerly Professor of English Literature at the University of Hong Kong)

(Mr. Blunden, the distinguished poet, edited Wilfred Owen's poems in 1931.)

It is excellent news that you are uniting in a lasting tribute to Wilfred Owen.

Vast as the old Western Front was, "strange meetings" used to happen, but I never met Wilfred Owen there whose editor I was to become; our friend Siegfried Sassoon, his mother, father, sister and brother Harold (the artist) through their conversation made me seem to know him as a young officer of the generous, devoted, and capable kind typical of those years. His poems were a secret, we hear from a brother officer, and that also was not unusual in the old B.E.F. Only, what original poems his were!

* * * *

FROM SIR HERBERT READ.

(Sir Herbert Read is renowned for his contribution to English poetry aesthetics, and philosophy.)

I was an exact contemporary of Wilfred Owen and shared the same experiences in the First World War. His war poetry has meant much to me, both as the most exact and profound description of those shared experiences, and as a technical development in the art of verse.

In editing the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, W. B. Yeats chose a poem of mine in preference to one by Owen. I have never been happy about that, because I too felt "the pity of war" and thought that I was as guilty as Owen in expressing it, even in the poem chosen by Yeats. Yeats's objection was to what he called "passive suffering", of which he wrote that it was not a theme for poetry. "Tragedy is a joy to the man who dies." This is true, but Owen would have agreed:

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate

Though we fought the same battles, I never met Owen. But he became my brother, in his passive suffering in his acceptance of a cruel destiny, as one who was content "to miss the march of this retreating world".

* * * *

FROM MR. D. S. R. WELLAND, B.A., Ph.D.

(Reader in **American Literature at the University of Manchester**)

(Mr. Welland is the author of **Wilfred Owen; A Critical Study.**)

Probably no English poet of Wilfred Owen's generation has achieved a reputation more international than he has, and yet the nature of his genius is characteristically English. For this reason it is good to know that he is now being commemorated, in a particularly suitable way, in one of the English schools in which he was educated. Birkenhead Institute is to be congratulated on taking a step that will give pleasure to the many admirers of Owen's work, and it is in their name even more than in my own that I send these good wishes for the success of the venture.

It has been my privilege, in classes and in print, to introduce Owen's poetry to a large number of young readers; I have always been impressed by the readiness of their response to him, and even more by the way in which that response deepens as they grow older. The passionate integrity of his writing, the warmth of his humanity, and his consummate mastery of music and language, all of these are immediately attractive to young people; but the maturity of his vision and his disturbing insights into the twentieth-century malaise gave a prophetic quality to lines such

as "None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress" so that his work has a tragically abiding relevance forty five years after his death. Yet even in a world disarmed (remote as that may sound) his poetry would still survive for its intrinsic merits and for what it has meant to other poets, and Birkenhead may certainly be proud of her connection with him.

* * * *

FROM MR. STEPHEN SPENDER

(Poet and Author. Editor of **Encounter**.)

I am very glad that you are publishing a magazine "Tribute to Wilfred Owen". I have been reading Owen's poems ever since I was in 1929 an Oxford Undergraduate. I think they had a particular appeal to poets of my generation because they most movingly demonstrated that great poetry could be written out of the most terrible experience of the Western Front, naturally and as it were innocently, without either the trappings of "modernism" or the intellectual armour of literary criticism. Today Owen probably looks closer to Keats than to Eliot or Pound, and perhaps it is just this which gives him his very special and valued position.

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FROM MR. C. DAY LEWIS.

(Mr. Day Lewis, poet and author, is the most recent editor of Wilfred Owen's work.)

I am delighted to hear of your "Tribute to Wilfred Owen". It is good to know that his old school is honouring thus one of the great English poets.

* * * *

FROM MR. T. S. ELIOT (O.M.)

(Poet, scholar and dramatist. Nobel Prize Winner.)

I am sorry that I cannot at present afford the time to write anything for you about the poems of Wilfred Owen. I should have to refresh my memory of these poems before doing so. But there is one poem of his at least, **Strange Meeting**, which is of permanent value and, I think, will never be forgotten, and which is not only one of the most moving pieces of verse inspired by the war of 1914-18, but also a technical achievement of great originality.

WAR IN MODERN TIMES

by

R. E. EVANS, M.A. Senior History Master, Birkenhead Institute.

LOOKING back over the years 1750-1815 Clausewitz, the Prussian analyst of war, concluded that "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means". He was seeking a definition which would include both the limited wars fought by 18th century absolute monarchs, and the total nationalistic wars of the French Revolutionaries and Napoleon. War in 1750 was between professional protagonists seeking as far as possible to avoid battle, whereas the French at the turn of the century fought as a whole nation, mobilised by conscription, hurling itself ferociously upon the enemy. Clausewitz could not imagine that, in a hundred years, scientific and technical developments would so divorce the military from the political, that warfare would become an end in itself, with monstrous results for humanity.

The limitation of war was one of the greatest achievements of the 18th century. It came about partly as an expression of revulsion at the excesses of the 30 Years War of the 17th century, in which 8 million people died, and partly as a product of the intellectual climate of the time, which avoided excess and so sapped religious partisanship and aggressive nationalism. Johnson could popularly claim that "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel". Armies were therefore small and professional, and very highly trained in complex battle manoeuvres. It is said that Prussian officers "dressed" their men with surveying instruments. Civilians were regarded as completely separate from the military, and therefore the mass of the people were not involved in the wars. Sterne could, for example travel to Paris during the 7 Years War without a passport. The morale of the armies was poor because there was a great gulf between officers and men. The officers were nobles, appointed as of right and not by merit, whereas the men were universally regarded as the "scum of the earth", and did little to reverse the truth of this opinion. In such an age wars became as much a battle of economies as the clash of armed forces. The object was to exhaust the enemy's treasury and his granaries, and outwit him by manoeuvre so that a reasonable peace treaty could be concluded when the limited objective of the war was achieved. Marshal Saxe believed that a general could have a successful career without ever fighting a battle.

Into this world of spit and polish, of virtually non-combatant 6ft Pomeranian grenadiers, of the leisured aristocratic officer with his vast personal baggage train, came the shattering outburst of the French Revolution. By 1793 the French people had been roused to a crusade against the other powers of Europe in the name of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Conscription was enthusiastically welcomed by the people, and the generals were thus enabled to fight more battles because replacement of losses was made easy. Napoleon was the first to appreciate the significance of the change, and openly boasted of his willingness to expend 30,000 men a month. Now that officer comfort and squeamishness towards civilians no longer mattered he developed a reliance on attack, and introduced a new mobility. Out of this came the belief that a succession of shattering victories would make peace easier to achieve, a myth which has persisted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Only a correspondingly fierce and total nationalistic response was sufficient to earn for other European countries the right to decide their own affairs, but a dangerous barbaric precedent had been set.

The Industrial Revolution which had begun to transform society in the 18th century, made little direct impact upon warfare before the 19th century. Inventiveness had expressed itself in military projects, but the significance of these was not appreciated until after 1800. From then onwards, invention, the application of new scientific knowledge, and the improvement in production techniques, gradually transformed the soldier's equipment and his capacity for destruction. The rifle became dominant when the percussion cap and the cylindro-connoidal bullet increased its efficiency and effective use up to 1,200 yards. The Prussian use of breech loading for artillery gave them a great advantage in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 over the much slower French muzzle-loaded cannons. By this time also the use of rifling in the barrels had increased the accuracy of bombardment and the penetration of the shot. In addition to these technical developments there were numerous experiments: the first submarine was in prototype, and the first suggestions for the use of a poisonous gas were made. As the century progressed and the application of steam to locomotion was appreciated, a new mobility was infused into the conduct of war. The Prussian Moltke learned the value of rail power from the American Civil War, from which many other lessons could have been noted. This war was, in a sense, the first of the industrial age, for it exhibited many of the characteristics of scientific and technological war. The complete domination of the rifle was demonstrated when



Soldiers in the Trenches.

D. S. W. Jones.

frontal attack was shown to be futile, the use of entrenchments was extended, and hand-grenades, rockets, mines and torpedoes were used. The war showed that the defensive had gained in strength, and that victory for the attacker was a slow, expensive business. Unfortunately this conclusion was not drawn in Europe, and the dazzling successes of Prussia in 1866 and 1870 (mainly resulting from the inefficiency and unpreparedness of her foes) perpetuated the belief that the offensive was the stronger form of war. Theorists like Foch carried on a near religious crusade in favour of the big battle, the bayonet, and the frontal attack. Suicide was thus a respected part of military education.

By the end of the 19th century, therefore, there were many signs of the approaching Armageddon. The most pointed were certainly in the writings of the pacifist Bloch, who published in 1897 his 6 volume study of war in which he made an uncannily accurate forecast of the nature of the First World War. He contended that the great developments of the last century had made inevitable a stalemate between the conflicting fighting forces, and that as a result casualties would be enormous if battles were fought, and the civil populations would also be subjected to a dreadful war of attrition. He thought that the victor would suffer as much as the vanquished, and that the ultimate result would be the collapse of social organisation. Because Bloch was not a military man, the military men ignored him, although the Spanish-American War 1898, the Boer War 1899-1902, and the Russo-Japanese War 1904-5, all exhibited in various ways the truth of his thesis. In the siege of Port Arthur in 1904 the Japanese lost 11,000 men capturing 203 Metre Hill, a small part of the defences, held by some 2,000 Russians. But the military men drew no conclusion about the use of the machine gun, the new power of artillery, and the difficulty of penetrating wire entanglements.

Meanwhile, the politicians, misinformed as ever on military matters, still believed in the efficiency of war. The French dreamed of 'revanche' against Germany, Germany sought colonial equality, Russia and Austria clashed in the Balkans, and Britain tried hard to hold on to her economic hegemony. Armed with the panoply of scientific war, the massed forces of the nations, led by men schooled on half digested theories of Clausewitz, were ready to be launched into total nationalistic war, and to speed and increase the intensity of mutual destruction, science had added the internal combustion engine, wireless communication and carefully planned propaganda.

The European society upon which the 1914 war broke out was optimistic and full of enthusiasm for the new century. There was a general belief in ever more rapid progress. Science was triumphant, machine industry seemed to promise unlimited wealth, and liberty and democracy appeared to be taking over from despotism and Oligarchy. Although there was a small war here and there, most people believed that Europeans were too intelligent and wise to wage big destructive wars again. And furthermore, as the whole world was becoming Europeanized, it seemed that a peaceful millennium was within man's grasp. Even when general war burst in on this Utopian conception, optimism persisted and many believed that the new mechanical inventions would bring it swiftly to an end — 'pace' Bloch.

The best hope of a swift end appeared to be with the German Schlieffen plan, but this was so misapplied by Moltke that the impetus of the attack was lost. On the Allied side there was a complete lack of a united political point of view, and incessant squabbles over command. The nightmare stalemate resulted. Two huge armies found themselves face to face, both lacking the means to break down the defence of the other. The bullet, the trench and the barbed wire were impenetrable, and it is a sobering thought that from October 1914 until the spring of 1918 the gain from any offensive did not exceed 10 miles. Because generals could not infuse mobility into the war they resigned themselves to a war of attrition on the scale forecast by Bloch. If all the dead on the Verdun sector had suddenly become alive there would not have been room for them to stand upright. In 1916 in 6 months alone, 600,000 Frenchmen and Germans were lost around Verdun, and on the Somme in 5 months, also in 1916 there were 1,100,000 British, French and German casualties. To the men the war became disgustingly futile. The remoteness of the senior officers, the medical, animal and climatic horrors of the trenches, the claustrophobia of dug-outs, and the battered desecrated landscape stamped on their optimism and leered at the jingoistic exhortations to "fight on" coming from politicians at home. How could Passchendaele make any sense at all? Small wonder that French soldiers mutinied. Generals and politicians avoided the issue by recommending attacks in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans. When these failed, science delved further into the diabolical to introduce mobility into the war. Poison gas, which could have won the war for Germany, was misused and time given for counter measures. Military conservatism postponed the decisive use of the tanks, which might have beaten the Germans

psychologically in 1917, had they been available in sufficient numbers. Finally stalemate was broken, the German resistance collapsed through exhaustion when the Allied effort was reinforced by American troops, fresh, undismayed and confident of victory.

Amid the unmitigated slaughter, and under the mental and nervous strain of incessant din, (a strain which, in our times, has invaded our 'peaceful' lives) men found a new comradeship with one another, deeper than they had known before. It was natural that some voices should be raised to speak for this doomed brotherhood, and to protest and warn against this outrageous form of combat which so diminished the individual that his body and his mind became less important than the gadgetry of war. The message which Wilfred Owen and others spoke so magnificently has been confirmed by later developments in nuclear physics. As Auden has said, Owen's poems "written about one war served as the only adequate commentary on the next". His was the first poetic statement of disenchantment with technological war, and if the 20th century is to tame the war beast, we must not only listen to and respect the visionary voices of bitter experience, but think back along the shameful trail of harsh peace treaties, pointless campaigns, insidious propaganda and the legion of wasted lives until the practice of war can be exterminated or at last humanized.

WILFRED OWEN — A Personal Appreciation

by *SIEGFRIED SASSOON C.B.E.*

(Poet and Author. Mr. Sassoon was the first Editor of Wilfred Owen's Poems in 1920.)

This appreciation was first given on the B.B.C. Third Programme August 22nd, 1948.

ONE sunny morning in the first week of August, 1917, I was sitting by a bedroom window in a War Hospital near Edinburgh, sand-papering my clubs. For, although the War Office had diagnosed my anti-war protest as due to shell-shock, I was spending most of my days in sampling the local golf courses. Anyway, there I was, meditating on an encouraging letter I had just received from H. G. Wells, and quite unconscious of the significance of the 'Come in' with which I now responded to a gentle knock on the door. The young officer who entered was wearing the badges of the Manchester Regiment. Short, dark-haired, and shyly hesitant, he stood for a moment before coming across to the window. He was carrying several copies of my first volume of verse, **The Old Huntsman**, which had been published about three months before. With apologies for his intrusion, he asked me to inscribe them for him and some of his friends. It had taken him two whole weeks, he said, to muster up courage to approach me with this request.

For him, as he afterwards wrote to his mother, the occasion was a momentous one. For me, though I took an instinctive liking to him during the half-hour he was with me that morning, he was, so far, merely a nice mannered young man with a pleasantly modulated voice and a charming honest smile, who had confessed that he wrote poetry, none of which had yet appeared in print. Standing at my elbow, rather as if conferring with a superior officer, he had given me his name, and I duly inscribed it in his copy of my book. Wilfred Owen. It was indeed an extraordinary bit of luck that we should have got to know one another, with several million chances against it ever happening. But life is an affair of fortuities; and so it came about that we two, whose names are now inseparably associated, were together in that hospital until the beginning of November, when he rejoined a Reserve Battalion of his regiment.



Craiglockhart where Wilfred Owen met Siegfried Sassoon in 1917.

Our companionship very soon became an ideal one. Our temperaments were harmonious; and it was a confederacy of two writers intent on the same purpose, to reveal the front-line realities of the war. I cannot remember that we ever discussed or compared our active-service experiences; but we were, both of us, working steadily, and at intervals submitted the results to each other — Owen doing so with a modesty which now seems more remarkable than it did to me at the time — For instance, he has recorded in a letter that, on September 7th, I condemned some of his poems, amended others, and rejoiced over a few. He added that he was not worthy to light my pipe — an observation which posterity will firmly repudiate. I must mention, however, that some of the poems he showed me were survivors from his juvenilia which he contemplated destroying. I censured the over-luscious writing of these immature pieces, though his skill in rich and melodious combinations of words was already apparent in them.

It may have been on that evening — I can remember going through the manuscripts with him as we sat in a corner of the cavernous hall of the requisitioned Hydro which we inhabited — that I first became aware of the masterly quality of his verse. He had handed me a newly-written sonnet called **Anthem for Doomed Youth**. There was enough in it to indicate the power and originality of what he afterwards produced, and I rejoiced in my discovery of an authentic poet. Nine years later, Lawrence Binyon included this sonnet in his supplement to the new edition of Palgrave's Golden Treasury.

ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

I could see that this was the sort of poetry I liked. But at that time my critical perceptions were undeveloped, and I was slow in realising that his imagination worked on a larger scale than mine, and that in technical accomplishment and intellectual approach he was on a higher plane. My trench-sketches were like rockets, sent up to illuminate the darkness. They were the first thing of their kind, and could claim to be opportune. It was Owen who revealed how, out of realistic horror and scorn, poetry might be made. My judgment was to some extent affected by his attitude of devoted discipleship. I knew that I could write epigrammatic satires better than he could, and he was attempting, in a few of his pieces, to imitate them. This has sometimes caused by influence on him to be exaggerated. The truth of the matter was that I arrived just when he needed my stimulation and advice. It was my privilege to be in close contact with him while he was attaining a clear view of what he wanted to say and deploying his technical resources to a matured utterance. I was, he assured me, the one man he had longed to know. And I count it among my most satisfactory performances that I was able to be of service to his genius. Nearly six months before we met, he had written the first draft of **Exposure**, one of his most dynamically descriptive war poems. This—after his usual process of drastic revision—he had now perfected. Here, for the first time, he used with fullest effect, those para-rhymes or alliterative assonance endings through which he brought a new element to verse technique.

EXPOSURE

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us . . .
 Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
 Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient.
 Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
 But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
 Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
 Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
 Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
 What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow . . .
 We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.
 Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army
 Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,
 But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.
 Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,
 With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,
 We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,
 But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces —
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stars snow-dazed,
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.
Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed.
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed.
We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.

Tonight, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.
The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,
But nothing happens.

He wrote this while away from the front-line for a few weeks, after enduring the arctic weather of January, 1917. The experience is described in one of his letters. His platoon was occupying an advanced post in a heavily shelled sector. There were no dug-outs, and one of his party froze to death. In March he fell into a deep cavity in a devastated area. A month later he was blown up by a shell during a particularly harassing twelve days in the Line. At the beginning of June, he was sent to England, suffering from nervous breakdown and the effects of concussion. By the time I met him he appeared to have completely recovered. He could now record what he had seen and suffered in an objective fragment comparable to one of Hardy's scenic introductions in **The Dynasts**.

THE SHOW

We have fallen in the dreams the ever-living
Breathe on the tarnished mirror of the world.
And then smooth out with ivory hands and sigh.

W. B. YEATS.

My soul looked down from a vague height with Death,
As unremembering how I rose or why,
And saw a sad land, weak with sweats or dearth,
Gray, cratered like the moon with hollow woe,
And pitted with great pocks and scabs of plagues.

Across its beard, that horror of harsh wire,
There moved thin caterpillars, slowly uncoiled.
It seemed they pushed themselves to be as plugs
Of ditches, where they writned and shrivelled, killed.

By them had slimy paths been trailed and scraped
Round myriad warts that might be little hills.

From gloom's last dregs these long-strung creatures crept,
And vanished out of dawn down hidden holes.
(And smell came up from those foul openings
As out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening.)

On dithering feet upgathered, more and more,
Brown strings, towards strings of gray, with bristling spines.
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire.

Those that were gray, of more abundant spawns,
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.

I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten,
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean,
I reeled and shivered earthward like a feather.

And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan.
And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.

Let it be remembered that, when this was written, all truthful reportings of experience were regarded as unpatriotic and subversive to War Effort. Officialdom suppressed, and the great majority of non-combatants shunned and resented, such revelations. Sensitive people couldn't bear to be told the facts. This was understandable — though not always comprehensible to the young. What Owen and I found intolerable was the selfishness and humbug apparent among many types of civilians. We could not agree with the old men that it was sweet and decorous to die for one's country. Inevitable, no doubt, but not edifying. Several of his poems were deliberately written to shock complacency, and were part of his plan for the volume which his death in action prevented him from completing. In these he dramatized the disabled soldier of all ranks and the dumbly enduring conscript, optimistically assured by politicians that he was engaged on a war to end war. Among his papers we found a few notes for the Preface to this volume. 'This book is not about heroes', he wrote, 'My subject is War, and the pity of War. I am not concerned with Poetry. The Poetry is in the Pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is to warn.' His warnings were, mostly, impersonally rendered. For himself, he testified to the spiritual compensations which he had experienced through the comradeship of active service.

APOLOGIA PRO POEMATE MEO

I, too, saw God through mud. —
The mud that cracked on cheeks when wretches smiled.
War brought more glory to their eyes than blood,
And gave their laughs more glee than shakes a child.

Merry it was to laugh there —
Where death becomes absurd and life absurder.
For power was on us as we slashed bones bare
Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder.

I, too, have dropped off fear —
Behind the barrage, dead as my platoon,
And sailed my spirit surging, light and clear
Past the entanglement where hopes lay strewn;

And witnessed exultation —
Faces that used to curse me, scowl for scowl,
Shine and lift up with passion of oblation.
Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul.

I have made fellowships —
Untold of happy lovers in old song.
For love is not the binding of fair lips
With the soft silk of eyes that look and long,

By joy, whose ribbon slips, —
But wound with war's hard wire whose stakes are strong;
Bound with the bandage of the arm that drips;
Knit in the webbing of the rifle-thong.

I have perceived much beauty
In the hoarse oaths that kept our courage straight;
Heard music in the silentness of duty;
Found peace where shell-storms spouted reddest spate.

Nevertheless, except you share
With them in hell the sorrowful dark of hell,
Whose world is but the trembling of a flare,
And heaven but as the highway for a shell,

You shall not hear their mirth,
You shall not come to think them well content
By any jest of mine. These men are worth
Your tears. You are not worth their merriment.

During his last year I only saw Owen once, in August, shortly before he returned to the Front. I was then in hospital, after serving for six months in Palestine and France. In October he wrote, 'My nerves are in perfect order. I came out to help these boys — directly by leading them as well as an officer can, indirectly by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first'. A fellow-officer afterwards recorded his admiration of Owen's leadership and the confidence which it inspired. Those last two months were his final victory over circumstance. He was killed a week before the

Armistice, while leading his company across the Sambre canal under heavy fire. Subsequently he was awarded the Military Cross. I have never been able to accept his disappearance philosophically. A blank sense of deprivation has dulled my mind whenever I thought of him and the loss to English poetry. His character I admired as much as his work. I have known no one else of his age who lived so much for others. Therefore it can be said of him that being lost, he liveth, and being dead, speaketh.

In December, 1920, a selection from his manuscripts was published, under my supervision, with my brief foreword. Some influential reviewers at once proclaimed him as a compelling witness of war's effect on the spirit of the man in the trenches. By then, however, there was a reaction against anything written about the war, and his reputation was slow in becoming established. As evidence of this, some details are worth recording. Up to the end of 1930, only 2,250 copies of his book had been printed. Of these, 750 went to America, where, even now, his poems are only accessible through anthologies. In 1931, there appeared a new edition, edited by Edmund Blunden, who added 35 poems and contributed an authoritative and completely satisfying memoir. This gave impetus to the long delayed recognition of Owen as the greatest of our war poets. In 1934 his manuscripts were acquired by the British Museum Library.

Meanwhile a new generation of young writers discovered him, and they were strongly impressed by the character of his achievement. He was claimed as the ancestor of the tentatively communist poetry of the 1930's—an assumption with which he might have disagreed. His assertion, in the notes for his Preface, that in his war poems he was not concerned with Poetry, has been seized on to support a theory, that there is something reprehensible in regarding poetry as an art—a theory which has been copiously disproved by many of its practitioners. It was, however, rightly suggested that he had opened up new fields of sensitiveness for his successors. It is certain that the new movements in verse would have been watched by him with sympathetic interest, and that many a young poet would have found him forthcoming with perceptive encouragement.

His ablest expositor, Blunden, has predicted that “a century hence this modern interpreter of the world in terms of imaginative and sensuous verse will be as much studied as any pioneer thinker of his time . . . Had he lived, his humanity would have continued to encounter great and moving themes, and his art would have matched his vision. He gave his readers picture and tone that whenever they are reconsidered afford a fresh profundity, for they

are combinations of profound recognitions". These recognitions, led me add, were arrived at by the process of divination which belongs only to the true poet as he has manifested himself through-out the ages in song and story. His generation, compared with that of today, was unsophisticated and uninformed. Forty years ago, Kipling wrote —

We are afflicted by what we can prove,

We are distracted by what we know.

But since then, that condition has become bewilderingly worse. Owen was neither afflicted nor distracted by an overplus of unassimilated knowledge. He derived his finest work from the secret sources of an inward power and integrity which enabled him to see and say great things with memorable finality. Here is an example.

THE END

After the blast of lightning from the East,
The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;
After the drums of Time have rolled and ceased,
And by the bronze west long retreat is blown.

Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth
All death will He annul, all tears assuage? —
Fill the void veins of Life again with youth,
And wash, with an immortal water, Age?

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:
"My head hangs weighed with snow."
And when I hearken to the Earth, she saith:
"My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.
Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,
Nor my titanic tears, the sea, be dried."

Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery.

Thus, in **Strange Meeting**, he wrote, unknowing, his own epitaph. This poem, found among his manuscripts in its uncompleted state, has become invested with a poignant and sombre significance. It seems to symbolize the untimely silencing of his mortal voice. Truth sits upon the lips of dying men. The words of **Strange Meeting** have that quality, deepened for our apprehension by its dramatic conception of the soldier encountering his enemy in some phantasmal remoteness, beyond the living world, yet envisioned from some tunnelled dug-out on the Western Front. It is Owen's ultimate testament, his passport to immortality, and his elegy for the Unknown Warrior of all nations.

STRANGE MEETING

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."
"None," said the other, "save the undone years,
The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now..."

The American Edition of Wilfred Owen's Poems

by J. COHEN *Associate Professor of English, Newcomb College,
Tulane University, New Orleans.*

IN the winter of 1957-58, I published an article in an American literary journal deploring the fact that whereas Americans were familiar with World War I poets Rupert Brooke and Joyce Kilmer, they did not know Wilfred Owen. In the United States he had remained out of print from before Pearl Harbor almost until the Korean hostilities. Even when he was in print the distribution of approximately 3,500 copies of the 1920 and 1931 editions could hardly be regarded as significant over a span of thirty-seven years. I felt that Owen deserved to have a wider reputation here and pondered the ways in which this might be achieved.

The situation, I learned later, was not as bad as I had pictured it. While I was writing my lament and awaiting its publication, an entire edition of some of Owen's poems had come into existence in the United States. I had no way of knowing about it, however, for it was unannounced, privately printed, unadvertised, limited, and issued without copyright. One does not expect this kind of thing to happen anymore. Yet it did happen and all devotees of Owen's poetry in this case must ultimately be glad. For this edition, apart perhaps from Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem," is the most impressively beautiful single tribute to Owen in existence. It was created by two well-known and highly regarded American artists, Leonard Baskin and Ben Shahn.

The impetus for the book came from Baskin. Sculpturer, printer, and teacher, he has had in the past few years an almost meteoric rise to fame. His sculpture, drawings, woodcuts and engravings are widely sought for their originality, but not for their comfort. His lines are stark and prophetic, intense and fierce. They are, however, filled with compassion, hope, and an expression of moral strength. He has created a whole graphic litany mainly of the dead, extracting from it the fullness of life out of the meaning of death. It is not surprising that he was attracted to Owen. Having done some drawings of his impressions from the poems, and having found a kindred interest in Shahn, it was only natural that collaboration followed with a view towards publishing a limited memorial edition. As an art student at Yale University, Baskin taught himself printing, and later he established the Gehenna Press. Using Owen's poems, Shahn's interpretations of them, and his own genius for fine printing, Baskin set out to create through his Press a monument worthy of his regard for the great war-poet.

Thus in 1956, 13 POEMS BY WILFRED OWEN came into existence. Magnificently and richly produced, the volume measures 10 x 13½ inches. It is hand bound in red morocco with Fabriano paper sides and slip-case. Limited to 400 numbered copies, of which thirty-five were done in half leather, the distinguishing features of the volume are the fifteen drawings by Shahn and his portrait of Owen drawn from the frontispiece to the 1920 edition, and engraved on wood and printed from the block by Baskin. Beneath the engraving in bold red type is the word "Poems" and in black type the poet's name. The page after reads: "Thirteen Poems By Wilfred Owen / With Drawings by Ben Shahn / Printed At The Gehenna Press / In Northampton, Mass. MCMLVI." The next page has only the notation that "Wilfred Owen was killed near the village of Ors in France on November 4, 1918. This edition of some of his poems is dedicated to his memory." The titles of the poems Baskin selected and brief descriptions of Shahn's drawings follow: (1) "The Parable Of The Old Men And The Young." Powerful head of the patriarch with tangled beard and penetrating eyes; (2) "Miners." A tangled mass of human bodies, with grotesque faces, petrifying into ore; (3) "Spring Offensive." Heavily concentrated cemetery section of stark crosses intensified by an undergrowth of flowers, with a rifle in the foreground, stuck bayonet-point into the earth, a helmet resting on the stock; (4) "Futility." Emaciated and gaunt figure lying unburied on the ground; (5) "My Shy Hand." Two lovers, arms entwined, the girl asleep, both cushioned in the palm of a hand formed largely by a network of protecting flowers; (6) "Strange Meeting." Nine girls, some of school age, frozen in their places, without hope; (7) "Fragment: The Abyss of War." A mass of vertical figures, a few on crutches or with canes, all faceless; (8) "Greater Love." Portrait of a woman holding a mirror into which she is peering; (9) "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo." General with a large chest covered with medals, and a small head. At the end of the poem there is a second drawing of a soldier enmeshed in barbed wire; (10) "Exposure." Emaciated corpse frozen in an awkward pose; (11) "Six O'clock in Princes Street." A little old lady with hands folded in her lap; (12) "Song of Songs." Nude in two poses: lying down with head on arm, and standing with a shawl about her shoulders; and (13) "Wild With All Regrets." Wounded soldier on a stretcher, with death imminent.

Shahn's drawings largely complement Owen's poems in realistically presenting a central impression of the horror of war. The pictures accompanying "Miners," "Spring Offensive," "Futility," "My Shy Hand," "Exposure," and "Wild With All Regrets" are particularly representative in the pictorial concretion of Owen's word-images. From Shahn's heavy ink lines there issues, however, more than a complementary image: these figures transport to the viewer their condemnation for having been burdened with the misery of combat and the loss of their lives in war. Like Owen's poems, Shahn's drawings succeed by their own artistic merit.

In some cases, the impression is more limited. The lost and forlorn girls accompanying "Strange Meetings" convey adequately Owen's pessimistic prophecy but the poem itself is capable of a multitude of images. (Elsewhere I have pointed out that Owen's ideas for the poem might have been influenced by Harold Munro's volume of poems published in 1917, entitled "**Strange Meetings**" and depicting on its cover a dead figure looking at the bones of another.) By the same token, "Greater Love," the "Apologia," and the "Parable" are capable of infinite graphic interpretation, which is simply another way of saying that one of the fundamental strengths in Owen's poetry is its richness of imagery.

On the page following the last poem we find the printer's device of Richard Warren and a note about the publication of this limited edition. Finally, there is the bright red pomegranate Colophon of the Gehenna Press.

The book is "a thing of beauty". To those who hold Owen in esteem, it must be "a joy forever". For this reason (as well as for the practical one that the matter was not pursued prejudicially by Owen's American publishers) I have not discussed the legal implications of the volume's production. Some art enthusiasts may not consider the poems important, feeling only that Shahn may publish his drawings if he so chooses. Others might argue, perhaps a bit unrealistically, that the war was "illegal" too but it produced a Wilfred Owen. I mention these matters only because the ramifications of the book's appearance are many. For myself, merely being bibliographically curious, it is enough that the circumstances of production have unquestionably enhanced the value of an unquestionably valuable book. If this amounts to condonation, I am not overly concerned. What does concern me is that beyond the importation and distribution of small quantities of the regular trade editions of Owen's poems in the United States, he has been honored in this country in an unusual and fruitful way.

VAIN CITADELS

An essay on the poetry of Wilfred Owen

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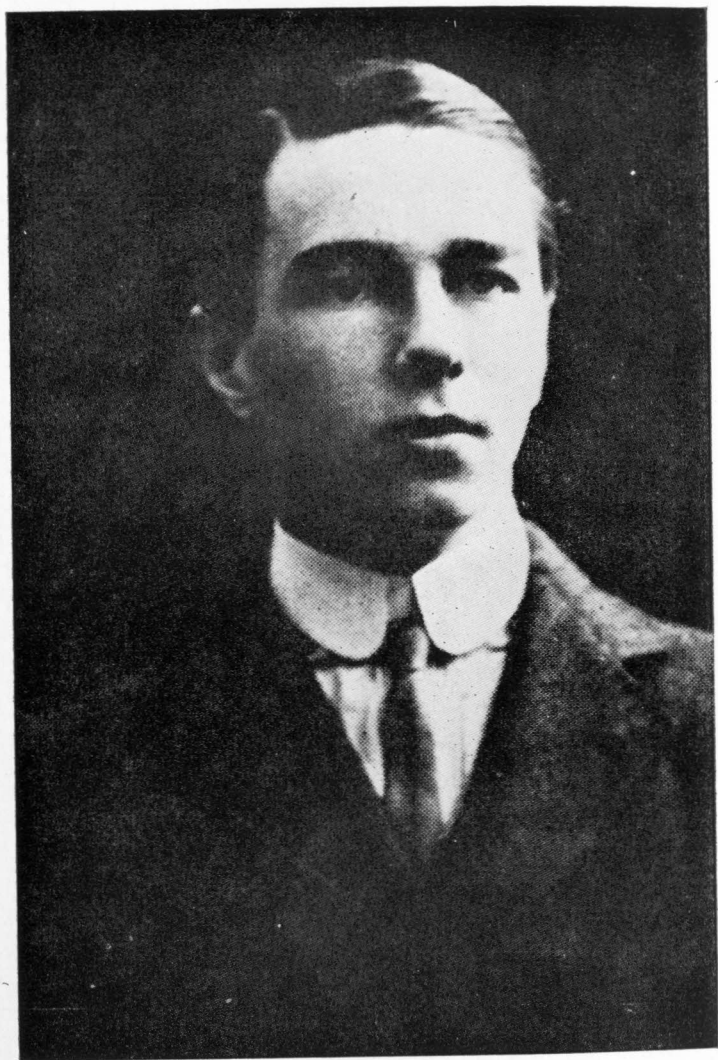
I

THE mass of verse written during the first World War can be divided, without much straining, into three kinds which succeed each other, though there is overlapping.

The first kind was verse of **sentiment**. Often this is good and efficient in its own limited way. But, by sentiment, we mean here an attitude towards an aspect of life which the writer has not yet "felt upon his pulses". Rupert Brooke, and others, wrote fine verse of this eager and chivalrous kind: chivalrous, because wrung from the conventions of a group fancy. The sentiment behind it was communal rather than individual; intensified and even clarified, but still not yet made personal through empiricism. Brooke's verse was capable of carrying his nation's exhilaration in 1914, an exhilaration which was to subside under trial. Brooke did not live to know this.

As the war proceeded it became clear that Brooke's articulation of society's enthusiasm was wrongly expended. Preliminary fancies were winnowed by dire flails of experience. Occasionally, entry into the matrix of the thing itself confirms anticipatory sentiments; but this is rare and modification is to be expected sufficient to alter a previous outlook. The middle and last years of the First World War did more than caution high expectancies. They quite destroyed illusion. This destruction of innocent notions set up a conflict between the thing as it was and the thing it was expected to be. Other poets presented the conflict but Wilfred Owen managed to surmount it by organizing and reconciling its elements.

The second kind of War verse was realistic, or documentary, verse. The poet here tries to be as exact, and as reticent in comment, as a camera. Siegfried Sassoon and Owen himself, in such documentary poems as **Dulce et Decorum Est**, effected a correction to earlier sentiment or fancy. The declared purpose was to shock readers by presenting incidents of warfare with no "toning down" or comment, though there was an amount of withheld irony of which the reader was generally aware. The



Wilfred Owen as a Student.

comment was, in reaction, supplied by the reader. This method stops short of interpretation of the incidents abruptly projected since the writer's implication is too complete to permit of the necessary perspective: or, more accurately, the writer has not yet developed that authentic and admirable **duplicity** of the mature artist who can be at once deeply involved in, and vastly removed from, an experience. Realism may have marked a stage beyond fancy, yet was still provisional, and bided the mind that could create a vision which included, united, sustained the **dissecta membra** of close-range observation; illumined them in the sultry glare of a tragic philosophy which related them to the everlasting background.

The third category of War verse, much less in extent than the other two, and somewhat later, was such a poetry of vision. It included the later poems of Wilfred Owen. It is poetry speaking to us from the far side of experience.

II

A reading of Owen's poetry, roughly in the order in which it was written, shows that it covers the three kinds. He began with verses of fancy, and advanced through realism (albeit his realistic poems speak from within the ambience of a huge irony) and finally arrived at the far side of experience, and spoke from there with a full authority.

This is to say that Owen developed as most considerable poets have developed, but a comparison with Keats is — for once — especially apt. Keats was Owen's favourite exemplar, and in his early letters and verses we feel that Owen was as much under the influence of Keats as the early Keats was under Shakespeare.

The following passage from a letter of Owen is surely derived from a reading of Keats's letters:

I certainly believe I could make a better musician than many who profess to be, and are accepted as such. Mark, I do not for a moment call myself a musician, nor do I suggest I ever shall be, but there! I love Music, with such **strength** that I have had to conceal the passion, for fear it be thought weakness... Failing Music, is it Pictures that I hanker to do? I am not abashed to admit it, but heigh ho! If there were anything in me I should, following Legend, have covered, with spirited fresco, the shed, or carved the staircase knob into a serene Apollo... Let me now seriously and shamelessly work out a Poem.

This is an imitation of an imitation of Keats (the exclamations, the jolly invocations of "Apollo," are an attempt by Keats to repeat the effect of certain dialogue in Shakespeare's comedies) but it is not superficial. The references to "legend", "fresco" and "carved" suggest Owen's early and profound apprehension of the essential qualities of — say — **Lamia, Ode on the Grecian Urn**, or the second version of **Hyperion**. Owen's earliest verses are redolent of this familiarity with Keats. These lines are echoes of the 1817 Volume and of **Isabella**:

This is more like the aureoles of Aurora,
The leaves of flames, the flame of her corona.
Not Petrarch wore such coronals, nor Laura,
Nor yet his orange-trees by old Verona,
Nor gay gold fruits that yellow Barcelona!

While this is clearly, yet healthily, derivative, it is important to note that from the outset Owen was experimenting with sound. His contribution to prosody, pararrhyme with its simultaneous control of harmony and dissonance achieved in his last poems, was adumbrated in the early **From My Diary July 1914**:

Leaves
Murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees.
Lives
Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees.
Birds
Cheerily chirping in the early day.
Bards
Singing of summer scything thro' the hay.

Here, interspersing the pastoralism, in the mode of the early Keats, while still in the "Chamber of Maiden-thought", we have the introduction of that device (Lives-Leaves: Birds-Bards) which later was to mount to something so much more than the merely technical or even audial, just as the so-called technical discoveries of — say — Wyatt or Wordsworth were the embodiments of new extensions and varieties of apprehension; outward signs of a psychical mutation.

As Keats left the "Chamber of Maiden-thought" to move down "the dark passages" which led from it and was hastened by mortal disease so Owen's early pleasurings were harshly challenged by the bitterness of war.

A passage from a letter reveals this invasion of personality by war, an ineluctable displacement of those innocent adventures in fancy by an actuality which no effort could assuage by pretending it a nightmare, which it resembled except that neither volition nor time could dissolve it:

They want to call No Man's Land 'England' because we keep supremacy there. It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it—to find the way to Babylon the Fallen. It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease, and its odour is the breath of cancer. I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have **perceived** it, and in the darkness, **felt**... No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.

This is an equation, compressed and powerful, of a thing of which Owen was part. In its purity it resembles parts of **The Inferno**, or the absolute misery of the **City of Dreadful Night**, or the late gothic nihilism of Beddoes' **Death's Jest Book**: but, whereas the visions of Dante, Thompson and Beddoes were **visions**, Owen's "abode" was unevasively real. As such it provided not the terminus of ardent speculation—as with Dante, Thompson and Beddoes—but the unavoidable starting place and condition for progress. Failure to 'matriculate' meant the surrender of imagination. This "abode" thrust forward a problem both metaphysical and (but it is the same thing) technical.

The problem was further perplexed in that the 'abode of madness' was not absolutely constant but alternated with scenes in which diverse objects, desperate and exquisite, or desolated and interesting, were simultaneously presented within the same arc:

We were marooned on a frozen desert. There is not a sign of life on the horizon, and a thousand signs of death. Not a blade of grass, not an insect; once or twice a day the shadow of a big hawk scenting carrion.

Here the juxtaposition is wide death and a moving life—a hawk's life to be sustained on that death over which its shadow passed. Sometimes, there is awareness of three diverse realities, engaging more than one sense, as:

I kept alive on brandy, the fear of death, and the glorious prospect of the cathedral town just below us, glittering with the morning. With glasses I could easily make out the general architecture of the cathedral.

Or sometimes it is the suddenly droll bracketed with the movement of panic:

All at once the cry rang down, 'Line the bank'. There was a tremendous scurry of fixing bayonets, tugging of breech covers, and opening pouches, but when we peeped over, behold a solitary German, haring along towards us, with his head down and his arms stretched in front of him, as if he were going to take a high dive through the earth.

Such experiences, in which things widely disparate were conjoined, are 'puzzling'; raise the possibility of bifurcation of vision, which — rejected — impels either a confession of impotence, or forces a solution which integrates and then releases in poetry simultaneously the diverse and conflicting elements. The problem was aggravated by the experiences taking place in that France in which he had cultivated the 'idyllic mode' in pre-war visits.

These experiences provided the raw material of Owen's poetry. Such raw material demands a period of gestation, longer than distracted existence at the Front allowed. The poems there had to be worked out quickly against time. Most of them show no refining and no development of the half-rhyme which he had touched on earlier. (But it has often happened with poets that they postpone a serious development of a technical discovery merely hinted at early in their careers.)

The documentary poems of Owen, such as **Dulce et Decorum Est**, **The Dead-Beat**, **S.I.W.**, heatedly project brutal vignettes. They are more active than the mass of "mud and blood" verse of this second phase of the war in that the images are severely outlined, the irony is less coarsely explicated but rather held in a sensed reserve, and the relation between the incident expressed and its entire baleful setting, and the relation of this setting to values, while not emergent, are felt by the reader to be nevertheless gathering behind the poems.

III

In June 1917, Owen returned to England, to a hospital near Edinburgh. These months were all important in that they granted him the leisure and peace to take stock of his takings. He was able to read and write, and talk to Siegfried Sassoon whom he held as "Keats x Christ x Elijah x My Colonel x My Father Confessor x Amenophis IV!" This was not too serious: nevertheless it seems that Sassoon was valued in that he confirmed the validity of Owen's latest work which was now so removed — especially in its denial of the obviously 'poetical' in language — from his earliest writing.

We may suppose that poems written during these months include **Mental Cases**, **Futility**, **Disabled** and **The Send-Off**: poems in which there is a quietism, an acute sense of the *lacrimae rerum*, of nostalgia, of bugles "saddening the evening air" and "voices of boys" and "country bells". In them we find a first assured and functional use of half rhyme, expressing that lacuna caused by a thwarting of justifiable demands on life. As in **Futility**:

Move him into the sun—
 Gently its touch awoke him once,
 At home whispering of fields unsown.
 Always it woke him, even in France,
 Until this morning and this snow.
 If anything might rouse him now
 The kind old sun will know.
 Think how it wakes the seed,
 Woke, once, the clays of a cold star
 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
 Full-nerved — still warm — too hard to stir?
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
 —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
 To break earth's sleep at all?

With his now enlarging and synthesising power of compassion he wrote at this time the fine poem, **Miners**, wherein is realized the pathos and dangers of an occupation comparable to the soldier's.

Mr. Frank Nicolson has recalled how Owen ventured to tell him about his discovery:

The problem of literary form was an absorbing one for him, and he felt he had found, or was finding, an adequate medium in which to express himself in verse. I do not know whether he had published any of his poems at that time; if so, I had not seen them. But he told me of his idea of substituting a play of vowels for pure rhyme, and spoke of the effects that could be obtained from this device with an engaging assurance and perhaps a touch of wilfulness, like that of a child insisting, half humorously and half defiantly, that he is in the right. Possibly I did not accept his thesis quite as cordially as I should have done, and indeed I doubt if I fully comprehended it, for I have some recollection of remarking to him, a little ineptly, that he would find it foreshadowed in a passage of John Halsham's **Idlehurst**.

This candid reminiscence has its amusing side, but one can guess Owen's disappointment at a display of well-intentioned failure to respond to an artist's enthusiasm for his growing certainty. George Herbert had employed half-rhyme in a poem expressing his disharmony with God. Of this poem Owen may have been unaware. He may also have been unaware of Vaughan's half-rhymes; he was certainly unaware of Emily Dickinson's.

In April 1918, Owen rejoined his unit in France for the last time. During his months at the hospital he had assimilated experience and reached an integration that is declared by his poems. They had now additional depths, a grave full tone. His enlarged compassion registered no longer through negative acerbity, but in a sorrowing, though calm, subscription to fate. The guarantee of this is his masterful handling of material. His development of parhyme was no tangent from tradition; it was

not a wilful application of an effect but the adequate incorporation and sign of an inner mutation best so contained. Matter and manner were, and are, one. Their distinction, seemingly valid in critical theory, is lost in the presence of a successful poem.

On the eve of his departure, he had written:

Last year, at this time (it is just midnight, and now is the intolerable instant of the Change), last year I lay awake in a windy tent in the middle of a vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England, but a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles. I heard the revelling of the Scotch troops, who are now dead, and who knew they would be dead. I thought of this present night, and whether I should indeed—whether we should indeed—whether you would indeed—but I thought neither long nor deeply, for I am a master of elision. But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England, nor can it be seen in any battle. But only in Etaples. It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted, and no actor will ever seize it. And to describe it, I think I must go back and be with them.

Yet we must be ready to understand the **artistic** satisfaction that proceeded from beholding a scene of pure misery—pure, unmarred by any discordant hope. The identity of self with a complete despair granted repose from a sense of friction. It bestowed a quietus on philosophical querrilities as death would seem to do. The need Owen felt for the rest that followed immersion in this purely dolorous sea was stronger than a pacifism that engaged only his intellect.

IV

To turn to a few of his finer poems. **The Show**, where the poet “looked down from a vague height with Death”, upon a land “Gray, cratered like the moon”, probably grew from that first impact of No Man's Land (quoted above), “the face of the moon...the abode of madness”. So, **sub specie aeternitatis** in this poem, the distant and dismal panorama is anthropomorphised: “across its beard, that horror of harsh wire”. From this station above with Death the trenches seem “slimy paths”. The armies engage:

Brown strings, towards strings of gray, with bristling spines,
All migrants from green fields, intent on mire.
Those that wore grey, of more abundant spawns,
Ramped on the rest and ate them and were eaten.
I saw their bitten backs curve, loop, and straighten.
I watched those agonies curl, lift, and flatten.

The long focus is used to degrade humanity to degrees lower than their redaction by Hardy in the stage directions of **The Dynasts**. On the vile and desolated land, "weak with sweats of dearth", the myriad maggots writhe and heave and devour each other, and the gangrenous stench arises "as out of mouths, or deep wounds deepening". This poem solves the problem one way. Instead of suffering pity for lacerated humanity, the poet shrivels men to insects, and exchanges compassion for repulsion; the race's cannibalism is exposed to scathing and salving disgust. The postulation of aerial survey recalls Gloucester in **King Lear**:

As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods:
They kill us for their sport.

But in **The Show** there is emphasis on rabid filth, wrinkling mess, and the surveillance is indifferent rather than spiteful. Yet appeasement this way is recognized as insufficient, a provisional solution involving the furthest reaches of cynicism and self-dehumanisation. Hence:

Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean,
I reeled and shivered earthward like a feather,

And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan,
And He, picking a manner of worm, which half had hid
Its bruises in the earth, but crawled no further,
Showed me its feet, the feet of many men,
And the fresh-severed head of it, my head.

In the rapid drop, a cinematic close-up, the down-looker is reassimilated with the anguished context, and there is a shock of conversion from transcendent scorn to tragic perception as he realises that mankind's martyrdom is also his own.

Poetry has always grown weaker when it has strayed too far from ordinary speech. As Dryden and Wordsworth have restored power through fresh recruitment from the resources of the language of prose, so Owen was the first of our time to recharge poetry with rudimentary diction after the divagation of the nineteenth century. In that largely lies his power; but he instils his everyday language with the overtones of myth as in **Hospital Barge at Cérisy**. Apparent too in that great prose book of the first World War — though published long after: David Jones' **In Parenthesis**. Here the barge carrying wounded in is forcefully realized. It has managed a lock and is navigating a bend in the canal, when her funnel screamed:

And that long lamentation made him wise
How unto Avalon in agony
Kings passed in the dark barge which Merlin dreamed.

In these poems of his third phase, Owen shows his stature by not creating an object or scene as an end in itself but as a launching point for a transcending interpretation. **Hospital Barge** suggests that Owen had been moved by Tennyson's **Passing of Arthur**; **Insensibility** shows the powerful influence of Tennyson's **Crossing the Bar**.

Insensibility gives an account of his own arrival at integration by recounting the varieties of response to war by others. Inclusive comprehension of man's tragedy was achieved by no blunting of feeling, though expedient this might have seemed for preservation of sanity, but by a ceaseless distension from the centre of imagination. He reproved those who restricted sympathy to avoid their own suffering:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones;
Wretched are they, and mean
With paucity that never was simplicity.
By choice they made themselves immune
To pity and whatever moans in man
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

This is an alternative solvent through the old conjuration of the pathetic fallacy. The writer is healed by the inclusion of seas and stars with humanity within the obdurate bond of suffering. The katharsis is accomplished by the exploitation of a view directly opposite to that assumed in **The Show**.

We now turn to Owen's last poem, of which Edmund Blunden says "it is the most remote and intimate, tranquil and dynamic of all Owen's imaginative statements of war experience".

It uses the method of **Piers Plowman** and the **Divina Commedia**: the projection of two kinds of truth through dream or vision.

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites.

There, in this "sullen hall", congested with recumbent figures, he rouses one who

Lifting distressful hands as if to bless

(an image strongly reminiscent of Dante's **Inferno** is the line "with a thousand pains that vision's face was grained") discloses to Owen all he had lost, all that he would have done. It is gradually that we become aware that the speaker is dead, is — like one in Dante's Hell — hopeless, is talking to one who killed him who will also be dead himself soon. In spite of ominous accumulation, the lines

I am the enemy you killed, my friend,
I knew you in this dark,

towards the end of the poem deliver a highly charged shock.

The poem, after the initial laying of the subterranean scene, is dramatic, works through persons and dialogue. It is through the extra pressure and conviction of imagination that the poet objectifies himself in the killed enemy soldier and voices Owen's own positive intention of redemptions — to be unfulfilled since the poet was composing his own splendid and miserable epitaph. In its dramatic urgency it can be compared with **La Belle Dame sans Merci** where Keats likewise incarnates himself in another. But **Strange Meeting** in its slow gathering of eeriness, perfected and then dissolved to attain a further reach of pathos, is more like King's **Exequy on his Dead Wife**, though Owen's language is more sombre, burdened and sulky in its unexpressed resentment of dismal thwarting by a malignant universe that itself hankers after a dulling of its suffering. The poem, opposite in approach to **The Show**, is said to be unfinished. In a sense it was appropriately sealed by the writer's death which happened soon afterwards.

Strange Meeting, though low-keyed, has a fullness of harmony in alliance with a disquietude worth exploring. Now by harmony we mean — in music — a combination of tones sounding simultaneously. In verse, writers have attempted to **approximate** to the effect of harmony — though it could only be an approximation, — an appearance — as in the interweaving of two metrical sequences in Hopkins' use of counterpoint; where rapid alternation is the substitute for an impossible fusion. There are, however, other forms of harmony such as that indicated by Empson in his **Seven Types of Ambiguity**, where he shows that in Shakespeare's sonnets more than one meaning can be released by a phrase at the same time. This type of harmony of **meanings** can be bred from larger units than the phrase.

In **Strange Meeting** the scene is **both** a dug-out on the Western Front and Hell; there is a particular time and also timelessness. On one level the poem is mundane enough (and the language strongly "unpoetical") but it also holds tragic phantasy. **Strange Meeting** is in fact superior to Owen's other work in that the phantasy is not a sequel to a plain beginning, an extension from the local and particular to another level, but the realism and the phantasy are here throughout present, immediate and indivisible.

Then there are his sound harmonies: these are especially obtained by the use of his pararhymes (e.g. groined-groaned; world-walled) whereby the reader, long habituated to pure rhyme, mentally supplies a rhyme to the word ending the preceding line, while—at the same time—actually hearing the word of consonantal identity but vowel difference which Owen gives him. A chord is thus created, and while the reader responds to agreement of consonant he is equally aware too of the clash between simultaneous and distinct vowels—the one expected and the one given—an effect similar to that of half-tone in music. The initial consonantal concordance is a revival of Anglo-Saxon alliteration, but spatially regularized, while the vowel dissonance vibrates that frustration and discomfort inherent in subject and substance of the poem. Further, Owen made functional use of differences of vowel lengths and pitch for additional modulation and combinations of dissonance. If the rhyme **expected** is lower in pitch than the one in fact **given**—stirred—(?irred) stared—there is happy disappointment: if the **expected** rhyme is higher in pitch than the one **given** there is unhappy disappointment—grained—(?ained) ground. Quantity of vowel—håll—(?åll) hëll, or (reversed) hëll—(?èll) håll work the same respectively: the expected quantity and the longer or shorter one in fact given are heard simultaneously. Pitch and quantity can be made to agree or conflict. To this can be added the meaning(s), single or multiple, which can either be congruent to the sounds of the words or hostile to them, e.g. the **meaning** of hell is better suited to hall than hell; add the image(s) and associations. The potential harmonies of two lines linked by pararhyme are enormous—the combinations ranging from a high proportion of inner frictional elements to a total overall harmony. Owen was steadily mastering these harmonies—his poems becoming ever more resonant as he increased the release of simultaneities. Owen discovered the resources of regularly (i.e. rhythmically) spaced pararhyme in gaining harmonies.*

His successors have certainly used his discovery, but scarcely to the same **organic** results, but rather for the merely negative reason of avoiding monotony of pure rhyme. Fully used, however, this new dimension of sound in poetry offers chances for the restoration of the long narrative poem — that branch of verse which, along with the poetic drama, the present age lacks and which it needs.

*But see 'Wilfred Owen's free phonetic patterns: their style and function' by David I. Masson, **Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism**, vol. XIII, no. 3, March, 1955, pp. 360-369, for the most recent and the best examination of Owen's manipulation of sound.

* * * *

The above essay was written in 1947. Now, sixteen years later, though he might put it differently, its writer finds nothing he much wants to alter. He still finds the abiding, indeed growing power, of Wilfred (the Christian name, because this poet seems a brother to all who know war and who try to write) to be two-fold (i) with respect to the nine or ten splendid poems he achieved, and (ii) — a corollary — with respect to his discovery of new resonances in the English language, specifically through the discovery of pararhyme.

The title: 'Vain Citadels'. Wilfred Owen took strongholds without enjoying their tenure.

FRANCIS BERRY.

WILFRED OWEN

by KENNETH MUIR, *King Alfred Professor of English Literature,
University of Liverpool.*

WILFRED OWEN was killed on 4 November 1918, exactly a week before the Armistice. His death in an unnecessary advance when the war was already won might have been the subject of one of his own poems. He was the spokesman for the soldiers in the trenches, as Rupert Brooke had been the spokesman for the early romantic period of the war.

In the months before his death, while actually at the front, Owen somehow managed to prepare his poems for publication, although they were not published until after the war by his friend, Siegfried Sassoon. In his famous preface Owen declared:

Above all I am not concerned with poetry. My subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do to-day is to warn. That is why the true poets must be truthful.

When Owen says that the book is not concerned with poetry, he does not mean that his poems are not as good as he could make them, but rather that the expression is subordinate to his main aim, which is to tell the truth about war, and not to earn a reputation as a writer of beautiful poems. In the table of contents he sets down the purpose of each poem. "Miners" is designed to show how the future will forget those who were killed in the war. "The Show" exhibits the horrible beastliness of war, and "Strange Meeting" shows its foolishness. Yeats excluded Owen altogether from **The Oxford Book of Modern Verse** because he disapproved of the way in which all his poems were concerned with the suffering, and not with the heroism, of war. He did not realise what superb heroism Owen had himself exhibited in stripping away illusions and displaying war as it really was. Now, more than a generation later, we can see that Brooke's war poems are sentimental, Sassoon's savagely satirical, and that only Owen's have improved with age. From the horrors of war on the western front, "a terrible beauty was born".

Owen was only twenty-five when he died, and if we read his poems in chronological order we can see him develop with astonishing rapidity from a boyish romantic poet to the mature magnificence of "The Send-Off" or "Strange Meeting". Only four years, at most, separated such lines as —

Then slowly, through those shaking jewels of dawn
Hung the immortal ruby, huge with morn.
The Moon was finished; like a reel unspun
She vanished like a pearl that sinks in wine.
She died: like the white laid that once was mine. —

to the splendid "Anthem for Doomed Youth", containing the lines:

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Owen had a great influence on the poets between the two wars and since, and one of his technical experiments, the use of half-rhymes, has been frequently used by later writers, though never so effectively. In "Strange Meeting" he dreams that he is killed in battle and that he meets a German soldier, a poet like himself, in a "profound, dull tunnel" which represents the underworld and was doubtless suggested by the tunnelled dug-outs at the front. Owen rhymes 'escaped' with 'scooped', 'groaned' with 'groined', 'world' and 'walled'. It will be noticed that the consonants are the same, but not the vowels; and this imperfect rhyming is not due to carelessness, but rather to deliberate artistry. Owen wished to suggest, by these dissonances, the muddle, the aimlessness, and the hopelessness of the situation he was describing. The poem expresses perfectly the tragedy and waste of war; and in some extraordinary prophetic lines Owen seems to look forward to the ultimate result of the war, the rise of fascism:

Now men will go content with what we spoiled;
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.

At about the same time, a great German poet, Rilke, was expressing the hope that a better world would be built on the ruins of the old:

I sometimes imagine that, with every day the war goes on, the obligation of humanity towards a great, neighbourly future increases; for what could be more binding than this pain which has grown beyond all measure, and which, nevertheless, must finally make millions of people in all countries more united? Ah, then it will be possible to speak once again, and every word of love or of art will find a new acoustic, a more open air and a wider space.

Such sentiments led to the founding of the League of Nations, but ultimately Owen's fears were more realistic than Rilke's hopes.

More than forty years have elapsed since Owen died, and in spite of the efforts of his fellow poets, Sassoon and Blunden, his poems have not yet been fully collected. There are, for example, a number of unpublished poems in the British Museum. But a complete edition is now being prepared,* and when it finally appears Owen will, I believe, emerge as the most impressive English poet of the present century, his two rivals, Yeats and Eliot, being, of course, Irish and American.

KENNETH MUIR.

NOTE: *This article was written before Mr. C. Day Lewis's edition was published.

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