

Ivor Gurney

by Hugh Underhill



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SCOPE OF TOPIC

The variousness of voices to emerge from the First World War is now acknowledged, and among them, Ivor Gurney has slowly gained recognition as standing out in a very individual way. This Bookmark outlines his life and work, considers a number of his poems, including one of his most admired, 'The Lock-keeper', and suggests that he was at once a war poet and a poet of other things in a way which is indivisible.

BOOKS TO READ

Ivor Gurney: *Selected Poems*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, Oxford University Press, 1990

Ivor Gurney, selected and edited by George Walter, Everyman's Poetry, 1996. A valuable supplement to

P.J. Kavanagh's selection - both poems chosen and texts used differ considerably. It does not include 'The Lock-Keeper'.

Michael Hurd, *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney*, Oxford University Press, 1978

NOTES

Although Ivor Gurney died in 1937, no selection of his poetry was published until 1954 and a Collected Poems did not appear until 1982. A little earlier, Michael Hurd's biography (see above) had suggested that Gurney's work presents a more complex case than was once thought, and since then there have been editions of his letters, and the scholarly work of R.K.R. Thornton and George Walter on the confusing welter of extant manuscript material. Why, then, was he relatively neglected for many years? As P.J. Kavanagh pointed out in the Introduction to his edition of *The Collected Poems*, he suffered from being regarded, first, as a 'local' poet; second, as primarily a composer, for whom poetry, to use a word of his own, was only a 'hobby'; thirdly, as a 'mad' poet who spent something like a third of his life in an asylum. He was represented by two poems in James Reeves's 1962 *Penguin Georgian Poetry* and at least until then was largely regarded as belonging with these so-called Georgian poets of the second decade of the century, a minor pastoralist and war poet whose mind gave way largely as a result of his experiences at the front in the first world war.

In fact, however, it is possible to say that being at the front helped keep Gurney sane; it was not until he was sent back to hospital in England after being mildly gassed in 1917 that really pronounced evidence of mental disturbance began to appear. The letters he wrote from the lines, a continuous stream of them, are certainly not those of somebody out of his wits; they are remarkable, indeed, for their vividness, humour and fluency. It is true that the urgency of his need to unburden himself to his correspondents may alert us to certain insecurities and difficulties in coping. Even the humour may be suspect; as Geoffrey Hill remarked, there is 'some evidence to suggest that Gurney had a depressive's gift for clowning.' Certainly the war sapped his already precarious health, and greatly contributed to the scarcely bearable sense of injustice he came to feel at his treatment by the world in general. But Gurney's way of life and states of mind even before the war indicate that the roots of the problem went back much further.

Gurney was born in Gloucester in 1890. His father was a tailor, not markedly successful in business or life, while his mother seems to have shown little warmth or understanding. It is clear that Ivor never felt his family environment to be sympathetic, and his closest early relationship was with his godfather the Reverend Alfred Cheesman, who encouraged his

interest in music and books. He liked sports and outdoor life, but early showed musical gifts. He was in Gloucester Cathedral Choir, and became an articled pupil to the Cathedral organist. In 1911 he won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London and began as a student to write the song-settings on which his reputation as a composer now largely rests. The remarkable sensitivity with which he matched music and words is an indication of a rare, overlapping double talent. But he was never able to settle in one place or to sustained work (his eating and sleeping habits were almost comically irregular). When war was declared, though he detested army ways, volunteering allowed him perhaps for the first time to embrace a steady routine and experience a sense of fellowship with other men. In this he is similar to Edward Thomas, whose work he came to love and identify with.

While at the front he persistently sent poems and musical compositions to the musicologist Marion Scott, one of the older women-friends who like his godfather seem to have replaced his family in his affections, and she arranged publication of his first collection *Severn and Somme* (October 1917). These poems are often imitative in form and diction but in the most valuable sense, that of a craftsman learning his trade; many are more 'polished' than his later and greater poems could afford to be, and there is constantly a fine ear and sense of management of the line and stanza. *To the Poet Before Battle, Pain* and *Servitude*, all exploit sonnet form to individual ends; *Ballad of the Three Spectres*, with its myth-like use of 'threes', is almost a pastiche of traditional ballad, but no less effective for being so. Most significantly, there is little conventional in ways of seeing and feeling. One becomes aware not only of how acutely the poet experiences particularities of place and weather, but how oddly intimate is Gurney's relationship to his Gloucestershire landscape. It is almost as if landscape stands in for personal relationships - 'Your hills not only hills, but friends of mine and kindly' (*Strange Service*). One is reminded of similar affirmations in John Clare, an earlier poet to spend a considerable part of his life in an asylum, such as when he speaks in 'The Flitting' of 'every weed and every blossom... looking... With friendship's welcome'. In later work one sees that Gurney had internalized Gloucestershire - 'Cotswold' or 'Severn' as he often called it - so that it becomes a psychic landscape, a country of the imagination. It was, of course, an actual, minutely known and observed Gloucestershire to which Gurney was attached, but as time went on and he could no longer visit at first hand, it became an imaginative reservoir upon which he could draw to express increasingly complicated and tormented states.

'Pain' is a poem which, by means of ways of seeing and noting as well as ways of saying - rhetorical and syntactic constructions - which are distinctively Gurney's own, presents the World War I battlefield as if, in the poem's words, 'seen anew', and at the same time anticipates the anger and desperation to overtake much of the later poetry: 'The amazed heart cries angrily out on God.' The poet is 'amazed', almost driven to distraction, by the sufferings he has encountered and amazed that God could permit such things: the shock generated by that ambiguous preposition - the conventional calling out on' God for help is here compacted with a venting of anger 'on' God - is hallmark Gurney. The brief, eight-line 'Song' 'Only the wanderer' (the single poem of his own which he was to set to music), with its concluding 'Do not forget me quite, / O Severn meadows' not only demonstrates a crafted lyric poise, but a habit of mind which places the fixity of a localised setting over against that mind's own dislocation (*Severn and Somme*), and which also is ever seeing the 'familiar' 'anew'.

Shortly after the war, 'War's Embers' was published (1919); to add to Gurney's distresses, this was the last volume of his verse to be accepted in his lifetime. If the lambency comes rather easily in *Song*, a notable poem from this second volume, *To His Love*, forcefully exploits that same coupling of a paradise peace-time 'Severn', 'quick' with life, and the death-filled fields of the Somme (paradises, of course, are always lost); in the process, conventional elegiac use of 'memories', and pieties about the nobility of dying for one's country, are extraordinarily transformed. In a culminating burst of inconsolable emotion, enforced by a jarring line-break in which 'wet' seems to act as adjective and noun at the same time, the horrible manner of the soldier's death is felt as utterly beyond bearing even despite its intact 'nobility'. The poet must 'somehow forget' a horror in a dimension which does not admit of forgetting.

Although *Severn and Somme* and *War's Embers* may have starting points in the Georgian poets or the lyricism and concern with a similar countryside of A.E. Housman, and despite Gurney's lovely musical settings of Housman, with the poetry Gurney produced after the war we find ourselves in a different world. Increasingly the affinities are with those English poets struggling against displacement and acute depressive states: Smart, Cowper, Hopkins, John Clare especially, and Edward Thomas ('he had the same sickness of mind I have' - though there are important differences). In June 1918 Gurney indeed suffered a breakdown and wrote suicide letters; in October he was discharged with 'deferred shell-shock' (a stock formulation then used by out-of-their-depth military doctors). He had greater difficulty than ever settling to his renewed studies at the R.C.M or to a regular job or place of living, yet paradoxically, the following three or four years were his most productive for musical composition and poetry.

While nobody else gives us quite as Gurney does the common soldier's real feelings about the war and the lived minutiae of his daily existence, what predominates in the poems is that co-existence or what Jon Silkin called 'interleaving': there is the ordeal at the front and its aftermath, and a loving engagement with the Cotswold countryside, its weathers, places and inhabitants. Just as at the front 'Severn' was always in Gurney's mind - 'Riez Bailleul in blue teatime / Called back the Severn lands...' - so on his return to England and Gloucestershire, the war was ever-present for him. It is not a case of simple 'remembering'; in *Severn* after the war, the war is re-experienced as a time of grasping together 'Severn' and 'Somme': a kind of continuous present of the psyche or imagination. This may be seen as an attempt to establish an indivisibility of selfhood or 'subjective' being in the struggle to hold off breakdown. One repeated focus is on intervals of rest and peace while at the front, as is found again in 'Riez Bailleul' 'There's dusk here; west hedgerows show thin; / In billets there's sound of packs reset, / Tea finished....' which comes to one of Gurney's resonant closes: 'Stars gather in heaven and the pools drown in.' That startling elision, the stars drowned in the pools, is characteristic of Gurney's way of renewing a familiar detail, and of coming to a full rest (though there remains perhaps an ominous undertow in 'drowned'). Gurney is always yearning, even after the war, for rest and peace, a release from what is, essentially, a sense of being denied and persecuted, of threat to his intactness as a human being. 'Rest' does not mean indolence; the release is often frenetically sought in physical activity and above all in the making of music and poetry: it is hard not to feel that Gurney in part drove himself to breaking-point. But the unorthodox uses of syntax and prepositions I have noted are examples of Gurney finding himself as a modern poet, deliberately introducing oddities of grammar and idiom, 'roughening-up' the verse. In places there may be stumblings, but, as I've suggested, he was moving beyond the old nostalgias and pieties, working for all he was worth at ways of letting his personal voice, his singular ways of feeling, thinking and seeing, come through.

The democratic solidarity with the lot of the common soldier which we find in 'Riez Bailleul' and many other poems runs parallel with a similar identification with ordinary countrymen. The figure at the centre of 'The Lock Keeper' is a kind of archetypal countryman, full of practical lore and wisdom, in a way which has caused him to be compared with Edward Thomas's 'Lob' (an earlier short version was dedicated to Thomas's memory) . There is an admiration which is like Edward Thomas's for such men of steady purpose who can impart knowledge 'transcending / Books' to a poet 'more used to book-poring than bright life': 'a time of learning and little said / On my part, since the Master he was so wise'. In fact the poem is much less bookish than Thomas's, and while it does not range so widely as 'Lob', it is more focussed on a tangible, particularised man and his looks and ways. True, he is 'without name', but this is because what he does, the place he occupies, are what he is. The life in the man is adduced with D.H. Lawrence-like avidity as, for example, he is seen at his 'digging, furious, electric', and we are given a near-Dickensian picture of him 'close in the deep chimney-corner, seen / Shadow and bright flare, saturnine and lean'. He is at once a composite, an exemplar, and fully individual.

The flow of the rhyming couplets (with intermittent variations) permits accumulating detail and reflection, the impression of the copiousness of the lock-keeper's knowledge and that he encompasses in his single being the life and work and lore of a whole countryside, consorting

as he does 'as equals' with 'coalmen, farmers, fishermen his friends...or sailors, or poachers, or wandering men'. This whole fraternity exists in a kind of extension of the land and water, practising skills and crafts in tune with it, bound in, too, with the region's history. 'Tentaculous', a characteristically idiosyncratic but expressive coinage, is used twice in the poem, applied not only to the reach of the lock-keeper's knowledge but suggesting also the webbed nature of lives, work and the land with the past traced into them. 'A *net* of craft of eye, heart, kenning and hand' (my italics) is what Gurney so much valued in his lock-keeper, and that Anglo-Saxon tern 'kenning' suggests a knowledge or 'cunning' which goes far back into the past of the land and of the people. Not that the lock-keeper is bound by the past he will accept new knowledge once he has tested it' and made sure of it: 'cautious with ableness...his mind moved to a new stand.' The poem comes to one or Gurney's finely musical closures: 'Dark river voice below heard and lock's overflow.' The compression and displaced word-order, together with a lovely half. submerged internal rhyme, work again to release e feeling of rest and peace, achieved above all for Gurney by the fulfilled 'making' of art.

There are continuous examples in Gurney's poems of this love of mastery of skills and of the made or crafted thing, and constantly he draws parallels with his own craft as a poet or 'maker' and musician. But if he repeatedly images the history of the land and its inhabitants imprinted on the landscape (interleaving then and now), it is with a profoundly anxious presentiment, for which the war above all had given him warrant, that the land is about to be ravaged, its history and these skills and knowledge erased. He acknowledges in 'The Lock-Keeper' as he frequently does in his letters that all is not right with him: 'It would have needed one far less sick than I' to have benefitted fully from the lock-keeper's instruction. In 1922 his family, finding his behaviour intolerable, had him committed, first to an asylum in Gloucester, and then in Dartford, where he was to spend the rest of his life. His removal there locked into his consciousness the sense of some ruinous and unforgivable shift in the order of things, his own fate, as it were, an emblem.

What had most appalled him about the war had always been its 'spoiling' of a world of once bright and lovingly made things, here lamented not while still in the trenches but in another poem called 'Riez Bailleul' written from the asylum; he actually attempts, once more with 'interleaving', to resurrect that suffering in order to ease his greater suffering now:

The parapet, the grey lookout, the making
Of a peasantry, by dread war, harried and set on shaking;
A hundred things of age, and of carefulness,
Spoiling; a farmer's treasure perhaps soon a wilderness.

The final emphasis falls on the evil done to a people's skills and crafts, to the natural harmonies of a community and countryside. Such poems take their place in a sustained striving by Gurney to maintain memory and selfhood intact, to recover imaginatively 'bright things' (the phrase is from one of his most desperate poems, 'To God'), and to protest at the outrage he felt had been done him and others who suffered in the war. He had always in his poems and letters responded indignantly to the unfeeling ways of power and privilege, and another poem from this period, 'Signallers', isn't hard to read as a kind of parable of the class-system. The signallers are 'gentlemen all' who 'delicately wangled sly favours' before 'the vulgar brawling common crew / Could take the seats for tired backs' and whose relatively safe job was to 'signal down the message' that infantrymen were dead. The effect, though, of a certain humorous irony running through the poem (after all, he himself underwent training as a signaller) is at once grim and forgiving: if signallers enjoy minor perks the infantry don't, like everybody else -'distinctions or not'-they are merely part of the machine. This reflects Gurney's extraordinary generosity of spirit, surviving often even in the asylum. But it in no way blunts the protest; it is itself the source of that protest's democratic feeling, perception of the ways prevailing forms and structure compel unnatural distortions of our humanity, an angry conviction that his own readiness to give of himself to the world had been wickedly frustrated.

FURTHER READING

The Collected Letters of Ivor Gurney, ed. R.K.F Thornton, MIDNAG / Carcanet, 1991

Geoffrey Hill, 'Gurney's "Hobby"', *Essays in Criticism* vol. 34, no.2 (April 1984)

Jeremy Hooker, 'Honouring Ivor Gurney', *The Poetry of Place*, Carcanet, 1982

John Lucas, *Modern English Poetry: from Hardy to Hughes*, Batsford, 1986, pp.92-102; *The Radical Twenties*, Five Leaves Publications, 1997, pp.198-20

Jon Silkin, 'Gurney's Voices', *Stand*, vol.25, no (Autumn 1984)

Various recordings of Gurney's music are available

e.g. English Songs: Ivor Gurney, Frederick Delius, Ia and Jennifer Partridge, Etcetera KTC 1063

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