

# Siegfried Sassoon

by Ian Brinton



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## Siegfried Sassoon

In an unpublished account of the effects of the First World War upon the poetic generation which included Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, Siegfried Sassoon, Herbert Read, Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, all defined in some way as 'war poets', J.H. Prynne suggested something of the enforced limitation placed upon these young men by the historical necessity of the moment:

Abrupt exposure to the violence and boredom and extended numbing risk to coherence of personal identity was the background and also foreground of battlefield reality to all of these non-professional soldiers. For each of these men the project of being or becoming a poet was starkly compressed in matter of time, denying opportunity to grow and shed earlier versions of themselves; and the intensity of this experience clamped them into a fierce, complex commitment to this imperious subject-matter. It was simply impossible to consider seriously writing about anything else. The possibilities of moving more experimentally in a direction of writing-practice where thematic insistence—of writing directly 'about' one's subject—might be deflected and mutated, were mostly set aside by lack of mental space and versatility or daring of mind. The ability to move outward and onward in feeling and intelligence, from the demands of the immediate, was constricted not only by the shocking and constantly dangerous violence of the front-line war, but also by a fierce ethical duty not to turn away from terror and suffering: to survive was to be marked with the duties of the survivor, too urgent to permit distracting encounter with problematics of style and more radical development.<sup>1</sup>

This sense of being caught in time, dislocated from any possibilities of progress in intellectual and emotional attitudes towards one's art of writing, was something which is of particular relevance to the work of Siegfried Sassoon and this is emphasised perhaps by two short passages from the opening pages of his fictional autobiography, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*:

1. With half an hour to spare after breakfast, I strolled up the hill and smoked my pipe under a quick-set hedge. Loosening my belt, I looked at a chestnut tree in full leaf and listened to the perfect performance of a nightingale. Such things seemed miraculous after the desolation of the trenches. Never before had I been so intensely aware of what it meant to be young and healthy in fine weather at the outset of summer.<sup>2</sup>
2. Man, it seemed, had been created to jab the life out of Germans. To hear the Major talk, one might have thought that he did it himself every day before breakfast. His final words were: "Remember that every Boche you fellows kill is a point scored to our side; every Boche you kill brings victory one minute nearer and shortens the war by one minute. Kill them! Kill them! There's only one good Boche, and that's a dead one!"<sup>3</sup>

The focus of this Bookmark will be upon three contrasting poems and Sassoon's autobiographical fiction *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (MF-HM) along with its sequel, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (MIO). The poems can be found in the Faber edition of *Collected Poems*.

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<sup>1</sup> 'War in Arcady: Edmund Blunden's Undertones, an unpublished lecture given in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> MIO, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> MIO, p. 12.

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**'unpatriotic to be bitter'**

This quotation comes from *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* and refers to a London newspaper editor driving along the road in a Staff car remarking upon the amazing spirit of the troops. Sassoon went on to write 'But somehow the newspaper men always kept the horrifying realities of the War out of their articles, for it was unpatriotic to be bitter, and the dead were assumed to be gloriously happy.'<sup>4</sup>

The sonnet, 'A Subaltern', is an attempt to capture some of the clean-lines and youthful characteristics of David Thomas, a young Sandhurst recruit, some ten years Sassoon's junior, who appears as Dick Tiltwood in *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*. The recognizable qualities contained within this idealised portrait include the stoicism of the young man who knows that he must endure the hardships which are dealt out to those who are called to serve whilst also ascribing an almost sacred importance to the girl back home who had 'no place in Hell'. The opening lines refer to brightness as the man turned 'to me with his kind, sleepy gaze' and this look moves to become a 'fresh face' which brightens 'to the grin'. Jean Moorcroft Wilson, whilst pointing us towards the less successful elements of the poem, recognised that it conveyed the type of person Thomas was through echoes of the language he might have used, that of a typical ex-public-schoolboy where even his swearing is genteel as he tells the poet 'he'd been having a bloody time / In trenches':

It also helps the reader to understand his appeal for Sassoon, who clearly associated him, in a phrase taken straight from Newbolt's 'Vitae Lampada', with golden summer days of cricket and adored his slight bashfulness and near inarticulateness.<sup>5</sup>

'A Subaltern' was written in early March 1916 and its subject was killed just over a week afterwards on a wiring expedition to strengthen the British line. The depth of Sassoon's emotional response to this waste of youth and cleanness is made clear in the following account:

The sky was angry with a red smoky sunset when we rode up with the rations. Later on, when it was dark, we stood on the bare slope just above the ration dump while the Brigade chaplain went through his words; a flag covered all that we were there for; only the white stripes on the flag made any impression on the dimness of the night. Once the chaplain's words were obliterated by a prolonged burst of machine-gun fire; when he had finished, a trench-mortar "canister" fell a few hundred yards away, spouting the earth up with a crash...A sack was lowered into a hole in the ground. The sack was Dick. I knew Death then.<sup>6</sup>

The sonnet turns its eye wistfully on the past setting memory 'back to summer days' and its opening lines present us with a haunting nostalgia for a time long ago when the cricket 'Close' at Clifton College was dominated by the voice of Henry Newbolt's schoolboy who 'rallied the ranks' with the cry 'Play, play up and play the game.' The unreality of the image of the rats is betrayed with that word 'scampered', a term used more often with an affection attributed to a pet, and the archaic poeticism 'palsied' belongs more in the Keatsian tradition of the 1819 poem, 'The Eve of St Agnes', than it does in the early months of the third year of the war. The sonnet's last line emphasises the Public School British reserve by suggesting that any form of complaint is just talking 'such tripe'. Four lines of poetry written two days after the young subaltern's death, recorded in the first volume of the Sassoon *Diaries*, made quite clear how important the young Thomas had been to the poet:

For you were glad, and kind, and brave;  
With hands that clasped me, young and warm;  
But I have seen a soldier's grave,  
And I have seen your shrouded form.

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<sup>4</sup> MIO, p. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, p. 238-9.

<sup>6</sup> MF-HM, p. 303-4.

## 2

**'antidote to the glorification'**

In *Siegfried's Journey* Sassoon suggested that the two poems 'The One-Legged Man' and 'The Hero' were written with 'a strong sense of satisfaction that I was providing a thoroughly caddish antidote to the glorification of "the supreme sacrifice" and such-like prevalent phrases'. He saw the performances as having the 'quality of satirical drawings' and they were 'deliberately devised to disturb complacency'.

The use of direct speech in 'The Hero' is in clear contrast with the overtly poetical movement of 'The Subaltern' and the satirical thrust at the self-deceiving satisfaction of the elder generation, as it invents the thoughts of its successor, is brought home to the reader with a stabbing brutality as the Brother Officer recalls the 'cold-footed, useless swine' who had 'panicked down the trench that night'. The 'hero' is of course no hero but simply one of those whose nerve gave way under the extended pressure of trench-warfare; he is a soldier who literally got 'cold feet'. However, for the boy's mother at home, living in a world kept disinfected from the realities of what was going on a hundred miles away, he exists in her heroic creation of him. When she opens the poem with her response to reading the Colonel's letter informing her of her son's death her immediate response is 'Jack fell as he'd have wished' with its clear implication that her son's self-sacrifice is the death he had sought. The 'gallant lies' which the Brother Officer tells the grieving woman continue this mythologizing so that she doesn't have to know how her son had 'tried / To get sent home' before being 'Blown to small bits' when the mine exploded in the trench at 'Wicked Corner'.

The names given to trenches at the Front, and it must be remembered here that this was a war fought primarily in a rural setting, seemed designed to blur the foreign nature of the soil and in *MF-HM*, just before the death of Dick Tiltwood, that 'subaltern' referred to in the first sonnet, Sassoon writes of 'stumbling and splashing up a communication trench known as Canterbury Avenue as he looked for Watling Street close by the Maple Redoubt'. However, by contrast the bitter name accorded to the area where the mine goes up in 'The Hero' suggests a more allegorical view on the judgement of the horrors of war and it refuses to play the Orphic game of looking over the shoulder at that disappearing warm glow of home: the mine that killed 'Jack' went up at 'Wicked Corner' and those words have no echo of home. 'The Hero' was published in the *Cambridge Magazine* in November 1916 and one immediate reaction to the deliberate destruction of those myths which are created in order to preserve civilian complacency at home is mentioned by Jean Moorcroft Wilson: Charles Geake wrote in to say that 'at least one Englishman was pained not to say disgusted by the poem.'<sup>7</sup> In fact the poem is reminiscent in tone of Thomas Hardy's 'Satires of Circumstance' which had been published in 1914 and which had been read by Sassoon at the time. In particular there is an echo of 'In the Cemetery' where the churchyard sexton, who moved the dead bodies of young children so that the main drainage system could be installed, makes the point that a lie is perfectly acceptable if it provides griever with some relief:

"And as well cry over a new-laid drain  
As anything else, to ease your pain!"

## 3

**'Counter-Attack'**

This title poem from Sassoon's 1918 collection which Heinemann published has a shockingly visceral sense to it and coming so quickly on the heels of his own letter to his Commanding Officer, Colonel Jones Williams, its directness cannot be avoided. Sassoon's growing concern for what he perceived as the unnecessary prolongation of hostilities prompted by political motives, led to his forthright stance in the letter refusing to return to military duties:

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<sup>7</sup> Wilson, p. 286.

I am writing you this private letter with the greatest possible regret. I must inform you that it is my intention to refuse to perform any further military duties. I am doing this as a protest against the policy of the Government in prolonging the War by failing to state their conditions of peace.

The opening lines of the poem in which Sassoon tells us that

We'd gained our first objective hours before  
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes

serve as an ironic aubade with the dawn personified as a British soldier standing in the successfully taken trench of the enemy. The 'blinking' here is as much a result of post-combat stress as it is of awakening to a new day and the troops are both 'unshaved and thirsty' as well as 'blind with smoke'. The possible sporting reference with the next phrase, 'We held their line', is juxtaposed in the poem's layout with the seven-lines of indentation which follow on from that dawn greeting: it is as if we are now being presented with a scene which lies *within* a scene and we are made privy to the nightmare scenario of death and decomposition.

The place was rotten with dead

This is an Infernal landscape in which 'green clumsy legs...grovelled along the saps' and human beings have become 'trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud' which, in turn have an all-too-real sense of emptiness with the simile of the loosely filled sand-bags. Sassoon's refusal to see death in terms of the 'proper' clothed manner is worth comparing with the mother's view of her son in 'The Hero' ('Jack fell as he'd have wished') and this is startlingly emphasised with the image of 'naked sodden buttocks' as well as 'Bulged, clotted heads'. It might be worth recalling here that when Edward Thomas sent his poem 'Lob' to *Blackwood's Magazine* less than a year before 'Counter-Attack' was written he had removed the line referring to 'Mother Dunch's Buttocks' (a country name for the Sinodun Hills in Wiltshire) lest, as his biographer Eleanor Farjeon put it, he offend the editor of the magazine and his public.

This aubade, the derivation of which word includes a reference to alba, white, is bleared with fog reminiscent of Goya's 1812 painting of 'The Colossus' as 'posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke' and the image of grotesque confusion is continued with 'stumbling figures' which loom out of the half-light. As the enemy attempts to re-take the trench which has just been taken from them the almost hysterical panic of the scene is captured with staccato direct speech: 'Stand-to and man the fire-step!'; 'Fire-step...counter-attack!'; 'O Christ, they're coming at us!' It finds another expression in the account of morning light from the concluding pages of MF-HM:

Against the clear morning sky a cloud of dark smoke expands and drifts away. Slowly its dingy wrestling vapours take the form of a hooded giant with clumsy expostulating arms. Then, with a gradual gesture of acquiescence, it lolls sideways, falling over into the attitude of a swimmer on his side. And so it dissolves into nothingness. Perhaps the shell has killed someone.<sup>8</sup>

Similar to the gas-engulfed soldiers in Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' Sassoon's soldier in 'Counter-Attack' dies drowning in his own blood, 'Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned, / Bleeding to death.' As Paul Fussell makes clear in *The Great War and Modern Memory* such imagery of drowning 'seems to fit a landscape which after a rain resembled, as one man recalls, "just one big sea for miles and miles"'. These closing images from Sassoon's poem present the reader with a shocking proximity as the soldier is knocked down by an explosive 'To grunt and wriggle' and he fights against 'flapping veils of smothering gloom'. This is the world of 'Attack', another poem Sassoon wrote at the time, where 'Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear' clamber over the top of their trench to flounder in mud.

O Jesus, make it stop!

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<sup>8</sup> MF-HM, p. 307-8.

**'And the dead were the dead'**

Sassoon admired the lecture given by A.E. Housman, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry' and, according to Jean Moorcroft Wilson quoted it in an unpublished article written, by request, for *The Listener* in 1935. Housman suggested that the 'peculiar function of poetry' was 'to transfuse emotion—not to transmit thought, but to set up in the reader's sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer.'<sup>9</sup> This attitude seems distinctly at odds with Sassoon's own conclusion to MIO:

Who made the War? I laughed hysterically as the thought passed through my mud-stained mind. But I only laughed mentally, for my box of Stokes gun ammunition left me no breath to spare for an angry guffaw. And the dead were the dead; this was no time to be pitying them or asking silly questions about their outraged lives. Such sights must be taken for granted, I thought, as I gasped and slithered and stumbled with my disconsolate crew. Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull.<sup>10</sup>

That contrast between a nostalgic softness concerning the function of poetry and the shocking realities that were witnessed and recorded by Sassoon is perhaps what prompted J.H. Prynne to suggest that

In different ways each one of what we now can't avoid calling 'war poets' had to make do with traditional modes and genres of composition, as compellingly the default option. With so much of their cultural equipment at risk of destruction, they were deeply conservative in formal poetics, even as they experimented towards far limits in the expression of personal and ethical feeling. It is possible to say that they were locked into this conservatism: and for those of them who survived the war their subsequent writerly development was mostly arrested and uneventful. Pound, Eliot and Joyce defined major new initiatives, but the surviving war poets lapsed into survival.

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, p. 556.

<sup>10</sup> MIO, p. 157.

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