

Ivor Gurney

by Ian Brinton



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Ivor Gurney 1890-1937

The poet and composer Ivor Gurney was brought up in Gloucestershire before attending the Royal College of Music in the autumn of 1911. However, as his biographer Michael Hurd has suggested, he became 'ill at ease in the noisy London streets, and cramped in squalid lodgings' and 'unable in term-time to glimpse the restoring countryside, he began to experience fits of deep depression which left him weak and ill.' In 1913 he suffered a breakdown and returned to Gloucestershire to stay at the Lock House in Framilode and the talismanic importance of this haven, along with Crickley Hill, became for him central as a refuge and both places haunted him whilst he was at the Front. The importance of Framilode was highlighted in a letter to his friend Marion Scott, sent from Fulham where he returned for a short time between 1913 and the outbreak of war:

I will simply say that from a small hill not a mile away from where I stayed (or 'stopped' as they say here) and this hill, lovely in itself, though tiny and probably not 200 feet high, gives one a view of the Forest of Dean, hills on the West, the whole broad Severn on the SW, Gloucestershire to the Southern Border to the S. And the whole line of Cotswolds on the S.SE and E. Likewise the Malverns on the North! Oh, what a place!

At the outbreak of war Gurney volunteered for action but was refused on the grounds of poor eyesight. In 1915 he tried again and was accepted in February as Private no. 3895 of the 2nd/5th Gloucesters. He left for France in May 1916 and was sent to the Front near Laventie where he was wounded. After spending six weeks recovering in hospital at Rouen he was transferred to the Machine Gun Corps and was gassed at Passchendaele in September 1917 as a result of which he was returned home. He never recovered from this and in 1922 was committed to City of London Mental Hospital at Dartford, Kent, where he remained until his death in 1937. He published two books of poems, *Severn & Somme* (1917) and *War's Embers* (1919) and a *Collected Poems*, chosen and edited by P.J. Kavanagh was published in 1984.

From *Somme & Severn*

Firelight

Silent, bathed in firelight, in dusky light and gloom
The boys squeeze together in the smoky dirty room,
Crowded round the fireplace, a thing of bricks and tin,
They watch the shifting embers till the good dreams enter in,

That fill the low hovel with blossoms fresh with dew,
And blue sky and white clouds that sail the clear air through.
They talk of daffodillies and the bluebells' skiey bed,
Till silence thrills with music at the things they have said.

And yet, they have no skill of words, whose eyes glow so deep,
They wait for night and silence and the strange power of sleep,
To lift them and drift them like sea-birds over the sea
Where some day I shall walk again, and they walk with me.

When Gurney sent the manuscript of this poem to Marion Scott on 3rd February 1917 he wrote 'The boys are nearly all asleep—eight of us in a room, say, 14 feet by ten, with a large stack of wood, a fireplace and equipment. Outside it is bitterly cold; in here, not so bad; and good companionship hides many things.' This sense of camaraderie in the trenches was central to Gurney's experience and as Hurd put it 'Caught up in a loving comradeship wherein all suffered equally and endured, he felt perhaps for the first time in his life a sense of security—a sense that he was no longer the odd man out, and that he had found the family he had always been looking for.' This sense of camaraderie moves in the first stanza from 'bathed' to 'squeeze together' and 'crowded' and the sense of a

common quality of living is emphasised as they focus on the fire. The fact that its embers are shifting works in two ways: not only does the movement allow for a removal from the sordid present, enabling 'good dreams' to appear, but also it hints at a dissolution as the moment of fraternity is recognised as fragile. The dreams themselves are not those to be found in sleep but are the ones re-created through shared memory: it is the 'talk' which musically weaves together the patterns of a home life so distant from the present. Some weeks later Gurney revised this line to become 'Till Silence thrills and murmurs at the things they have said' allowing the word 'murmurs' to **express** the sound rather than comment upon it. The breaking-up of the group as they drift off to sleep is conveyed in the image of gulls which seem to suggest a search for a home 'over the sea' and a hope that a reunion of this comradeship might be found at some later stage.

From *War's Embers*

Dicky
(To His Memory)

They found him when the day
Was yet but gloom;
Six feet of scarréd clay
Was ample room
And wide enough domain for all desires
For him, whose glowing eyes
Made mock at lethargies,
Were not a moment still;—
Can Death, all slayer, kill
The fervent source of those exultant fires?
Nay, not so;
Somewhere that glow
And starry shine so clear astonishes yet
The wondering spirits as they come and go.
Eyes that nor they nor we shall ever forget.

Composed in March 1917 the poem is a tribute to Corporal Richard Rhodes whose fate Gurney had mentioned to Marion Scott in a letter dated March 25th:

One of the finest little pocket corporals that ever breathed went out on patrol, mistook his direction in the dark, and was shot when about to enter the enemy lines by mistake.

About a fortnight later, after the British advance, Gurney wrote again to say that Rhodes's grave had been found 'and after tea one evening the whole company (that was fit) went down for a service there'.

Quite a fine little wooden cross had been erected there: the Germans had done well: it was better than we ourselves would have given him; and on the cross was

"Hier ruht ein tapferer Engländer,
Richard Rhodes", and the date.

Strange to find chivalry in sight of the destruction we had left behind us; but so it was. They must have loved his beauty, or he must have lived a little for such a tribute. But he was brave, and his air always gallant and gay for all his few inches. Always I admired him and his indestructability of energy and wonderful eyes.

An obvious echo in the poem is of the Shakespearian lines in which Prince Hal refers to the dead Hotspur, killed at Shrewsbury, in *Henry IV Part I*:

When that this body did contain a spirit,
A kingdom for it was too small a bound;
But now, two paces of the vilest earth
Is room enough.

The poem concentrates upon the Corporal's eyes, the glowing sense of life that will not be forgotten, and the contrast between the six feet of clay and the expanse of 'starry shine' reverses Hal's reductive awareness of greatness turned to dust by suggesting a Romantic sense of eternal movement of 'wandering spirits'. However, in a tone typical of Gurney's poetry, that sense of 'wandering' is tinged with an air of homelessness and it is difficult not to call to mind the restlessness of Dante's roaming spirits.

Proximity and Distance: the Near and the Far

In a letter of June 1916 to his friend and fellow-musician, Herbert Howells, Gurney remarked on the connections between the landscape of Northern France and that of Southern England: 'There is precious little jerry building in France, and all the village roofs are red like the Sussex roofs, and in an easy walk from the front trenches all the normal life of farms and villages goes on as well as possible except for the shortage of men.' A few days later he wrote to Marion Scott about how there was a sense of life carrying on as normal within a short distance of the conflict:

Out of the window we can watch men making hay in a fashion reminding us distractingly of Home. They are easily in range of the smallest field guns.

The dislocation felt by Gurney between his quiet home-life and the world of the trenches occupied his mind when he wrote again to Marion Scott a month later:

But in the name of all the Pleiades what has a neurasthenic musician to do with all this? One looks at the clear West, the evening stars, and thinks of Minsterworth, booktalk and music in the quiet room there: and then the guns begin; and after, one's friends are taken away, some still, some cheerful at a Blighty.

This eerie sense of dislocation, being trapped in a No-Man's Land whilst possessing vivid recollections of the world back in Gloucestershire, was emphasised by the censors' insistence on the removal of all place names in correspondence home. This led to a contrast between the precision of domestic details and the vagueness of the location as in his letter to Marion Scott dated June 7th 1916 where he wrote 'so that when you read of a slight disturbance near Donawhere you may picture me standing gallantly to attention as near to the cookers as possible.' In a letter to Mrs Voynich, from the same day, he told her 'Being at this moment in the reserve trenches near Somewhere or other, after a stay in the front line and then in reserve' and another letter from June 7th, to Catherine Abercrombie, referred to the war 'distant from us by 300 yards' and snipers continually firing. In the same letter he recorded an incident which poignantly brought together this eerie feeling of being in two places at the same time:

Once we were standing outside our dugout cleaning mess tins, when a cuckoo sounded its call from the shattered wood at the back. What could I think of but Framilode, Minsterworth, Cranham, and the old haunts of home. This Welshman turned to me passionately. "Listen to that damned bird," he said. "All through that bombardment in the pauses I could hear that infernal silly 'Cuckoo, Cuckoo' sounding while Owen was lying in my arms covered in blood. How shall I ever listen again...!" He broke off, and I became aware of shame at the unholy joy that filled my artist's mind. And what a fine thin keen face he had, and what a voice...

The poem 'Crickley Hill' conveys perhaps the intensity of this dislocation and the passionate yearning for a past world which must have seemed gone forever.

Crickley Hill

The orchis, trefoil, harebells nod all day,
High above Gloucester and the Severn Plain.
Few come there, where the curlew ever and again
Cries faintly, and no traveller makes stay,
Since steep the road is,
And the villages
Hidden by hedges wonderful in May.

At Buire-au-Bois a soldier wandering
The lanes at evening talked with me and told
Of gardens summer blessed, of early spring
In tiny orchards, the uncounted gold
Strewn in green meadows,
Clear-cut shadows
Black on the dust and grey stone mellow and old.

But these were things I knew, and carelessly
Heard, while in thought I went with friends on roads
White in the sun and wandered far to see
The scented hay come homeward in warm loads.
Hardly I heeded him;
While coloured dim
Evening brought stars and lights in small abodes.

When on a sudden, 'Crickley' he said. How I started
At that old darling name of home! and turned,
Fell into a torrent of words warm-hearted
Till clear above the stars of summer burned
In velvet smooth skies.
We shared memories,
And the old raptures from each other learned.

O sudden steep! O hill towering above!
Chasm from the road falling suddenly away!
Sure no two men talked of you with more love
Than we that tender-coloured ending of day.
(O tears! Keen pride in you!)
Feeling the soft dew,
Walking in thought another Roman way.

You hills of home, woodlands, white roads and inns
That star and line our darling land, still keep
Memory of us; for when first day begins
We think of you and dream in the first sleep
Of you and yours—
Trees, bare rock, flowers
Daring the blast on Crickley's distant steep.

According to Helen Thomas's account of visiting Gurney in Dartford 'He passionately loved my husband's work and was deeply interested in anything to do with him. Indeed Edward Thomas's name—for Ivor Gurney had never met him though they had been near each other at the Front in France—evoked in him what one can only call love.' 'Crickley Hill' has echoes of the war poetry of Thomas and the opening line seems to pay homage to the line from the 1915 poem, 'October', 'Harebell and scabious and tormentil'. Other particular echoes of Thomas's poetry appear in this first stanza where the sense of place is identified with isolation: 'few come there'...'no traveller makes

stay' and 'the villages / Hidden by hedges.' The feeling of presence in absence, the vividness of the recall of the Severn world to the soldier in Northern France, is highlighted by the second stanza's opening with a leisurely sense of sauntering as 'a soldier wandering / The lanes at evening' shares his reminiscences of 'gardens summer blessed' and a dream-like quality is suggested by 'uncounted gold / Strewn in green meadows'. It is typical of both Gurney and Thomas that this dream should be cut across by a precision of the 'clear-cut' and a visual accuracy of 'Black on the dust and grey stone'. Gurney, the musician, listens only carelessly to what his fellow soldier is saying and his mind is distracted by his own mental recreation of 'roads /White in the sun' and the 'scented hay' coming 'homeward in warm loads' merges seamlessly into the evening lights 'in small abodes' which surround the poet and his companion. At this point exactly halfway through the poem the sound of the name 'Crickley', a musical note that replaces dream-like memory, brings in a torrent of urgent recollection the dramatic importance of which is emphasised by the words 'steep', 'towering', 'Chasm' and a sense of vertigo experienced with 'the road falling suddenly away'. It is as if the more sentimentalised aspects of the past landscape have been replaced with an urgency of recall and this gives us a much greater sense of the tangibility of loss and the concluding 'blast on Crickley's distant steep' conveys not only a sense of gap between the world of the present and the world of the past but also hints at the transient vulnerability of that 'distant steep'.

'Patient suffering'

Michael Hurd referred to a 'quality of modernity' in Gurney's poems, 'a laconic, unsentimental statement of observed facts, transmuted into poetry by force and concentration of expression and a very exact choice of words'.

The Silent One

Who dies on the wires, and hung there, one of two—
Who for his hours of life had chattered through
Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:
Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went
A noble fool, faithful to his stripes—and ended.
But I weak, hungry, and willing only for the chance
Of line—to fight in the line, lay down under unbroken
Wires, and saw the flashes and kept unshaken,
Till the politest voice—a finicking accent, said:
'Do you think you might crawl through there: there's a hole.'
Darkness, shot at: I smiled, as politely replied—
'I'm afraid not, Sir.' There was no hole no way to be seen
Nothing but chance of death, after tearing of clothes.
Kept flat, and watched the darkness, hearing bullets whizzing—
And thought of music—and swore deep heart's deep oaths
(Polite to God) and retreated and came on again,
Again retreated—and a second time faced the screen.

As Hurd pointed out, Gurney 'encapsulates the patient suffering of all conscripted fighters—black ironic humour their only protection against a stupidity and horror that goes almost too deep for the devices of literature.' However, it is the very devices of literature which allow one to remain sane when faced with such stupidity and the polite voice with 'a finicking accent' owes something perhaps to the 'certain lord, neat and trimly dressed' who addresses Hotspur in Act I, iii of *Henry IV, Part I*:

And as the soldiers bore dead bodies by,
He called them untaught knaves, unmannerly
To bring a slovenly unhandsome corpse
Betwixt the wind and his nobility.

In April 1917 Gurney was wounded in the arm and taken to Rouen to recover but by May he was back in the battalion. After the disastrous failure of the French General Robert Nivelle's plan for an offensive at Easter 1917 in which it was reported that one regiment went meekly to the front baaing like sheep, Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig's offensive at Passchendaele took place at the cost of half a million lives. In early September near the Passchendaele Ridge Gurney was gassed and returned to England suffering from what was regarded as 'shell-shock'. In a letter he had written to Marion Scott in August that year he said 'May God forgive me if I ever come to cheat myself into thinking that it was [interesting], and lie later to younger men of the Great Days. It was damnable.'

After some time convalescing in Edinburgh and Newcastle Gurney spent the last months of the war working in a munitions factory but, as Hurd put it,

The body rested, safe and snug between clean sheets, but the mind turned back again and again to the rain-sodden trenches and the mud and the sweat and the comrades dying one by one.

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