SOLDIER POETS: A STUDY OF ATTITUDES
TOWARD WAR SINCE 1914

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to show, by examination of their work, the attitude toward War of poets who actually fought during the World War, since there appears to be a definite change in the attitude of poets toward warfare. Most poetry written before the World War tended to glorify warfare. Most poetry written during and since that time has condemned it. This study will review the poetry of prominent writers who were participants in the conflict. It will be restricted to poetry which indicated a definite attitude toward warfare. Special emphasis will be given to the work of Siegfried Sassoon, who most vigorously declared his attitude. The war poetry of Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Herbert Read, Wilfred Gibson, Edmund Blunden, and Richard Aldington will be reviewed for purposes of comparison and substantiation of the thesis of this study.

Many poets who saw only brief service are not included; a few are mentioned merely for purposes of comparison. The emphasis is placed on men who saw considerable service and developed a definite attitude toward warfare which they expressed in poetry. For this reason more space is given to those who survived the War and have stated
their opinions in poetry written since the War.

This study has significance in view of the fact that a definite change seems to have occurred throughout the English speaking world in the attitude toward warfare. This change has been reflected in the poetry written during and since the World War. Poets who were actual participants in the struggle had a part in this change, because in expressing the thoughts and feelings of their contemporaries they served both as spokesmen of their age and as moulders of public opinion and sentiment.

A study by Daniel George and Rose Macaulay of mankind's reactions to warfare as recorded in what he has written over a period of twenty-four centuries revealed the fact that man has always been conscious that war has sacrificed youth and left a train of sorrow and suffering; but that, nevertheless, man has glorified warfare.¹ This study accepts the general conclusions of Mr. George and Miss Macaulay.

The nineteenth century deserves special study because of the diversity of attitudes of poets of the time. Since this period is not within the scope of the paper, it will be possible to point out only briefly that this period was an important link in the changing attitude toward warfare. We find in the poetry of the nineteenth century glorifica-

¹ George, Daniel and Macaulay, Rose, All in a Maze.
tion of heroic death for one's country. The martial swing of this type of poetry contributed to the false glamour of warfare. Such poems as Tennyson's The Charge of the Light Brigade, Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington, Part III of Maud; Browning's Hervé Riel, Cavalier Tunes, and How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix are familiar examples of this type of writing. It is true, however, that in the nineteenth century there were modifications of the tendency to stress the glory of warfare. Even in the writing of poets such as Tennyson, whose chief emphasis would appear to be on the glory of warfare, we find the passage in Locksley Hall on World Peace. The same ideal of universal harmony was expressed in Sydney Dobell's A Shower in War-Time. George Meredith, Robert Southey, and Stephen Crane all saw the falsity of war spirit. In France (December 1870) and in On the Danger of War, George Meredith showed the terrible destructive force of war. Robert Southey in The Battle of Blenheim satirized warfare in old Kaspar's attempt to explain the "famous victory" to his little grandchildren, Peterkin and Wilhelmine. Stephen Crane, whom Amy Lowell called "a man without a period," was the most modern in his attitude. In The Black Riders and War is Kind he made bitter, satiric attacks upon warfare.

In this attitude, however, he stood alone among poets of the Civil War.

On the whole, poetry condemning warfare was rare before the time of the World War. In the past war poetry applauded heroic deeds and lamented the loss of loved ones. The prevailing spirit was one of glorification of noble deeds and heroic deaths.

This study has been carried on from the point of view of the individual's reaction, as he expressed himself in poetry, to the experiences of a soldier at the front during the World War. The material covered has been divided as follows: (1) the early war poetry as represented by Rupert Brooke and others who wrote during the first years of the War; (2) the work of Wilfred Owen, a poet of great ability, who expressed clearly and definitely his attitude toward warfare; (3) six volumes of the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon from 1917-1936, showing the author's changing reactions to the experiences of the War; (4) the poetry of six other prominent men-of-letters who wrote, during and after the War, poetry in which they expressed their reactions to the War.

In the preparation of this thesis the writer reviewed all of the available war verse of the authors considered. Poetry which appeared only in magazines and was never published in book form was disregarded. Since many of the
volumes of war poetry are now out of print and difficult
to obtain, the study was necessarily restricted to the
more important contributions of each author.

The biographical material was collected from: *Authors
Today and Yesterday; Living Authors; Who's Who; biographical
notes appearing in anthologies and recent histories of
English literature; magazine articles; prefaces to volumes
of poetry; and, in the case of Siegfried Sassoon, his
autobiography.

In studying the trends of war poetry the following
were useful: recent histories of English literature, recent
essays on English literature, especially those appearing in
the following magazines: *The Dial, The Spectator, Quarterly
Nineteenth Century, The Nation, The (American) Bookman,
The Athenaeum. Book reviews appearing in *The (London) Times
Literary Supplement, The Saturday Review of Literature, and
the Book Review Digest were used in making the bibliography
for this work.
CHAPTER II

EARLY WAR POETRY

The purpose of this chapter is to show that soldier poets who wrote verse during the early days of the War showed the following reactions to the War: (1) They expressed a willingness to die for their country. (2) They had faith in the justice of the cause for which they were fighting. (3) They exulted in the strength and courage which enabled them to meet the challenge. (4) They harbored no bitterness against the enemy. Rupert Brooke was the best known of these early war poets. There were many others, but only a few will be mentioned here since this thesis is concerned principally with later war verse.

Rupert Brooke

Rupert Brooke was born at Rugby August 3, 1887, where his father was assistant master. While attending school at Rugby, he won a prize for his poem, The Bastille, and was prominent in athletics. In 1906 he entered King's College, Cambridge; later he spent some time at Munich, at Berlin, and in Italy. In May, 1913, he began a year of travel which took him to the United States, Canada, and the South Seas. His letters to the Westminster Gazette described these travels. When the World War broke out he
remarked, "Well, if Armageddon's on, I suppose one should be there,"¹ and enlisted in September, 1914, in the Hood Battalion of the Royal Naval Division. He took part in the Antwerp expedition in October, 1914, and then went to Blandford Camp in Dorsetshire. He was on his way to the Dardanelles when he died of blood-poisoning on board a French Hospital ship, on April 23, 1915, and was buried at Skyros.

Five sonnets made up Rupert Brooke's contribution to war poetry, but they have been sufficient to make him the best known and most popularly admired of the war poets. His work is not of particular interest to this study, however, because he represented only the first reaction to the War. Although it was evident that the War profoundly stirred him, he did not live long enough or see enough fighting to make his contribution of value to this study, except that he represents the first reaction to the War as it was expressed in poetry.

No other one of the poets of the World War has made such a strong appeal to the public as has Rupert Brooke. Many poems have been written as tributes to him, and much has been written about him—his good looks and his personality. His sonnets are almost too well-known to need quoting. They represent the early reaction of many soldiers to the War; the spirit is that of exultation in the

opportunity of sacrificing one's life for one's country.
Their great popularity is a tribute to the spirit of the work; they represent a feeling which echoes in the hearts of the readers.

The Dead

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!
There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away; poured out the red Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
That men call age; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow! They brought us, for our dearth,
Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
And paid his subjects with a royal wage;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again;
And we have come into our heritage.2

The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by the suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.3

2. Ibid., p. 113.
3. Ibid., p. 115.
Other Poets of the Early War Period

Alan Seeger's, 4 I Have a Rendezvous with Death, and John McCrae's, 5 In Flanders Fields, are too well known to need quoting, but the following poems of several poets who were killed in the war will show that the spirit of the early days of the war was the spirit of youth meeting a challenge and gloriying in the strength which enabled it to meet the challenge. Most of the poems were concerned with death but they showed, on the part of the soldier, fearlessness in facing death and a belief in the cause for which he was fighting.

Charles Hamilton Sorley's, 6 All the Hills and Vales Along, began with these lines:

All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song,
And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.
  0 sing, marching men,
    Till the valleys ring again.
  Give your gladness to earth's keeping,
  So be glad, when you are sleeping.

An examination of a few of the other early poems of the War shows substantially the same attitude. Julian Grenfell's, 8 Into Battle, began:

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5. Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae (spelled McRae by some editors) died in France January, 1918.
6. Captain Charles Hamilton Sorley was killed in action October, 1915.
The naked earth is warm with spring,
   And with green grass and bursting trees
Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,
   And quivers in the sunny breeze;
And Life is Colour and Warmth and Light,
   And a striving evermore for these;
And he is dead who will not fight;
   And who dies fighting has increase.

It concluded with this stanza:

The thundering line of battle stands,
   And in the air Death moans and sings;
But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
   And Night shall fold him in soft wings.

Flanders, April, 1915.

Other poems also showed this joy in the strength and ability to meet the foe and to conquer.

Come,
Where, wild to meet and mate you, flame in their beaks for breath,
Black doves! the white hawks wait you on the wind-tossed boughs of death.
These boughs be cold without you, our hearts are hot for this,
Our wings shall beat about you, our scorching breath shall kiss:
Till, fraught with that we gave you, fulfilled of our desire,
You bank,—too late to save you from biting beaks of fire,—
Turn sideways from your lover,
Shudder and swerve and run,
Tilt; stagger; and plunge over Ablaze against the sun,—
Doves dead in air, who clumb to dare The hawks that guide the gun! 10

--Gilbert Frankau, from "Eyes in the Air"

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R. E. Vernéde's,\textsuperscript{11} England to the Sea, contained these lines:

God grant to us the old Armada weather,
The winds that rip, the heavens that stoop and lour—
Not till the Sea and England sink together,
Shall they be masters! Let them boast that hour!\textsuperscript{12}

There was no hatred of the enemy in any of these poems. Sergeant Joseph Lee's,\textsuperscript{13} German Prisoners, was a good example of the attitude of soldier poets toward the enemy:

\textbf{German Prisoners}

When first I saw you in the curious street
Like some platoon of soldier ghosts in grey,
My mad impulse was all to smite and slay,
To spit upon you—tread you 'neath my feet.
But when I saw how each sad soul did grieve
My gaze with no sign of defiant frown,
How from tired eyes looked spirits broken down,
How each face showed the pale flag of defeat,
And doubt, despair, and disillusionment,
And how were grievous wounds on many a head,
And on your garb red-faced was other red;
And how you stooped as men whose strength was spent,
I knew that we had suffered each as other;
And could have grasped your hand and cried,
"My brother!"

Willingness to die for one's country was expressed in Robert Ernest Vernéde's,\textsuperscript{14} A Petition:

\textbf{A Petition:}

All that a man might ask thou hast given me, England, Birthright and happy childhood's long heart's-ease,
And love whose range is deep beyond all sounding
And wider than all seas:
A heart to find the world and find God in it,

\textsuperscript{11} R. E. Vernéde, killed in action in France, April 9, 1917
\textsuperscript{12} A Book of Verse of the Great War, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{13} A Treasury of War Poetry, p. 176.
Eyes blind now but not too blind to see
The lovely things beyond the dross and darkness,
And lovelier things to be;
And friends whose loyalty time nor death shall weaken
And quenchless hope and laughter's golden store—
All that a man might ask thou hast given me, England,
Yet grant thou one thing more:
That now when envious foes would spoil thy splendour,
Unversed in arts, a dreamer such as I,
May in thy ranks be deemed not all unworthy,
England, for thee to die.

One of the best expressions of the spirit which characterized the early days of the War was Alan Seeger's, Champagne, 1914-15, which ended with these words:

Honor them not so much with tears and flowers,
But you with whom the sweet fulfilment lies,
Where in the anguish of atrocious hours
Turned their last thoughts and closed their dying eyes,
Rather when music on bright gatherings lays
Its tender spell, and joy is uppermost,
Be mindful of the men they were, and raise
Your glasses to them in one silent toast.
Drink to them—amorous of Earth as well,
They asked no tribute lovelier than this—
And in the wine that ripened where they fell,
Oh, frame your lips as though it were a kiss.

Champagne, July, 1915.

The attitude characteristic of these poems was: (1) acceptance of the justice of the quarrel, (2) exultation in strength and courage to meet the challenge, (3) a belief in the glory of dying for one's country. There was no hatred of the enemy expressed in poems written in Eng-

15. Ibid., p. 162.
lish during the World War, nor was there any glorification of individual acts of heroism, probably because modern warfare does not furnish opportunities for that.
CHAPTER III

WILFRED OWEN

Wilfred Owen was born at Oswestry, Shropshire, March 18, 1893. He attended Birkenhead Institute in Liverpool. His mother said, "He was always a very thoughtful, imaginative child—not very robust, and never cared for games. As a little child his greatest pleasure was for me to read to him even after he could read himself." Between 1907-1909 he made two trips to Normandy with his father. In 1910 he enrolled at London University but did not stay long. His admiration for John Keats led him to make a pilgrimage to Keats' home, Teignmouth, in 1911. Because of his poor health he went to France where he lived from 1913 to 1915. He obtained a tutorship near Bordeaux; here he became acquainted with the French poet, Laurent Tailhaide, who gave him encouragement in writing poetry. In spite of his poor health he enlisted and served in France with the Artists' Rifles from December 1916 until June 1917. At that time he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh, for fourteen months. Here he met Siegfried Sassoon who came there as a patient in August. The two became friends, and Sassoon encouraged Owen in writing poetry. To soothe

his shattered nerves at this time, Wilfred Owen attended concerts, gave lectures, studied German, engaged in historical research, edited the hospital newspaper, "The Hydra", and published some of his own poetry in magazines. Apparently it was not necessary for him to return to the War; the state of his health would have permitted him to remain safely in the hospital until the end of the War. But in August, 1918, he returned to the front, moved not only by the desire to fulfill his obligation to duties undertaken, but by an urgency that transcended this personal motive. To express the truth of war as a warning to future generations had become with him a deep purpose. He must return to the battlefield to vivify his impressions, to make certain of the truth of those images of horror that haunted his mind. In a letter to his mother December 31, 1917, he said,

"But chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all faces in that camp....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."  

In still another letter to his mother at this time, he summed up his own life.

"I am not dissatisfied with my years. Everything has been done in bouts: bouts of awful labor at Shrewsbury and Bordeaux; bouts of amazing pleasure.

in the Pyrenees, and play at Craiglockhart; bouts of religion at Dunaden; bouts of horrible danger on the Somme; bouts of poetry always; of your affection always; of sympathy for the oppressed always. I go out of this year as a poet, my dear mother, as which I did not enter it. I am held peer by the Georgians; I am a poet's poet. I am started."3

After Wilfred Owen's return to the front he was made a company commander, received the Military Cross on October 1, and was killed in action on November 4, 1918, one week before the Armistice.

Unfortunately the poetry of Wilfred Owen was not published in book form until 1920. Then Siegfried Sassoon undertook the task of editing it. In the introduction he said,

"His conclusions about War are so entirely in accordance with my own that I cannot attempt to judge his work with any critical detachment. I can only affirm that he was a man of absolute integrity of mind."4

Upon the appearance of this volume critics gave Wilfred Owen a place of importance among modern poets. Louis Untermeyer included his work in Modern British Poetry in 1925, saying, "It was evident at once that here was one of the most important contributions to the literature of the War."5 A review by J. C. S. in London Mercury, 1921, said that the publication of this volume would, "give him,

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5. Untermeyer, Louis, Modern British Poetry, 1925, p. 337
beyond dispute a permanent place amongst our poets."6

The editors of the anthology, This Generation, included Wilfred Owen's work with this comment,

"Today, of all the war poets Owen is acknowledged to be the best. His work, young as he was, indicates that he could fuse the horrible experiences of war with a wisdom about life and a belief in beauty and progress, despite the general cataclysm in which he lived and by which he was killed."7

This high praise of critics is of interest in the case of Wilfred Owen in view of the fact that he himself declared that his verses about the War were written with a didactic purpose. An unfinished preface found among his papers, and printed in Sassoon's edition of his work, made clear his aim in writing war poetry. It is here quoted in full.

This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, dominion, or power,

except War.

Above all, this book is not concerned with Poetry. The subject of it is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is the pity.

Yet these elegies are not to this generation,

This is in no sense consolatory.

They may be to the next.

All the poet can do to-day is to warn.

That is why the true Poets must be truthful.

If I thought the letter of this book would last,

I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives Prussia,—my ambition and those names

will be content; for they will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders. 8

A letter written by Wilfred Owen in June, 1917, also made clear his definite convictions about warfare.

Already I have comprehended a light which never will filter into the dogma of any national church; namely, that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. It may be a chimerical and ignominious principle, but there it is. It can only be ignored; and I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully and successfully indeed. 9

The Work of Wilfred Owen

The study of Wilfred Owen's work will attempt to point out: (1) his sense of the horrors of the War, (2) his tenderness toward doomed youth tricked by false idealism, (3) his sense of the closeness of the friendships formed on the battlefield, (4) his purpose of making clear to future generations the truth about warfare.

The following quotations from five of Wilfred Owen's poems will serve to show the horrors of warfare as he visualized them for us. The Show represented the author with Death looking down from some "vague height" upon the battlefield, where men looked like caterpillars or worms among the barbed wire entanglements and trenches. The

point of view was detached and impersonal.

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 writhed and shrivelled, 10

The concluding stanza described Death picking up one of the
victims.

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. 11

In Insensibility he showed the strain to which the feelings
of the soldier were subjected.

Happy are men who yet before they are killed
Can let their veins run cold.
Whom no compassion fleers
Or makes their feet
Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers.

Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle
Now long since ironed,
Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned. 12

Exposure described men freezing to death in the trenches.

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,

10. Owen, Wilfred, Poems, Siegfried Sassoon, editor,
1920, p. 6.
11. Ibid., p. 6-7.
12. Ibid., p. 15.
Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles, Far off, like a dull rumor of some other war. What are we doing here?

To-night, His frost will fasten on this mud and us, Shrivelling many hands and 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. 13

Mental Cases and S. I. W. touched upon one of the most tragic aspects of warfare. In Mental Cases the "men whose minds the Dead have ravished" were described with horrible vividness.

Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows, Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish, Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked.

Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, Treading blood from lungs that have loved laughter. Always they must see these things and hear them, 14

S. I. W. told with more dramatic contrast of the youth who had left home to meet the enemy heroically but, unable to face horror and brutality day after day, had committed suicide.

Courage leaked, as sand From the best sandbags after years of rain. 15

Although the horror of warfare was apparent in these lines that have been quoted, there was a restraint about the work which was not always apparent in the work of other modern writers about the War.

13. Ibid., 18-19.
15. Ibid., p. 23.
The second point to be considered in the work of Wilfred Owen was his tenderness for doomed youth tricked by false idealism. In *Arms and the Boy* he saw a laughing curly-haired boy exposed to "cold steel...keen with hunger of blood." and "cartridges of fine zinc teeth." In *Disabled*, a legless veteran sat in a wheel-chair watching small boys at play and young girls strolling past. He remembered his own active youth, so full of life and joy, but he was condemned to spend his life in an institution doing the things the "rules consider wise" and taking "whatever pity they may dole." In *A Terre*, a blind, crippled soldier spoke of

> My glorious ribbons?—Ripped from my own back In scarlet shreds. (That's for your poetry book.)

In these quotations we see the author's appreciation of the nobility of these men victimized by circumstances over which they had no control. He also paid tribute to the closeness of the friendships between those who shared this suffering. Greater Love said:

> Red lips are not so red As the stained stones kissed by the English dead. Kindness of woeed and woeer Seems shame to their pure love. O Love, your eyes lose lure When I behold eyes blinded in your stead!

Your slender attitude Trembles not exquisite like limbs knife-skewed,

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16. Ibid., p. 10.
17. Ibid., p. 35.
18. Ibid., p. 28
Rolling and rolling there
Where God seems not to care;
Till the fierce love they bear
Cramps them in death’s extreme decrepitude. 19

In Apologia Pro Poemate Meo

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 welding20 of the rifle-thong.21

There was no hatred of the enemy, no expression of personal wrongs in Strange Meeting when the living soldier met his dead enemy. Both belonged to the army of doomed youth.

Courage was mine, and I had mastery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citidels 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.22

The avowed purpose of making clear the truth about modern warfare was brought out in Dulce et Decorum Est

19. Ibid., p. 3.
21. Ibid., p. 4.
22. Ibid., p. 1.
which concluded with these words:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gurgling from the froth-corrupted lungs
Bitten as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori. 23

The life of Wilfred Owen indicated that he was a normal young Briton of the upper middle class. He was an educated man, sensitive, sincere, sympathetic— not a radical who would view things extremely or with prejudice. The fact that he did see war, that he felt personal obligation to share in its hardships even though he disapproved of the ends of war, and that he responded to the inner urge to present in poetry the horrors of war in the deep truthfulness of experience, all indicate a profound sincerity. His clearly stated purpose was to tell the truth about modern warfare for the benefit of future generations. He depicted the horror of the battlefield from a detached point of view; he paid his tribute to the friendship formed in common suffering; and he showed friend and foe alike, the victims of a false idealism, the armies of doomed youth; he made the reader feel the splendid nobility with which men acted when facing a death which was not a glorious sacrifice, but a cruel slaughter in which "nations trek from progress." 24

23. Ibid., p. 15.
CHAPTER IV

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

The purpose of this chapter is to show by an examination of seven volumes of Siegfried Sassoon's poetry that the author's attitude toward the War changed. He entered the War with the feeling, which was common to most young British soldiers, that the War was an opportunity to serve one's country. At first he did not question the rights or wrongs of the war; it was the soldier's duty to fight for his country and to die a glorious death, if necessary. This attitude changed. First he showed a feeling of resentment against the slaughter and mutilation of youth and against the degradations of warfare; then he began to question the rights and wrongs of the situation which involved so many of the most highly civilized nations of the world and finally he was driven by his war experiences to an attitude of uncompromising pacifism, a condemnation of modern warfare and everything that tends to bring it about, or prolong it. He came to feel that the idealistic younger generation was being sacrificed to the pride and greed of the older. His bitter satiric attacks were directed toward high military and government officials, toward the press, and toward civilians who by their ignorance or lack of imagination failed to realize how horrible modern warfare
among civilized nations had become. He condemned a civilization preoccupied with materialistic gain and lacking in appreciation of higher values.

Life of Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Lorrainel Sassoon was born September 8, 1886. His father was a well-to-do country gentleman of Persian-Jewish ancestry, a member of the famous Sassoon family of wealthy merchants and bankers established at Toledo and Bagdad during the Middle Ages. His mother was an English woman, a painter and sister to Hamo Thornycroft, the sculptor. The father and mother separated while the three boys were still small children; the father died soon after. The children were educated at home by tutors and later in public schools. Siegfried attended Marlborough Grammar School, but his education was interrupted by severe illness, and he never distinguished himself as a scholar. Later he entered Clare College, Cambridge, but left without taking a degree. He was very fond of music and poetry, especially the poetry of Shelley, Masefield, and Hardy. From 1911-1916 he published some of his own work anonymously. Hunting and other out-of-door sports claimed much of his time.

On August 3, 1914, he enlisted, was wounded three times, received the Military Cross for bringing in wounded under fire, and rose to the rank of captain before the end

1. Spelled Loraine by some editors.
of the War. One of his brothers, Hamo, was killed at Gallipoli. During the War Siegfried Sassoon published war poetry in the Cambridge Magazine, a pacifist publication. In the spring of 1917 he was shot through the throat. There is a record that in July 1917 Second-Lieutenant Siegfried L. Sassoon, M.C., recommended for D. S. O., Third Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers, made a formal protest against the War, which he believed was being needlessly prolonged, by refusing to fight longer. He threw away his Military Cross and wanted to be court-martialed, but instead he was judged a mental case resulting from shell-shock and was sent to a war hospital for neurasthenic patients. Thus he was deprived of the opportunity of telling the high military officials what he thought of the War.

At the hospital Dr. Rivers took an interest in Sassoon and helped him to recover from the extremely nervous state into which his war experiences had driven him. After his dismissal from the hospital, he was sent to the Eastern Front for a short time and then back to France. He was made captain soon after this, but was severely wounded in the head and returned to a London hospital.

Since the War he has spent some time as a journalist in London, and much time in studying and writing poetry.
In 1920 he came to the United States to give lectures and readings. In 1933 he married Hester, the daughter of Sir Stephen Herbert Gatty. They have one son. Siegfried Sassoon is an ardent Pacifist and according to his friends, a modest, quiet individual greatly loved by the men who served with him during the War. An article by "Amicus" in The Spectator said,

He has been the friend of genius, the particular friend of impoverished genius; the most particular friend of genius unrecognized, genius nascent, genius early dead, and genius hypothetical though not proved. No poet of his generation has been better loved by his fellows.

Work of Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon has published much work in both prose and poetry. A great deal of his work first appeared anonymously or under various pseudonyms: Sigma Sashôn, Sigmund Sashôn, Pinchbeck Lyre, Saul Kain, A. Z. Three of his prose works classed as novels are: Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, and Sherston's Progress. In these, which critics regard as slightly fictionized autobiography, he called himself George Sherston. The first one, Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man, published in 1928 won the Hawthornden Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In 1939 he published his autobiography, The Old Century and Seven More Years.

2. Amicus, "Mr. Siegfried Sassoon," The Spectator, 146; 451-2, March 21, 1931.
This study will be concerned with the war poems from the following volumes: The Old Huntsman and Other Poems, 1917; Counter Attack and Other Poems, 1918; Picture Show, 1920; Satirical Poems, 1926; Heart's Journey, 1928; The Road to Ruin, 1933; Vigils, 1936. His war poems have never been published in exact chronological order; nevertheless they furnish an interesting study and show significant changes in the attitude of the author.

The Old Huntsman and Other Poems

The first poems of Siegfried Sassoon to be considered are those included in The Old Huntsman and Other Poems, first published in 1917. Not all of the poems in this early volume were concerned with warfare. The title poem, The Old Huntsman, gave the reminiscences of such a man. Many of the other poems were concerned with love, beauty, or other subjects not related to warfare. This study is concerned with the war poems which are of special interest because they represent the author's early reaction to the War. At first he saw it as a noble enterprise and a soldier's death as a heroic one. Then his own horrible experiences drove him to a bitter, satirical attitude; and ultimately in his later poems, he condemned warfare and became an extreme Pacifist. The war poems included in

The Old Huntsman and Other Poems will be considered for four points:

(1) Sassoon's characteristics as a poet: his mysticism, his humor, his love of beauty, his love of solitude.

(2) His representation of the War from the point of view of the soldier; his attitude toward the suffering which he felt and saw.

(3) His early acceptance without question of the right of the War and of the soldier's duty to fight for his country.

(4) The beginning of his feeling of resentment because people did not understand the horror of modern warfare; his conception of the World War as a crime against the youth of his generation.

In several of these early war poems the author's mysticism was apparent, for example: A Mystic as Soldier, The Redeemer, Secret Music, The Dragon and the Undying, and The Last Meeting. In The Redeemer he saw Christ in the face of the common soldier; in A Mystic as Soldier he said,

Now God is in the strife,
And I must seek Him there,
Where death outnumbers life,
And fury smites the air.

I walk the secret way
With anger in my brain.
O music through my clay,
When will you sound again?4
The Dragon and the Undying and The Last Meeting both expressed the feeling that the Dead live in the beauty of nature.

Yet, though the slain are homeless as the breeze, Vocal are they, like storm-bewildered seas. Their faces are the fair, unshrouded night, And planets are their eyes, their ageless dreams. Tenderly stooping earthward from their height, They wander in the dusk with chanting streams; And they are dawn-lit trees, with arms up-flung, To hail the burning heavens they left unsung.

From The Dragon and the Undying

In The Last Meeting a living soldier went to a lonely wooded hill to speak with the spirit of his friend who had been killed recently. We see the village street through which he passed, the people he saw by the way, the empty house where he could not find his friend, and the woods, "sanctuary, austerely built of trees," where he found his spirit.

Ah! but there was no need to call his name. He was beside me now, as swift as light. I knew him crushed to earth in scentless flowers, And lifted in the rapture of dark pines. "For now," he said, "my spirit has more eyes Than heaven has stars; and they are lit by love. My body is the magic of the world, And dawn and sunset flame with my spilt blood. My breath is the great wind, and I am filled With molten power and surge of the bright waves. That chant my doom along the ocean's edge." 7

The author's love of beauty which was a part of his mysticism was illustrated in: France, To Victory.

5. p. 15.
6. p. 100.
7. p. 101
Before the Battle, and in other poems. These descriptions of nature remind the reader of the descriptions of nature in Sassoon's prose works: *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, and Sherston's Progress.*

In his prose Siegfried Sassoon was still a poet as he was in

**Before the Battle**

Music of whispering trees  
Hushed by the broad-winged breeze  
Where shaken water gleams;  
And evening radiance falling  
With reedy bird-notes calling.  
O bear me safe through dark, you low-voiced streams.

I have no need to pray  
That fear may pass away;  
I scorn the growl and rumble of the fight  
That summons me from cool  
Silence of marsh and pool,  
And yellow lilies islanded in light.  
O river of stars and shadows, lead me through the night.

June 25, 1916.

Another aspect of the author's personality was apparent in *When I'm among a Blaze of Lights* in which he described an officer at a cocktail bar with "blaze of lights", "tawdry music and cigars", "women dawdling through delights", while his mind wandered far away in pre-war days to a garden at night with "elm trees nodding at the stars", or to a small firelit room with candles, "glowing pictures in the gloom","}

8. p. 75.
and "kindly books that hold me late."

Then someone says, "Another drink?"
And turns my living heart to stone. 9

This was the solitary spirit of George Sherston, Sassoon himself, in his autobiographical fiction, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer. Sherston was always glad to get away from the conversation of the men to be by himself and to read Far From the Madding Crowd, or The Return of the Native or Tess of the D'Urbervilles, because "Thomas Hardy's England was between its covers." 10 It was also the spirit of Siegfried Sassoon's youth as he described it in his autobiography, The Old Century and Seven More Years. 11

That Siegfried Sassoon possessed a sense of humor would be evident to anyone who read his prose work or the things his friends have written about him. Occasionally touches of this humor were apparent in his war verse as in Special-Constable

"Put out that light!" he cried.
But no one put it out.
No one replied,
And silence gulped his husky shout.

Against the door he blundered,
Knocked--but no one came.
Wrathful, he wondered;
"What's their number? What's their name?"

And the moon above the town
Through wisps of cloud looked down
On roofs and cowl's
And cats and constables and owls.

9. p. 18
10. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 64.
11. The Old Century and Seven More Years, p. 49.
He clutched his truncheon tight,
For he was bold that night,
And hurled it high
Up at the lit and lawless sky.

He bawled: "Then go to Hell!"
And, reeling home to bed,
Blue brilliance fell
From moons that danced within his head.12

Siegfried Sassoon, like Wilfred Owen, saw the war from
the point of view of the common soldier. Stand-to: Good
Friday Morning was a good example of the soldier's point
of view wishing for a "safe wound". In Conscripts he spoke
sarcastically of the "sickly, slender lord"13 who managed
to sneak home but praised "the kind, common ones"14 who
"stood and played the hero to the end".15 A Whispered Tale
was addressed to "good, simple soldier".16 In the Pink,
A Working Party, Died of Wounds, and The Hero all describe
the tragedy of the death of simple unimportant individuals;
but to Siegfried Sassoon such as these were the heroes and
victims of the War.

The fact that the poems were based upon actual ex-
periences may be seen by a comparison of the author's prose
and his poetry. Died of Wounds described the delirious
ravings of a wounded soldier; the same incident was related
in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer.17 The author's feelings,

12. pp. 37-38
13. p. 52.
14. p. 52.
15. p. 52.
17. Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 123.
enraged by a sign he saw in a military doctor's office, were expressed both in his prose work\textsuperscript{18} and in his verse. Both these accounts show the author's resentment of the destruction and mutilation of youth.

**Arms and the Man**

Young Croesus went to pay his call
On Colonel Sawbones, Caxton Hall:
And, though his wound was healed and mended,
He hoped he'd get his leave extended.

The waiting-room was dark and bare.
He eyed a neat-framed notice there
Above the fireplace hung to show
Disabled hewers where to go
For arms and legs; with scale of price,
And words of dignified advice
How officers could get them free.

Elbow or shoulder, hip or knee,—
Two arms, two legs, though all were lost,
They'd be restored him free of cost.

Then a Girl-Guide looked in to say,
"Will Captain Croesus come this way?"\textsuperscript{19}

That Siegfried Sassoon entered the war feeling that he was serving his country in a worthy cause but was driven by his experiences to violent pacifism and hatred of the War was shown in this volume. The war attitude expressed in *Absolution* and *Brothers* showed a feeling that the War was being fought for a noble purpose and that there was something glorious about dying for one's country.

\textsuperscript{18} Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{19} P. 46.
Absolution

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.
We are the happy legion, for we know
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

There was an hour when we were loth to part
From life we longed to share no less than others.
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers? 20

At Carnoy showed a questioning spirit, a doubt of the ultimate values of the War, a feeling of the wrongness of the world at war.

At Carnoy

Down in the hollow there's the whole Brigade
Camped in four groups: through twilight falling slow
I hear a sound of mouth-organs, ill-played,
And murmur of voices, gruff, confused, and low.
Crouched among thistle-tufts I've watched the glow
Of a blurred orange sunset flare and fade;
And I'm content. To-morrow we must go
To take some cursed wood... O world God made! 21

July 3, 1916.

"Blighters", "They", and The Tombstone-Maker showed bitterness, satire, resentment because people did not understand what war really meant.

"They"

The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back
"They will not be the same; for they'll have fought

21. p. 32.
"In a just cause: they lead the last attack
"On Anti-Christ; their comrade's blood has bought
"New right to breed an honourable race.
"They have challenged Death and dared him face to face!"

"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply
"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
"Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
"And Bert's gone siphilitic: you'll not find
"A chap who's served that hasn't found some change."
And the Bishop said: "The ways of God are strange!"22

The change in attitude toward the War was recorded in
the author's prose works. In Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man
George Sherston said, "I hadn't begun to question the rights
and wrongs of the War then." In Memoirs of an Infantry
Officer he said, "I wanted the War to be an impressive ex-
perience--terrible, but not horrible enough to interfere
with my heroic emotions."24 A few months later he said,

I was losing my belief in the War, and I longed
for mental acquiescence--to be like young Patterson,
who had come out to fight for his country undoubting,
who could still kneel by his bed and say his simple
prayers, steadfastly believing that he was in the
Field Artillery to make the world a better place.
I had believed like that, once upon a time, but now
the only prayer which seemed worth uttering was
Omar Khayyám's:

For all the Sin wherewith the face of Man
Is blackened--Man's forgiveness give--and take.25

22. p. 35.
Counter Attack and Other Poems

This volume published in 1918 consisted of forty short poems, almost all of them bitter satiric attacks upon warfare. The author had by this time become convinced that there was nothing glorious about modern warfare; he saw it as a degrading, destructive force. That he was the spokesman of doomed youth, of the Dead crying out against this crime against civilization was perhaps best revealed by the following poems: Prelude: The Troops, Suicide in the Trenches, Autumn, and The Dream.

Prelude: the Troops

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten down
The stale despair of night, must now renew
Their desolation in the truce of dawn,
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

Yet these, who cling to life with stubborn hands,
Can grin through storms of death and find a gap
In the clawed, cruel tangles of his defence.
They march from safety, and the bird-sung joy
Of grass-green thickets, to the land where all
Is ruin, and nothing blossoms but the sky
That hastens over them where they endure
Sad, smoking, flat horizons, reeking woods,
And foundered trench-lines volleying doom for doom.

O my brave brown companions, when your souls
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,
Death will stand grieving in that field of war
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.

26. Sassoon, Siegfried, Counter-Attack and Other Poems,
And through some mooned Valhalla there will pass
Battalions and battalions, scarred from hell;
The unreturning army that was youth;
The legions who have suffered and are dust. 27

Suicide in the Trenches concluded with these words:

You snug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go. 28

In Autumn he spoke to "martyred youth" and said, "The bur-
den of your wrongs is on my head." 29 The Dream showed his
feelings as an officer when he had to lead his men into
battle.

The secret burden that is always mine?—
Pride in their courage; pity for their distress;
And burning bitterness
That I must take them to the accursed Line.

And I must lead them nearer day, by day,
To the foul beast of war that bludgeons life. 30

The horror of warfare and the mental suffering which
it produced were evident in Attack, Counter-Attack, and
Repression of War Experience. The author's purpose in
making this picture vivid was to make his readers realize
what, in actuality, modern warfare has become.

The bitterness of Siegfried Sassoon's satiric attacks
was evident in Wirers, Joy-bells, Remorse, Does it Matter?
and To Any Dead Officer. The last was a telephone conversa-
tion to Heaven which concluded thus:

27. pp. 9-10.
28. p. 31.
29. p. 48.
Next week the bloody Roll of Honour said
"Wounded and missing"--(That's the thing to do

When lads are left in shell-holes dying slow,
With nothing but blank sky and wounds that ache,
Moaning for water till they know
It's night, and then it's not worth while to wake!

Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,
And tell Him that our Politicians swear
They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod
Under the Heel of England....Are you there?...
Yes...and the War won't end for at least two years;
But we've got stacks of men....I'm blind with tears,
Staring into the dark. Cheerio!
I wish they'd killed you in a decent show.31

There were also in this book, Counter-Attack and Other Poems, attacks upon the press for their casual comments, their false impressions, their failure to state the real truth of what was happening. The Effect showed the violent anger of a soldier who had seen his friends and companions killed in great numbers and then read the newspaper's casual comment upon the fact. The sarcasm was biting as it is in Fight to a Finish and Editorial Impressions which likewise were attacks on the press. These poems illustrated what Louis Untermeyer called Sassoon's "blasts of shattering disillusion and still more shattering pity".32

In The Fathers and Base Details the author attacked old men at home for their lack of understanding; and in Glory of Women and Their Frailty he criticized women for their personal

31. p. 41-42.
attitude toward warfare—they did not care what happened to anyone else so long as "he" was all right. In Survivors Sassoon satirized the casual visitors to Craiglockhart hospital for their lack of understanding of the men whose minds were tortured into insanity by the horrors they had seen. In The General he attacked a general whose blunder had cost the lives of many men. This incident was also related very briefly in Memoirs of an Infantry Officer when he said, "our Second Battalion had been almost wiped out ten days ago because the Division General had ordered an impossible attack on a local objective". 33

That Siegfried Sassoon's heart was always with his men and that as an officer he hated to take them into battle has already been illustrated by The Dream; 34 the same feeling was evident in other poems: Twelve Months After, Sick Leave, and Banishment. Sick Leave concluded with

In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
"When are you going out to them again?
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?" 35

Banishment seemed almost an explanation of his defiance of the military authorities, his failure to accomplish anything, and his return to the front to be with the men whom

34. Quoted on page 37 this work.
35. p. 43.
he had loved.

Banishment

I am banished from the patient men who fight.
They smote my heart to pity, built my pride.
Shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side,
They trudged away from life's broad weals of light.
Their wrongs were mine; and ever in my sight
They went arrayed in honour. But they died,--
Not one by one; and mutinous I cried
To those who sent them out into the night.

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
To free them from the pit where they must dwell
In outcast gloom convulsed and jagged and riven
By grappling guns. Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.

Robert Graves in Good-Bye to All That spoke of
Sassoon's consideration of the men under him thus:

Siegfried, for instance, on (I think) the day before
the Fricourt attack. The attack had been rehearsed
for a week over dummy trenches in the back areas
until the whole performance was perfect, in fact
static. Siegfried was told to rehearse once more.
Instead, he led his platoon into a wood and read to
them--nothing military or literary, just the London
Mail. Though the London Mail was not in his Time,
Siegfried thought that the men would enjoy the
"Things We Want to Know" column.

The author's sincere conviction that warfare was a
degrading and destructive force which must be condemned by
civilized people was made clear in his prose, and in the
conversations which he had with his friends. In Sherston's
Progress he said:

36. p. 44.
37. This Generation, Anderson and Walton, editors, quoting
Good-bye to All That, p. 315.
Worst of all, in the disintegration of those qualities through which they had been so gallant and selfless and uncomplaining—this, in the finer types of men, was the unspeakable tragedy of shell shock; it was in this that their humanity had been outraged by those explosives which were sanctioned and glorified by the Churches; it was thus that their self-sacrifice was mocked and maltreated—they, who in the name of righteousness had been sent out to maim and slaughter their fellow men. In the name of civilization these soldiers had been martyred, and it remained for civilization to prove that their martyrdom wasn't a dirty swindle.

Robert Nichols quoted Sassoon as saying,

Let no one ever from henceforth say a word in any way countenancing war. It is dangerous even to speak of how here and there the individual may gain some hardship of soul by it. For war is hell and those who institute it are criminals. Were there anything to say for it, it should not be said, for its spiritual disasters far outweigh any of its advantages.

In speaking of himself and Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves made their later feeling about the War perfectly clear. He said:

The view we had of the war was now non-political. We no longer saw it as a war between trade-rivals; its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.

Robert Nichols, also a soldier and a poet, said of Counter-Attack:

This book (in consequence almost wholly of these bitter poems) enjoyed a remarkable success with the soldiers fighting in France. One met it everywhere. "Hello, you know Siegfried Sassoon then,

38. Sherston's Progress, p. 72.
40. This Generation, Anderson and Walton, editors, quoting Robert Graves in Good-Bye to All That, p. 312.
do you? Well, tell him for me that the more he lays it on thick to those who don't realize the war the better. That's the stuff we want. We're fed up with the old men's death-or-glory stunt."

The opinions of Siegfried Sassoon's friends and the opinions of the soldiers would indicate that he was the spokesman of the living fighting man as well as the spokesman of the dead and the injured.

The poems in the two volumes already discussed showed the author's early attitude of accepting the War and his change to bitter condemnation of modern warfare. The study of four of his volumes published since the war will attempt to show the following points:

(1) The author was still the spokesman of the Dead, intent upon carrying their message of warning to the living.

(2) He condemned some high government and military officials for blundering, mismanagement, and needlessly prolonging the War.

(3) He resented the erection of war memorials to the Dead by people who had failed to understand or profit by the lesson which the World War should have taught them.

(4) He became disgusted with a civilization concerned with materialistic gain and indifferent to higher values.

41. Nichols, Robert, introduction to Counter-Attack, p. 5.
Picture-Show

There were forty-one short poems in this collection, which was published in 1920; but not all of them were concerned with war. There were enough, however, on this subject to show that the author had not forgotten the War and did not intend to let his readers forget. Concert Party, Night on the Convoy, The Dug-out, Battalion-Relief, and In an Underground Dressing-Station were pictures of life of a soldier in active service. In Aftermath he said

Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.

Look up and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never forget.

The bitterness and sarcasm were best illustrated by Memorial Tablet in which he was spokesman of a dead soldier.

Memorial Tablet
(Great War)

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,
(Under Lord Derby's Scheme). I died in hell—
(They called it Passchendaele). My wound was slight,
And I was hobbling back; and then a shell
Burst slick upon the duck-boards: so I fell
Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.

At sermon-time, while Squire is in his pew,
He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare;
For, though low down upon the list, I'm there;
'In proud and glorious memory'...that's my due.

Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:
I suffered anguish that he's never guessed.
Once I came home on leave: and then went west...
What greater glory could a man desire?

42. Sassoon, Siegfried, Picture-Show, N.Y., E.P. Dutton, 1920
43. pp. 47-48
44. p. 12.
Satirical Poems

Satirical Poems was first published in 1926; a later edition with five new poems added appeared in 1933. The poem of greatest interest to this study was On Reading the War Diary of a Defunct Ambassador which poured forth with unrestrained sarcasm all of the author's bitter feeling that the World War was a sacrifice of idealistic youth to the stupidity and materialistic interests of the older generation.

On Reading the War Diary of a Defunct Ambassador

So that's your Diary—that's your private mind
Translated into shirt-sleeved History. That
Is what diplomacy has left behind
For after-ages to peruse, and find
What passed beneath your elegant silk-hat.

You were a fine old gentleman; compact
Of shrewdness, charm, refinement and finesse.
Impeccable in breeding, taste and dress,
No diplomatic quality you lacked—
No title of ambassadorial tact.

I can imagine you among "the guns",
Urbanely peppering partridge, grouse, or pheasant—
Guest of those infinitely privileged ones
Whose lives are padded, petrified, and pleasant.
I visualize you feeding off gold plate
And gossiping on grave affairs of State.

Now you're defunct; your gossip's gravely printed;
The world discovers where you lunched and dined
On such and such a day; and what was hinted
By ministers and generals far behind
The all-important conflict, carnage-tinted.

The world can read the rumors that you gleaned
From various Fronts; the well-known Names you met;
Each conference you attended and convened;
And (at appropriate moments) what you ate.
Thus (if the world's acute) it can derive
Your self, exact, uncensored and alive.

The world will find no pity in your pages;
No exercise of spirit worthy of mention;
Only a public-funeral grief-convention;
And all the circumspection of the ages.
But I, for one, am grateful, overjoyed,
And unindignant that your punctual pen
Should have been so constructively employed
In manifesting to unprivileged men
The visionless officialized fatuity
That once kept Europe safe for Perpetuity.46

The Heart's Journey47

The Heart's Journey was first published in 1928.

Little of the poetry in this volume was concerned with warfare. In To One Who Was with Me in the War two ex-soldiers recalled their war experiences which seemed very far away. On Passing the New Menin Gate showed the feeling of bitter resentment which war-memorials aroused in the author.

On Passing the New Menin Gate

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,—
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?
Crudely renewed, the Salient holds its own.
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
The armies who endured this sullen swamp.

46. pp. 11-12.
Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride 'Their name liveth forever,' the Gateway claims. Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.

The Road to Ruin

This little volume, published in 1933, contained only six short poems, every one of them a bitter condemnation of the age. The author showed himself disillusioned and disgusted with a world preoccupied with materialistic gain. The world had failed to learn a lesson from the World War and was plunging ahead in a mad rush for wealth without regard for higher values.

News from the War-after-next

The self-appointed Representative
Of Anti-Christ in Europe having been chosen
As War Dictator, we are pledged to live
With Violence, Greed, and Ignorance as those in Controllership of Life....The microphone Transmits the creed of Anti-Christ alone.

The last Idealist was lynched this morning
By the Beelzebub's Cathedral congregation--
A most impressive and appropriate warning To all who would debratalize the Nation.

Our dago enemies having tried to kill us
By every method hitherto perfected,
We launch to-morrow our great new Bacillus,
And an overwhelming victory is expected.
Thus, Moloch willing, we inaugurate
A super-savage Mammonistic State. 50

48. p. 31.
49. Sassoon, Siegfried, The Road to Ruin, London: Faber and Faber, 1933.
50. p. 21.
Two of the poems in this volume were indicative of the author's resentment at the erection of war-memorials in a country which persisted in the continuation of practices which would bring about another war. At the Cenotaph and An Unveiling were both scathing denunciations of empty words in praise of the dead while governments continued to move on motivated by the desire to dominate and by greed for wealth.

An Unveiling

The President's oration ended thus:

'Not vainly London's War-gassed victims perished.
We are a part of them, and they of us:
As such they will perpetually be cherished.
Not many of them did much; but all that did what
They could, who stood like warriors at their post
(Even when too young to walk). This hallowed spot
Commemorates a proud, though poisoned host.

We honor here'(he paused)' our Million Dead;
Who, as a living poet has nobly said,
"Are now forever London". Our bequest
Is to rebuild, for What-they-died-for's sake,
A bomb-proof roofed Metropolis, and to make
Gas-drill compulsory. Dulce et decorum est....'51

The study of Siegfried Sassoon's work has so far been divided into two groups: first, the war poems published 1917-18; second, the war poetry published between 1920-1933. Now it is necessary to examine briefly his last volume, Vigils, 1936. A different spirit, one of weariness and resignation, is evident in this volume. Since the author is still living and still writing, it cannot be regarded as his final attitude toward warfare; but it certainly

51. p. 23.
embodies a mood.

Vigils

The latest volume of Sassoon's poetry, published in 1936, has not been received with much enthusiasm by critics. A review in The New Republic said, "The retirement is evident in the poems, which are contemplative, resigned and quite lifeless." He found "scarcely three lines of vivid seeing or strong feeling by a man who wrote some of the best poems that have survived the War." A review in Poetry found it "poetry sincere, pathetic, grey, monotonous, and deadening." William Rose Benét in the Saturday Review of Literature was slightly more charitable. He said, "Sassoon's work is always worth reading, but since he is now too overcome by life to imbue his poems with that ironic passion that made his verse against war so great, he cannot interest us as much as he did then." This slender little volume was indeed very different in tone from the violent attacks of previous works. Two poems, War Experience, and Ex-Service, were of interest in this study. In them the

War seemed far away.

The darkness of their dying
Grows one with War recorded;
Whose swindled ghosts are crying
From shell-holes in the past,
Our deeds with lies are lauded,
Our bones with wrongs rewarded.
Dream voices these—denying
Dud laurels to the last. 56

--from "Ex-Service"

Summary

The work of Siegfried Sassoon shows a man of many moods. He entered the war a mystic, a lover of music, of beauty, of nature, of out-of-door sports. Coming from a well-to-do, influential family he enlisted with a carefree conventional attitude that he was doing a glorious service for his country. Later he began to question the rights and wrongs of warfare, but he still wanted to feel that there was something splendid and glorious about it. Finally his feeling that it was horrible and revolting hardened into a definite conviction that modern warfare among civilized people was a senseless sacrifice of youth, that people were deluded by false ideals, that the whole thing was blundering, mismanaged, and needlessly prolonged. He became openly defiant and bitterly satirical; he became the spokesman of the Dead, the sacrificed youth, and the crippled ex-soldier. Since the War he has continued to speak for the men whose lives were sacrificed, many of them his friends, and to

56. Vigils, p. 16.
attack the press, statesmen, bishops, high officials, and peaceful civilians who have not sufficient imagination to understand the truth about warfare. He bitterly condemned an age too engrossed with interest in material gain to appreciate higher values or to realize the gigantic destructive force of modern mechanized warfare.
CHAPTER V

SIX SOLDIER POETS

Although Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon are the two most important war poets, there are many more, some of whom must be considered in support of the thesis of this paper. Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Herbert Read, Wilfred Gibson, Edmund Blunden, and Richard Aldington all saw service during the War and all left a record of their experience in poetry.

This chapter will be devoted to an examination of the verses of these six men. No attempt will be made at a complete study of each man, but each will be considered for the following points: (1) his life, especially his service during the World War, (2) his reaction to the War as it was expressed in his early war verse, (3) his reaction to war as it was expressed in poetry written after the War.

Robert Graves

Robert Graves was born July 26, 1895, in London. His father, who wrote some poetry, was an inspector of schools; and his mother was German. He attended preparatory schools and spent vacations on the continent and in Wales. In 1914 he left Charterhouse School to join the Royal Welch
Fusiliers and served in the same regiment with Siegfried Sassoon. The two men were close friends. When Robert Graves was reported dead Siegfried Sassoon wrote a poem, "To His Dead Body." Robert Graves himself wrote one, "Escape," about the incident. Newspapers told the story as follows: "Graves was picked up for dead," said Masefield. "He heard them say he was dead, and he called out: 'I'm not dead. I'm damned if I'll die.' And he didn't. He wrote a poem about it." After this severe wound Robert Graves did not return to the service. He resumed his studies at the close of the War and took his degree from Oxford. He has written much poetry. Because of his wife's health he went to Egypt, and taught for a short time in the University of Cairo; later he returned to England. His time has been occupied recently with the establishment of the Seizin Press which makes a specialty of rare books and special editions. As a critic, editor, and poet he has been active.

Little of his bitterness toward the War has been expressed in Robert Graves' poetry; that was reserved for his prose autobiography, Good-Bye to All That, which did not appear until 1929. But it Still Goes On, was a continuation because of the protest which the autobiography brought forth.

This study is concerned with the war poems in Fairies and Fusiliers, published in 1917, and Collected Poems, 1938.

Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon wrote some of their poetry together. Their common feeling about the War and their different reactions in poetry were explained by Robert Graves.

The view we had of the war was now non-political. We no longer saw it as a war between trade-rivals; its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.

He made clear that in their verse they were attempting to show war and peace in contrast.

We defined the war in our poems by making contrasted definitions of peace. With Siegfried it was hunting and nature and music and pastoral scenes; with me it was chiefly children. When I was in France I used to spend much of my spare time playing with the French children of the villages in which I was billeted. I put them into my poems, and my own childhood at Harlech. I called my book *Fairies and Fusiliers*; and dedicated it to the regiment.

These statements showed clearly that the two men felt the same about the War; but their reactions in poetry were different.

*Fairies and Fusiliers*: The volume called *Fairies and Fusiliers* appeared in 1917. The first poem, *To an Ungentle Critic*, warned the reader that the author was not attempting anything new. He said:

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I shall scrawl
Just what I fancy as I strike it,
Fairies and Fusiliers, and all
Old broken knock-kneed thought will crawl
Across my verse in the classic way.
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2. *This Generation*, p. 312, quoting *Good-Bye to All That.*
3. Ibid., p. 312.
The author's own words made clear his attitude. He was not attempting anything new; he was writing whatever his fancy dictated; he was defining war by contrasted definitions of peace in which children were an important interest. The greater part of the volume was taken up by the children in playful and delightful escape poetry.

Of the few short poems which mentioned the War, several were intended for friends: Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Nichols, D. C. T., and Charles Hamilton Sorley. These poems addressed to friends contained no bitter feeling about warfare and were, for the most part, reminiscent of happier days. Not Dead was written after the death of D. C. T. and indicated a feeling of his presence in nature. Letter to S. S. and A Bough of Nonsense were imaginative verses picturing himself and Siegfried Sassoon meeting and writing verses together. A Bough of Nonsense was intended to cheer Sassoon who had indicated in a letter that he was "nine parts dead" after the Somme fighting.5

Escape was based upon Robert Graves' own narrow escape. Severely wounded, he was at first reported killed, later wounded. He playfully described his experiences cramming "army biscuits smeared with ration jam",6 which he had spread with morphia, into the mouth of Cerberus and slipping

5. Graves, Robert, Collected Poems, xviii; and Anderson and Walton, editors, This Generation, p. 310, quoting Good-bye to All That.
back from the realm of Pluto.

Two Fusiliers expressed the feeling so often expressed by war poets that the suffering of war promoted a feeling of friendship which surpassed ordinary friendship.

And have we done with War at last?
Well, we've been lucky devils both,
And there's no need of pledge or oath
To bind our lovely friendship fast,
By firmer stuff
Close bound enough.

By wire and wood and stake we're bound,
By Fricourt and by Festubert,
By whipping rain, by the sun's glare,
By all the misery and loud sound,
By a Spring day,
By Picard clay.

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the red bond of blood,
By friendship, blossoming from mud,
By Death: we faced him, and we found
Beauty in Death,
In dead men breath. 7

Although his autobiography, Good-bye to All That, proved that Robert Graves hated the War and bitterly condemned it, he did not use his poetry as a medium for expressing this hatred; his early war verses were in the nature of escape poetry.

Collected Poems: In Collected Poems, published in 1938, appeared a poem, Recalling War, which began with these words:

Entrance and exit wounds are silvered clean,
The track aches only when the rain reminds.

7. Ibid., p. 19.
The one-legged man forgets his leg of wood,  
The one-armed man his jointed wooden arm.  
The blinded man sees with his ears and hands  
As much or more than once with both his eyes,  
Their war was fought these twenty years ago  
And now assumes the nature-look of time,  
As when the morning traveller turns and views  
His wild night-stumbling carved into a hill.

What, then was war? No mere discord of flags  
But an infection of the common sky  
That sagged ominously upon the earth  
Even when the season was the airiest May.  
Down pressed the sky and we, oppressed, thrust out  
Boastful tongue, clenched fist and valiant yard.  
Natural infirmities were out of mode,  
For Death was young again: patron alone  
Of healthy dying, premature fate-spasm.

and concluded with:

War was return of earth to ugly earth,  
War was foundering of sublimities,  
Extinction of each happy art and faith  
By which the world had still kept head in air,  
Protesting logic or protesting love,  
Until the unendurable moment struck—  
The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

And we recall the merry ways of guns—  
Nibbling the walls of factory and church  
Like a child, piecrust; felling groves of trees  
Like a child, dandelions with a switch!  
Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,  
Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall:  
A sight to be recalled in elder days  
When learnedly the future we devote  
To yet more boastful visions of despair.8

The author's condemnation of warfare and his feeling  
of despair were apparent in this poem, which represented  
his later attitude.

Robert Nichols

Robert Nichols was born September 6, 1893, at Shanklin in the Isle of Wight of parents in comfortable circumstances. He attended Trinity College, Oxford, one year, 1913-14, and then enlisted, becoming a second-lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery. His brief service at the front in the autumn of 1915 ended in a five-months stay at the hospital. He never returned to active duty but served with the Ministry of Labour and with the British Mission in New York City. After the War he resumed his studies. From 1921-24 he was Professor of English Literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo. He is best known for his dramatic work, some of which was written in collaboration with other writers.

The poems considered here were included in three volumes: Invocation: War Poems (1915); Ardours and Endurances (1917); and Aurelia and Other Poems (1920).

Invocation: The war poems in Invocation, published in 1915, were characterized by the attitude of a soldier who was glad to serve his country, who believed in the justice of the cause for which he was fighting, and who gloried in his ability to meet the test. This spirit was expressed in the title poem.
Invocation

Courage born of Fire and Steel,
   Thee I invoke, thee I desire
Who constant holdst the hearts that reel
   Before the steel, beneath the fire.
   . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Not possibly to suffer ill,
   A world-complacent sacrifice,
But happy and rebellious still
   To prove Faith's courage can suffice.

Death to waylay and slay stalks forth...
   One puny out of thousands more
I go to slay the Giants of Wrath,
   Or perish as men have before.

Forward I ride. Guns must to guns
   Intone a final requiem
That those who forged yon mighty ones
   May learn 'tis more to bury them. 9

Ardours and Endurances: In Ardours and Endurances,
published in 1917, much the same spirit was apparent.

Vivid description characterized some of this poetry; for
example, The Day's March and The Assault. The horror of
war was not emphasized but the discomfort, the confusion,
and the noise were.

Go on. Go.
Bullets. Mud. Stumbling and skating.
My voice's strangled shout:
   "Steady pace, boys!"
   The still fight: gladness.
   "Look, sir. Look out!"
Half Half Bunched Figures waiting.
Revolver levelled quick!
Flick! Flick!
Red as blood.
Germans. Germans.
Good! O Good!
Cool madness. 10

9. Invocation, pp. 11-12.
The author expressed his feelings for his fellow-soldiers, both living and dead. *Sonnet: Our Dead* showed that the author was a mystic, seeing the spirit of his dead comrades in the beauty of nature.

*Sonnet: Our Dead*

They have not gone from us. O no! they are
The inmost essence of each thing that is
Perfect for us; they flame in every star;
The trees are emerald with their presences.
They are not gone from us; they do not roam
The flaw and turmoil of the lower deep,
But have now made the whole wide world their home,
And in its loneliness themselves they steep.

They fail not ever; theirs is the diurn
Splendour of sunny hill and forest grave;
In every rainbow's glittering drop they burn;
They dazzle in the massed cloud's architrave;
They chant on every wind, and they return
In the long roll of every deep blue wave. 11

**Fulfilment** was one of the many poems written during the War to express the feeling of strong affection growing out of common suffering.

The prevailing spirit in *Ardours and Endurances* was much the same as in *Invocation*. The soldier was still unafraid, heroic, proud of his mission. This spirit was evident in such poems as: *Boy, Nearer, In the Grass: Halt by Roadside, The Day's March*, and *Fulfilment*.

The Soldier's is a name none recognize,
Saving his fellows. Deeds are all his flower.
He lives, he toils, he suffers, and he dies,
And if not all in vain this is his dower:

11. p. 66.
The Soldier is the Martyr of a nation,
Expresses but is subject to its will;
His is the Pride ennobles Resignation,
As his the rebel Spirit-to-fulfil.

--from "Boy"

The poems in Ardours and Endurances, typical of the early poems of the War, were characterized by: (1) belief in the justice of the cause, (2) appreciation of the close friendships with fellow soldiers, (3) a mystical attitude toward the dead, (4) joy in the ability to give oneself to a noble cause.

Aurelia and Other Poems: In Aurelia and Other Poems, published in 1920, there was a different spirit. Four poems were addressed to Siegfried Sassoon. They were: Casualty, The Secret, Burial Party at Paschaendael, and Dawn on the Somme. Casualty and The Secret expressed the feeling so evident in the work of all soldier poets—the great love of fellow soldiers, the strong ties of friendship growing out of common suffering. Dawn on the Somme showed the spirit of the dead heroes in the beauty of the rising sun.

Burial Party at Paschaendael described with horrible vividness the collecting of dead bodies after a battle which was wholesale slaughter. The horror of the situation was brought out by the snatches of conversation of the men.
who were bringing in the dead bodies. One of the younger men, new at the job, was overcome with nausea when he discovered the body of his pal. There was no longer the exultation of youth in these lines:

The writhe waste is dumb,
Defiled, defaced, shamed in its hopelessness.
This is the Ultimate Hell, the Wilderness
To which all Youth, Laughter, and Love must come:
Twelve graves brutishly scraped among the slime.
If Christ were here! If Christ could seem to have been!

In place of youthful exultation there was a feeling of frustration, or at least of lack of understanding of any ultimate values in this slaughter. The conclusion of the poem spoke of, "Mothers! now made the saddest word in speech--." The musing about mothers and about rows of crosses was interrupted by the comments of the men who were throwing mangled bodies into hastily dug graves. Then the padre began the service, "'I am the Resurrection and the Life,'" The reader was left with the feeling of the hopelessness of trying to rationalize such a scene.

These later poems showed none of the author's earlier feeling that war was a challenge to youth which he glorified in meeting heroically. He addressed the poems to Siegfried Sassoon, perhaps as an indication of the latter's influence. Robert Nichols wrote the introduction to Siegfried

13. p. 76.
14. p. 77.
15. p. 77.
Sassoon's Counter-Attack in 1918. In that introduction he referred to a conversation with Sassoon on the subject of certain exalted poems in Ardours and Endurances. This showed that the two men had discussed the attitude toward war in poetry. It seems probable that Robert Nichols, who saw very brief service at the front, was influenced in his later attitude by Siegfried Sassoon and other men who had endured a much longer period of service and in consequence had seen much of warfare which Nichols had escaped. Apparently Robert Nichols came to the realization that his own youth-ful war experiences were inadequate. His later attitude indicated his conception of warfare as a gigantic destructive force.

Robert Nichols' attitude toward war as expressed in poetry may be summed up as follows: his early poetry was characterized by the feeling that war was an opportunity for youth to show its strength and heroism, an opportunity to dedicate itself to a noble cause; his later poetry lacked this spirit and showed a grim realization of war as a destructive force which he was unable to rationalize into anything noble or heroic, or even of ultimate value to mankind.
Herbert Read was born December 4, 1893, in Yorkshire, where his father was a farmer. He attended boarding school, worked in a bank, and matriculated at the University of Leeds. In 1914 he left college to enlist, and he served in the army until 1919. He rose to the rank of captain, received the Military Cross, and was made companion of the Distinguished Service Order. Since the War he has held several important positions and has attained prominence as a man of letters. In 1922 he became assistant at Victoria and Albert Museum, and in 1931 Professor at Edinburgh University. He is a critic of art and literature, and an editor and poet.

This study was concerned with the war poems: (1) Naked Warriors, published in 1919; and (2) The End of a War, published in 1933. All selections were made from the Collected edition, Poems 1914-1934.

Naked Warriors: In the free verse of Herbert Read war was depicted as a gigantic machine ruthlessly crushing mankind, a senseless monster destroying youth for no good purpose. In Kneeshaw Goes to War he said:

Kneeshaw felt himself
A cog in some great evil engine,
Unwilling, but revolved tempestuously
By unseen springs.
He plunged with listless mind
Into the black horror.

16. Read, Herbert, Poems 1914-34, p. 33-34.
There was no hatred of the enemy expressed; they too were victims of this gigantic force. In Liedholz there was actual comradeship between the soldier and his German captive with whom he chatted about home, and family, as well as about "Beethoven, Nietzsche and the International." My Company showed the officer's love for his men and his feeling of revolt at the cruelty they must suffer, caught helplessly in this giant mechanism.

My men, my modern Christs,
Your bloody agony confronts the world.

A man of mine
   lies on the wire.
It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.

A man of mine
   lies on the wire;
And he will rot
And first his lips
The worms will eat.

It is not thus I would have him kissed,
But with the warm passionate lips
Of his comrade here.

I can assume
A giant attitude and godlike mood,
And then detachedly regard
All riots, conflicts and collisions.

The men I've lived with
Lurch suddenly into a far perspective;
They distantly gather like a dark cloud of birds.
In the autumn sky.

Urged by some unanimous
Volition of fate,
Clouds clash in opposition;
The sky quivers, the dead descend;
Earth yawns.

17. Read, Herbert, Poems 1914-34, p. 41.
They are all of one species.

From my giant attitude,
In godlike mood,
I laugh till space is filled
With hellish merriment.

Then again I assume
My human docility,
Bow my head
And share their doom. 18

The End of a War: The End of a War was composed of three parts: I Meditations of the Dying German Officer, II Dialogue between the Body and Soul of the Murdered Girl, and III Meditation of the Waking English Officer. The first, as the title suggested, gave the thoughts of a wounded German officer who had betrayed an English corporal into a trap, and was murdered, as he expected, by the corporal, who returned for vengeance. The second poem gave the conversation between the body and the soul of a French girl whose murdered body was found by English soldiers while they were searching a gardener's cottage for fuel. The soul said:

War has victims beyond the bands bonded to slaughter. War moves with armoured wheels across the quivering flesh and patient limbs of all life's labile fronds. 19

Part III of this poem gave the meditations of a living English officer on the morning of November 11, 1918. After the realization that at last there was peace, he thought

19. Ibid., p. 63.
of the dead.

O God, the dead. How can God's bell
ring out from that unholy ambush?
That tower of death! In excess of horror
war died. The nerve was broken
frayed men fought obscenely then: there was no fair joy
No glory in the strife, no blessed wrath.
Man's mind cannot excel
mechanic might except in savage sin.
Our broken bodies oiled the engines: mind was grit. 20

He explained that he "answered no call" 21 and "felt no
hate"; 22 he was only a tiny speck in the great avalanche.

our felt dependence on a ruling few:
the world madness: the wild plunge:
The avalanche and I myself a twig
torn from its mother soil
and to the chaos rendered. 23

He continued his meditations on the relation of the indi-
vidual to the universe; on the fact that the German
officer who had deceived him was dead, while he himself was
living; and on his feelings about the War.

When first this fury caught us, then
I vowed devotion to the rights of men
would fight for peace once it came again
from this unwilling war pass gallantly
to wars of will and justice.
That was before I had faced death
day in day out, before hope had sunk
to a little pool of bitterness.
Now I see, either the world in mechanic force
and this the last tragic act, portending
endless hate and blind reversion
back to the tents and healthy lusts
of animal men: or we act
God's purpose in an obscure way.

20. Poems 1914-34, pp. 69.
21. p. 69.
22. p. 69.
23. p. 69.
Evil can only to the Reason stand
in scheme or scope beyond the human mind.24

The three parts of this poem were based upon an incident
that happened to an English officer on November 10, 1918,
and on his meditations the following morning. Herbert Read
gave his own explanation of his choice of subject for this
poem and his feeling about warfare as a subject for poetry.
He said:

It was necessary for my poetic purpose to take an
incident from the War of 1914-1918 which would serve
as a focus for feeling and sentiments otherwise
diffuse. The incident is true, and can be vouched
for by several witnesses still living. But its
horrors do not accuse any particular nation; they
are representative of war and human nature in war.
It is not my business as a poet to condemn war
(or, to be more exact, modern warfare). I only wish
to present the universal aspects of a particular
event. Judgment may follow, but should never
precede or become embroiled with the act of poetry.25

From his own statement it is evident that Herbert
Read had no didactic purpose in writing his war verses.
His attitude was detached and philosophical. It is clear,
however, that to him warfare was a titanic mechanized force
in which the individual, a tiny speck, was helplessly
cought. Friend and foe alike were victims of this maelstrom
for which the author could find no rational explanation.

24. Read, Herbert, Poems 1914-34, p. 73.
25. Ibid., p. 75.
Wilfred Wilson Gibson

Wilfred Wilson Gibson was born October 2, 1878, at Hexham, Northumberland. He was educated in private schools and early showed an interest in poetry of which he has written much. His first poetry was inclined to be sentimental, romantic, and imitative; but in 1910 he published a volume called *Daily Bread* which marked a change in his style. In this book he wrote of common working people, attempting to present their feelings in dramatic situations stripped of all minor interest or poetic ornamentation.

He married in 1912 and went to live in Western England in the Malvern Hills. Four times he attempted to enlist in the World War but was rejected each time. He then engaged in social work. In 1917 he came to the United States to lecture and give readings. After his return to England he again tried to enlist; this time he was accepted and he served as a private in the Army Service Corps from October 1917 until January 1919.

Wilfred Gibson has written much poetry. His humanitarian interest was evident in his writing. The two groups of poems considered in this study are: *Battle*, a group of thirty-one poems about the War, originally published as a separate volume in 1916, but included in his *Collected Poems* (1904-1917).26 These poems were all very short; the longest

was only sixteen lines. They were in the form of monologues in which the soldier, always a farmer or poor laborer, told his thoughts or his feelings. In each a situation was presented without poetic ornament, without comment from the author, without any elaboration of details. The common soldier, the demented peasant woman, the poor farmer all appeared heroic against their tragic background; all were victims of a ruthless machine which they did not understand and against which they were helpless. This group of poems was written and published before Wilfred Gibson was successful in enlisting for service. The second group considered were the seventeen poems included in Hazards in the group labeled "Aftermath". These were also short poems, the longest only twenty-four lines; all were monologues, similar to those included in Battle except that the author was presenting the tragedy of war viewed after the War was over.

Battle: Most of these poems, published in 1916, described the simple thoughts and feelings of newly-made soldiers, formerly farmers or common laborers, confronted with the horror of warfare. These humble, obscure men were heroic. Their story was told in simple monologue, with no unnecessary details, no poetic ornamentation, and no comment.

In many of these poems the soldier was thinking of his home or family. Examples are: Before Action, The Question, Mangel-wurzels, His Father, and Cherries. In The Question an ex-farmer was wondering whether or not the old sick cow was dead. He concluded that, if he died, he would never know what happened to her. In Mangel-wurzels the farm boy recalled that last year all day he was hoeing mangel-wurzels in the sun. There was a kind of grim humor in His Father when the soldier-boy wondered what his father said when he discovered that he had forgotten to put the spigot into the beer-keg. In Breakfast, The Joke, and The Father the speaker was interrupted in his bet, his joke, or his bragging about his little son, by a bullet which cut his life short. The author made no comment on these humble, obscure young men whom Fate took from their simple homes and peaceful occupations.

Several of these poems dealt with the tortures of the mind. In The Bayonet and Fear the soldier was unable to free himself from the horror of his thoughts. In Mad, In the Ambulance, His, and His Mate the delirious or demented victim babbled of his garden, a nursery rime, or his April fool joke. In The Messages a dazed, horribly wounded victim mumbled about the messages entrusted to him by dying soldiers, but these communications had become a part of the confused horror of his mind. In Salvage and
The Housewife women crazed by warfare clung to the memory of their ruined homes.

She must go back, she said,
Because she'd not had time to make the bed.
We'd hurried her away
So roughly...and, for all that we can say,
She broke from us, and passed
Into the night, shells falling thick and fast.28

Hazards: In Wilfred Gibson's Hazards, published in 1930, there were seventeen little war poems in the section called "Aftermath". In one of these, Bee-keeper, the soldier had gone back to a peaceful pursuit and was absorbed in it. But many of the poems represented minds still tortured by recollections of the War. In John's Wife and The Telegram a woman was unconvinced of the death of a loved one. In Artillery the mind of the soldier was haunted by recollections of the horrors of his past. Poems like "The Glorious Dead", Her Son, Silence, France, and The Broken Latch showed the suffering and grief which endured long after the war was over. The Broken Latch was stark and bare in details but deep in feeling. A woman was listening to the yard-gate creak on its broken latch all night. She thought that if "he" had not gone to war, or if there had been no war, or if someone else had been killed instead, the latch would have been mended long ago.

There was no hatred of the enemy in The Luck or

After Ten Years. Friend and foe alike had been victims of the War.

After Ten Years

He came to-day, our whilom foe—
An enemy ten years ago—
At least our country's enemy,
Even as I was forced to be
An enemy of his: he came;
And by the hearth we watched the flame
Flourish the logs with gold, as we
Together talked of poetry,
Or sat, each silent in his seat,
Rapt in the healing, quiet, sweet
Companionship of kindred minds
And human fellowship that binds
The broken spirit and makes whole
The horror-lacerated soul.
We, who'd been forced by fate to dwell
Four years in opposite camps of hell,
Were liberated now, and free
Of the sweet heaven of poetry,
After long years of exile come
To our true native country, home.

-- October, 1928.

Although Wilfred Gibson never stated his opinion directly by means of comment, his work revealed his attitude and belief about war as follows:

(1) He realized the importance and dignity of human life, in the case of even the most obscure and humble individual.

(2) His concept of warfare was of a ruthless machine, uncontrolled, cutting off lives of simple people helplessly caught by a force which they could not understand.

(3) He regarded the men against whom he fought as

victims of warfare, not as hated enemies.

Edmund Blunden

Edmund Charles Blunden was born November 1, 1896, at Yalding, a small village in Kent. He attended Cleaves' Grammar School at Yalding and Christ's Hospital, London. His schooling was interrupted by the War when he joined the army in 1916, a mere boy, and served in France and Belgium with the Eleventh Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment. He was awarded the Military Cross for bravery. After the War he continued his education and received his Master of Arts from Queen's College, Oxford. He made a trip to South America on a tramp steamer for the benefit of his health, which since the War has not been good. He married and has had two children. As an editor and critic he became well-known. From 1924-27 he acted as professor of English Literature at the University of Tokyo; in 1931 he was made fellow and tutor at Merton College, Oxford, and in 1932 Clark Lecturer at Trinity College.

Edmund Blunden has written much both in poetry and prose. His experiences in the War were recorded in prose in Undertones of War (1929); some verses were also included in this volume. This study is concerned with the war poems in Poems 1914-30. As the author himself stated in the preface to this edition, he lost some of his early poems which were published during the War. To Siegfried Sassoon he
gave credit for saving some of his later poems from a similar fate.30

Poems 1914-1930: Most of the war poems in this volume were included under the heading "War: Impacts and Delayed Actions";31 there were, however, other poems in the volume which indicated in their phrasing or choice of subject the author's war experience. Some of the poems under "War: Impacts and Delayed Actions" were descriptive of scenes or experiences from the author's long experience on the Western Front. Other poems were reflective; the author looked at the War as he recollected it in after years. A study of these poems revealed the following points:

(1) The author saw in the beauty of nature escape from the intolerable horror of war.
(2) Unpleasant scenes he seldom depicted, never except briefly and in a restrained manner.
(3) He spoke of the friendships growing out of war experiences.
(4) His attitude was sometimes ironic but never bitter.
(5) He lamented the lost lives, the ruined homes, the desolation resulting from the War.

To Edmund Blunden the beauty of nature offered an

31. pp. 139-194.
escape from the horror of war. Only a few poems could be found which did not illustrate this. **War Autobiography** said:

Heaven is clouded, mists of rain  
Stream with idle motion by;  
Like a tide the trees' refrain  
Wearies me where pale I lie,  
Thinking of sunny times that were  
Even in shattered Festubert;  
Stubborn joys that blossomed on  
When the small golden god was gone  

Who tiptoe on his spire surveyed  
Yser north from Ypres creeping,  
And, how many a sunset! made  
A longed-for glory amid the weeping.  
In how many a valley of death  
Some trifling thing has given me breath,  
And when the bat-like wings brushed by  
What steady stars smiled in the sky!

War might make his worst grimace,  
And still my mind in armour good  
Turned aside in every place  
And saw bright day through the black wood:  
There the lyddite vapoured foul,  
But there I got myself a rose;  
By the shrapnelled lock I'd prowl  
To see below the proud pike doze.

Like the first light ever streamed  
New and lively past all telling,  
When I dreamed of joy I dreamed,  
The more opprest the more rebelling;  
Trees ne'er shone so lusty green  
As those in Hamel valley, eyes  
Did ne'er such right friendship mean  
As his who loved my enterprise.

---

The 11th R. S. R. began

How bright a dove's wing shows against the sky  
When thunder's blackening up in monstrous cloud;  
How silver clear against war's hue and cry  
Each syllable of peace the gods allowed!

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33. p. 171.
In The Sentry's Mistake the "cowman now turned warrior" had a hard time keeping his mind on his war-like duty in his quiet pastoral atmosphere:

Round the still quadrangle of the great farm
The company had settled their new home;
The cherry-boughs were beckoning every arm,
The stream ran wrinkling by with playful foam,
And when the guard was at the gateway set,
Surrounding pastoral sweetly stole their wit.34

Battalion in Rest gave glimpses of the life in Flanders where

The girls along the dykes of those moist miles
Went on raft boats to take their cows afield,
And eyes from many an English farm
Saw and owned the mode had charm;
One well might mark the silence and the smiles;
With such sweet balms, our wounds must soon be healed. 35

Any reference to the horror of warfare was expressed in a restrained manner. Escape implied rather than expressed a young soldier's relief at being spared the ordeal of identifying his dead comrades. Third Yores illustrated this restraint in depicting the horrible.

And the slow moments shake their heavy heads,
And croak, "They're done, they'll none of them get through,
They're done, they've all died on the entanglements,
The wire stood up like an unplashed hedge and thorned
With giant spikes--and there they've paid the bill."36

Later in the same poem a dazed soldier told of his experience trying to extricate his comrades from a pillbox

34. p. 140.
35. p. 150.
where they were trapped. The scene was vividly described. The half-crazed soldier was kept sane by watching some field mice.

Look, from the wreck a score of field-mice nimble,
And tame and curious look about them; (these Calmed me, on these depended my salvation).

Then the horrible plight of men trapped in a gunpit was indicated and the poem concluded:

The more monstrous fate
Shadows our own; the mind swoons doubly burdened,
Taught how for miles our anguish groans and bleeds,
A whole sweet countryside amuck with murder;
Each moment puffed into a year with death.
Still swept the rain, roared guns,
Still swooped into the swamps of flesh and blood,
All to the drabness of uncreation sunk,
And all thought dwindled to a moan, Relieve!
But who with what command can now relieve
The dead men from the chaos, or my soul?

Like most of the soldier-poets Edmund Blunden paid his tribute to the friendships of war and the grief which he felt in the death of those whose friendship he had valued highly.

So high flamed life when death was gesturing by,
So faint burns now. A day of that gone age
Was more than all the days that now shall come.
Then friendship was, that mightier grew than love.
Why are you fallen, friend after friend?

There was irony in A House in Festubert, Zero,
Premature Rejoicing, and Sentry's Mistake; but there was no bitterness or condemnation of warfare. The prevailing

37. p. 155.
38. p. 156.
spirit was one of weariness and hopelessness in the ruined
homes, the desolate landscapes, and the graves of friends.

1916 Seen from 1921 summed up this spirit.

Tired with dull grief, grown old before my day,
I sit in solitude and only hear
Long silent laughers, murmuring of dismay,
The lost intensities of hope and fear;
In those old marshes yet the rifles lie,
On the thin breastwork flutter the grey rags,
The very books I read are there—and I
Dead as the men I loved, wait while life drags

Its wounded length from those sad streets of war
Into green places here, that were my own;
But now what once was mine is mine no more,
I seek such neighbors here and I find none.
With such strong gentleness and tireless will
Those ruined houses seared themselves in me,
Passionate I look for their dumb story still,
And the charred stub outpeaks the living tree.40

The same spirit was expressed in The Ancre at Hamel:

Afterwards

Where tongues were loud and hearts were light
   I heard the Ancre flow;
Waking at the mid of night
   I heard the Ancre flow.
I heard it crying, that sad rill,
   Below the painful ridge,
By the burnt unrefttered mill
   And the relic of a bridge.

And could this sighing water seem
   To call me far away,
And its pale world dismiss as dream
   The voices of to-day?
The voices in the bright room chilled
   And that mourned on alone;
The silence of the full moon filled
   With that brook's troubling tone.

40. p. 163.
The struggling Ancre had no part
In these new hours of mine;
And yet its stream ran through my heart;
I heard it grieve and pine,
As if its rainy tortured blood
Had swirled into my own,
When by its battered bank I stood
And shared its wounded moan.

Edmund Blunden's war poetry was characterized by:

1. lament for the loss of friends and the ruin of homes,
2. ironic but not bitter attitude toward warfare,
3. brief, restrained reference to the horrible sights of
   the battlefield,
4. pictures of grief, desolation, and ruin.

Richard Aldington

Richard Aldington was born in Hampshire, England, 1892, of well-to-do middle class parents. He attended
Dover College and London University. Both he and his wife, "H. D." are recognized as leaders of the Imagist movement
in poetry; Richard Aldington has also attained prominence
as a translator, critic, and novelist. His service at the
front during the World War lasted from early 1916 until the
end of the War when he found himself an ex-lieutenant,
penniless, shell-shocked, and worn out by the terrific
nervous strain of life on the Western Front.

War Poetry of Richard Aldington: War Yawn, written
in 1914 and addressed to America, showed an ironic, but

41. pp. 174-75.
rather light-hearted acceptance of the War.

D' you know what it's all about?
Let me whisper you a secret—we don't!
We were all too fat with peace,
Or perhaps we didn't know how good peace was,
And so here we are,
And we're going to win....

The little rock-citadel of the artists
Is always besieged;
There, though they have beauty and silence,
They have always tears and hunger and despair.
But that little citadel has held out
Against all the wars of the world—
Like England, brother Jonathan.
It will not fall during the great war.

There is always war and always peace;
Always the war of the crowds,
Always the peace of the arts.

The later poems included in War and Love and Images of War showed, perhaps more than any other poems of the War, the nervous strain and severe nervous shock suffered by artistic, sensitive men who served as soldiers.

Bombardment

Four days the earth was rent and torn
By bursting steel,
The houses fell about us;
Three nights we dared not sleep,
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash
Which meant our death.

The fourth night every man,
Nerve-tortured, racked to exhaustion,
Slept, muttering and twitching,
While the shells crashed overhead.

The fifth day there came a hush;
We left our holes

And looked above the wreckage of the earth
To where the white clouds moved in silent lines
Across the untroubled blue.

Richard Aldington, himself summed up his own reactions
in the preface to War and Love, in the form of a letter to
F. S. Flint:

Just now I spoke of conflict; I did not mean war in
its universal or journalistic sense but in its im­
pingement upon the individual. These notations of
moods attempt to express that conflict between the
deight of the flesh, which we call love or passion,
and that agony of the flesh which is known only to
the infantryman of the line.

Even you may feel that these notes on war are
over-strained, morbidly self-conscious, petulant
perhaps. That may be, but (taking into account all
enthusiasma and devotions) I affirm that they
represent to some degree the often inarticulate
feelings of the ordinary civilized man thrust sud­
denly into these extraordinary and hellish cir­
cumstances—feelings of bewilderment, bitterness,
dumb revolt and rather piteous weakness. Poor
human flesh is so easily rent by the shattering
of explosive and the jagged shear of metal. Those
of us who have seen it will never be quite happy
again.

He justified his inclusion of love poems of "almost
exaggerated passion" in the volume by saying that they too
represented the soldier's reckless mood and "disregard of
rules for conduct, a yearning of the flesh, a wild grasping
at life".

In his writing about war Richard Aldington was chiefly
concerned with the tortured spirit of the fighting man.

44. Foreword to War and Love, p. 6.
45. Ibid., p. 6.
He said his book in intention was "by a common soldier for common soldiers," and apologized for not carrying out to his own satisfaction what he attempted to do because, as he said, "The army is not an ideal environment for literature." His poetry representing the nervous reactions of the soldier to the brutality of warfare seemed intended more as a memoir for himself and other soldiers than an attempt to convey his feeling to the public.

Summary

A survey of the war verse of Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Herbert Read, Wilfred Gibson, Edmund Blunden, and Richard Aldington revealed that their work substantiates the trends found in the work of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen. All apparently entered the War with the feeling, common to most young soldiers, that the War was being fought for a good purpose and that they were making noble sacrifices for their country. Each represented his reactions in a different manner, but each saw modern warfare as a gigantic destructive force against which man was helpless. None of these writers was able to rationalize modern warfare into anything which he could justify.

These soldier-poets, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and the six men discussed in this chapter, represented the

46. Ibid., p. 5.
47. Ibid., p. 7.
War by making contrasted pictures of peace and of war.

Favourite themes of war poetry written during and since the World War were:

(1) The dead soldier lives in the beauty of nature.

(2) The friendships of war, growing out of common suffering, transcend the experience of love between man and woman.

(3) The men whom the soldier must kill are not enemies; they are victims of Fate.

(4) Youth has been tricked by false idealism.

(5) Modern warfare is a gigantic mechanized force which is threatening civilization.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A survey of the war verse of poets who fought during the World War has revealed the following points:

(1) The poetry of Rupert Brooke and other poets who wrote during the early days of the War revealed an attitude of unquestioning acceptance of the right of the conflict, a feeling that it was a glorious thing to sacrifice one's life for one's country, and an exultation in the courage and strength which enabled one to meet the challenge.

(2) A little later a period of doubt and questioning of the right of a conflict that necessitated ghastly slaughter was evident in the war verse of Siegfried Sassoon and others who saw a long period of service at the front.

(3) Then came condemnation of modern mechanized warfare as a gigantic force in the face of which youth, tricked by false idealism, was hopelessly caught and sacrificed. No hatred of the enemy was expressed; friend and foe alike were regarded as victims.

Siegfried Sassoon was the most violent in his attack upon war in poetry, but the work of Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Robert Nichols, Herbert Read, Wilfred Gibson, Edmund Blunden, and Richard Aldington showed that they too shared his feeling. Siegfried Sassoon was the one who most
persistently continued to use poetry as a weapon of attack; he bitterly denounced anyone who instigated or helped to prolong the War in any way. He has condemned a civilization so preoccupied with materialistic gain that it has failed to see the lesson made plain by the World War—that modern mechanized warfare is a destructive force of terrific power which man has created but which he cannot control.

Some of the poets discussed did not use poetry as a medium for direct attack upon warfare; they felt that it was not the purpose of poetry to do this. All of them, however, indicated their conception of the truth about warfare. None of them has shown in his poetry written since the World War any tendency to glorify War. The gigantic destructive force of modern mechanized warfare appears to the poet who has experienced its horrors and hardships a titanic force which is threatening civilization. This attitude is significant in the fact that it marks a change in the poet's point of view on a theme popular in poetry since the beginning of literature.
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