

# HOW SWEET IT IS . . .

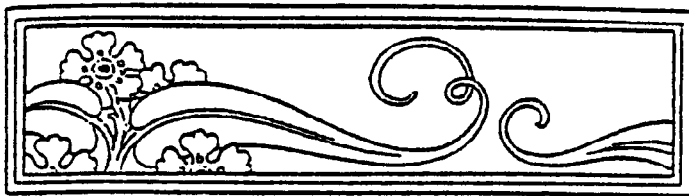
by

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## How Sweet It Is . . .

### Two Fusiliers

It had taken several weeks for him to develop enough courage to knock on the big fellow's door. He himself had been writing poetry for some years although he was only twenty-three years of age, but had published nothing. The older man he wished to meet had some reputation as a poet, although he was just thirty.

The knock on the door was answered by a curt request to enter. Siegfried Sassoon was sitting on his bed, cleaning his golf clubs. He was over six-feet tall, appearing to the diffident visitor noble with a fine, chiseled head. The visitor, Wilfred Owen, was half a foot shorter. He wanted Sassoon to sign a few copies of a collection of his poetry for Owen and a few friends. He stood at Sassoon's elbow, as though conferring with a superior officer.

Sassoon's first impression of Owen was that of a "rather ordinary young man, perceptibly provincial," who appeared "unobtrusively ardent" in response to Sassoon's self-described "lordly dictums about poetry,"<sup>1</sup> which emerged from subsequent nightly meetings between them. Sassoon's initial response to his younger acquaintance's poems appeared to be boredom. This gradually gave way to animation as Owen presented more. This fortuitous meeting

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of two young British poets turned out to have a profound effect on the younger one, helping to refine a style already keenly developed to a point in which the younger poet would be considered possibly the most promising of that time.

It was August 1916. The location was Craiglockhart, a military hospital in Edinburgh for soldiers with "shell shock" or neurasthenia as it was called then, as a consequence of the Great War across the Channel. Sassoon and Owen were victims. They were not alone. Their experiences in the war were similar to those of many other poets, including Robert Graves, by that time a close friend of Sassoon's and also a victim of shell shock. They were to have a profound influence on the images evoked from poetry. Graves's and Owen's and Sassoon's lives intertwined during the war as a result of remarkably coincidental meetings that mutually nourished their skills in poetry. Graves and Sassoon, besides their poetry, were among the chief memoirists of the war. Owen was perhaps the greatest war poet. This paper is an attempt to present some of their poetry in the context of the great changes in attitudes toward the war, and how their poetry particularly reflected it.

### The Prelude to War

The summer of 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I, was beautifully warm in England. Books could be left out on terraces overnight with little chance that they would be rained on. Robert Graves was mountain climbing in Wales, Siegfried Sassoon was fox hunting in Kent, and Wilfred Owen was teaching English to the children of a French family in Bordeaux.

English romanticism continued in its high tide in English poetry, espoused by Robert Bridges, the poet laureate, and others in the tradition of Tennyson and Housman. This poetry was charac-

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terized by meter, and used words such as *peril* for danger, *joining the colours* for enlisting, *slumber* for sleep, the *heavens* for sky, *to perish* instead of to die, and the *red, sweet wine of youth* for the blood of young men (Rupert Brooke). Such style remained in some of Wildred Owen's later poetry:

Red lips are not so red

As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.

(*Greater Love*)

The prewar romanticism has been given the name Georgianism, aimed at the upper middle class with a continuing tradition of poetic culture. By 1914, however, a new movement in poetic expression was developing, termed *imagism*. This used the language of common speech, with creation of new rhythms through free verse, and with concrete images in place of abstract poetry. The imagists were not interested in the general public of poetry lovers, especially the upper middle class, but attempted to express what they felt was modern consciousness. To them, humanity was not steadily progressing toward the millennium, a new age of barbarity and vulgarism was dawning, and the audience for the new poetry was to be a self-chosen elite, not susceptible to the spiritual degradation of the commercial world around them. The imagists, though exploiting pastoral or elegiac conventions, determined to clearly depict the reality of the war. Ezra Pound, for one, admitted to being an imagist, although he was nowhere near the battle lines. T. S. Eliot, also absent from the trenches, made use of the techniques of the imagists in the *Waste Land*, published four years after the war:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish?

.....

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A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
. . . . .

In 1914, the label of imagism could in no way be used to describe the embryonic poetry of Owen, Graves, or Sassoon, who were lyrical traditionalists.

Over the next few years, as the British war poets sampled the horrors of the trenches, their poetry evolved through inclusion of devices introduced by some of the contemporary traditionalists, such as Thomas Hardy, now just turned seventy-four. In a poem published in April 1914, he introduced such devices as pastoral descriptions contrasting with the thunder of artillery, voices from the grave commenting on war's insanity, and indifference to what were termed Christian values. Note the date: this poem was written before Archduke Ferdinand ventured toward his fate in Sarajevo.

It was Hardy who fired one of the first poetic salvos when the Great War began, in early August 1914:

What of the faith and fire within us  
Men who march away  
. . . . .

*(Men Who March Away)*

The poet laureate, Bridges, now seventy, provided his inspirational message in the first days of the war:

Thou careless, awake!  
Thou peacemaker, fight!  
Stand, England, for honour,  
And God guard the right!

*(Wake Up, England)*

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Mad Jack

When the war began, Graves's poetry was Georgian in style, with ballad-like forms, small-scale subjects, rural flavor, involving folklore and fairy tale. Sassoon, then twenty-eight, had already privately published nine volumes of verse, but had only achieved recognition the preceding year with a parody on John Masefield, another Georgian. In fact, in the early days of the war, while still in England, Sassoon came into contact with many Georgians. These included Rupert Brooke, the early great poet of the war, who was to die on the island of Skyros on his way to the Dardanelles of blood poisoning from an infected insect bite the following year, ironically on Shakespeare's birthday. It was Brooke who wrote the immortal lines:

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is for ever England.

*(V. The Soldier)*

And Wilfred Owen later reposted:

Not one corner of a foreign field  
But a span as wide as Europe,  
.....  
An appearance of a titan's grave,  
.....  
It crossed all Europe like a mystic road,  
.....  
And I heard a voice crying,  
This is the Path of Glory.

*(Fragment: Not one corner . . .)*

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Sassoon's early poetry, before the experience in the trenches, was much like Brooke's. Arriving in France late in 1915, his idealism was still intact:

War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,  
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

*(Absolution)*

And they are fortunate, who fight  
For gleaming landscapes swept and shafted  
And crowned by cloud pavilions white;

.....

*(France)*

Over the next few years, his imagery evolved with his insights, satire, and rugged irony, but Sassoon's poetic techniques remained Georgian.

Sassoon later was the first soldier-poet to achieve notoriety as an opponent of the war, but also of those whose complicity allowed it to continue. But this was much later. In response to his brother Hamo's death in Gallipoli, in August 1915, well before Siegfried was actively involved in the war, he wrote:

But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head  
And through your victory I shall win the light.

*(To My Brother)*

He was born in Kent, the middle son of Alfred Sassoon, who separated from his wife, Theresa Thorneycroft, when Siegfried was five, and died before he was ten. Cousins on his father's side intermarried with the Rothschilds, for Siegfried had come from



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an old Sephardic Jewish family which had been successful in banking for several centuries in Persia.

In the early nineteenth century, members of the family had moved westward, to Germany and England, and had remained quite successful. Siegfried's wealthy paternal cousins, though, had nothing to do with him. He was baptized in his maternal High Anglican church in Kent. His mother also had distinguished relatives, several of them Victorian sculptors. Siegfried was described by one of his friends as tall, spare, muscular.

Siegfried's maternal side, although by no means as wealthy as his father's side, was well-off enough to allow Siegfried to attend Marlborough, a distinguished public school, and Clare College, Cambridge, from which he neglected to graduate, as did Tennyson. He did have an income of £500 a year, reasonably substantial at that time, allowing him to pursue his interests in cricket, fox hunting, and collecting of book bindings, and, certainly, the writing of poetry.

Sassoon had incredible physical courage, and, as we shall see, high moral courage. He was in uniform the day after the British declaration of war, the fourth of August. He was initially a cavalry trooper. He almost lost his life before ever setting foot in France when, in January 1915, while training, he survived a serious tumble when his horse stumbled over a hidden wire, although he fractured his arm. There was little future for cavalry, anyway, in the new type of war being waged in France, and he transferred to the Royal Welch Fusiliers, as an infantry subaltern.

His courage later led to a Military Cross for bringing a wounded man back from a raid, and during the disastrous Somme offensive in 1916, he single-handedly occupied a section of a German trench for several hours, clearing forty enemy troops away from the trench. Not knowing what to do further in this situation,

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he probably repaired rapidly back to his own trench, although Graves's apocryphal description of this indicates that Siegfried spent a few hours reading books in the captured trench.

His men called him Mad Jack for his exploits in patrolling no man's land, that strip between the Allied and German trenches. Over the four hundred miles of mostly static front lines, from Nieuport on the Channel to the Swiss border, the strip varied from thirty yards to almost one-mile wide.

*A Shropshire Lad*

Wilfred Owen spent the first year of the war in France, although nowhere near the battle lines. He served as a tutor for a French family in Bordeaux and remained in France until September 1915 to honor his contract.

He was the eldest of four children, born in Shropshire, of a family of modest means, though by no means poor. His father wanted him to pursue a trade, his mother wanted him to enter the church, and he wanted to write poetry, from an early age, using Keats as a model. Because he missed honors on a scholarship examination, he failed to attend the University of London, and because of lung trouble, ironically another Keats attribute, he went to the more salubrious countryside of France in 1913 and became an English teacher at the Berlitz school in Bordeaux for a time, before taking up tutoring. Parenthetically, it can be said without doubt that Wilfred and James Joyce were the most qualified purveyors of the English language that Berlitz ever hired.

Owen was in France when the war began in August 1914. He was relatively indifferent to it at first but eventually developed the deep conviction that the war was an affront to God and man. In France that fateful month of August 1914, Wilfred wrote his first war sonnet:

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O meet it is and passing sweet  
To live in peace with others,  
But sweeter still and far more meet  
To die in war for brothers.

*(The Ballad of Purchase-Money/s)*

And after a few months of war:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world  
With perishing great darkness closes in.

.....

Now begin  
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.  
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

*(1914)*

Within several years, love's lines would be transformed into this:

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

*(Greater Love)*

And the sweetness of war to this:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!  
.....  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the forth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer  
.....

*How Sweet It Is . . .*

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.

*(Dulce Et Decorum Est)*

He enlisted in the Artists' Rifles in October 1915, received a commission in 1916 in the Manchester regiment, and sailed for France with the Lancashire Fusiliers only in late December 1916. His lack of early experience in the trenches did not deter his poetry.

*The Biostatistician*

Robert Graves, the youngest of the three war poets, like Sassoon, was of mixed parentage, his mother's family from Wales and his father's ancestors from Germany. In fact, his full name, Robert von Ranke Graves, caused him some difficulty during his service in France during the battle of Mametz Wood when he was mistakenly thought to be the relative of a German spy, Carl Ranke. His father, coincidentally with the same name Alfred as Sassoon's father, was a poet and editor. Some of Graves's close relatives were prominent German officers. Robert as a child had visited frequently his uncle's rambling home in Bavaria. Graves grew up in Wimbledon, a London suburb, and according to him, Swinburne, who lived nearby, once patted his head when Robert was in a pram. Whether this anointment had any mystical power is open to question.

Robert grew up to be a tall, gangly youth, with a craggy nose rearranged by boxing while he was a student at Charterhouse, another prominent public school. He was very unhappy there and took up boxing to minimize harassment by his fellow stu-

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dents. He was adept at this, but more adept at poetry. Through contacts he had been invited to the Harold Monroe Poetry Bookshop in London, an emporium that welcomed young poets with talk, food, and a place to sleep. Monroe published their works for a half-share of the royalties. A publisher interested in him, who had visited Charterhouse frequently looking for young talent, was Edward Marsh, who was also keen on publishing new poets. He felt that Graves had the makings of a Georgian. However, at the time, poetry remained a hobby for Graves.

Graves was to enter Oxford, although with mixed feelings, when the war was declared. He was nineteen at the time. He enlisted immediately, possibly because he felt compromised by his German ancestry.

At the suggestion of the secretary of his local golf club, his family having moved close to Wales, he joined the Royal Welch Fusiliers, interestingly the same regiment that Sassoon was to join. Both Sassoon and Graves became what was termed Special Reserve Officers, who had the privilege of fighting in the regular battalions. Before the war, this privilege was not won easily. A candidate for a commission in peacetime had to be strongly recommended by two regimental officers after going through Sandhurst or a similar academy, and to have a guaranteed independent income, allowing him to hunt, play polo and add to the social reputation of the regiment.

Like Sassoon, Graves first identified himself with the Georgians but later distanced himself from any group. He was somewhat of a non-conformist. When he arrived in the trenches, he brought with him such protective weapons as the *Odyssey*, *Erewhon*, Blake and Keats. Graves's hero was Samuel Butler. When he had become friendly with Sassoon, he often discomfited him by remarks such as that the Northern folk ballads were superior to

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Beethoven, and, more discomfiting, that fox hunting was the sport of snobs and half-wits. Unlike Sassoon, Graves made no real effort to conform to army standards and was slovenly in dress and manners. When they had first met, Sassoon heard from one of Graves's fellow officers that: "He's quite dotty. He used to sit up till one o'clock at night writing with dozens of candles lit all round his bed, and in the morning he used to shave with one hand and read a book with the other."<sup>2</sup> Graves was intellectual, however, and enjoyed the play of ideas, and was fascinated with new forms of expression, in writing and in art.

Graves spent his first watch learning not to move at the peril of his life. At the end of his watch he saw a man lying face down in a sheltered area of the trench. He had no boot or sock on one foot. Robert was going to speak to him but the machine gunner near him told him that it was useless talking to him. He had taken off his boot and sock to pull the trigger of his rifle with one toe; the muzzle was in his mouth.

Like Sassoon and Owen, Graves showed great bravery. He was a philosopher and a biostatistician of sorts. His philosophy about patrols, of which he had expert experience, was to use this as a means to last through the end of the war by getting wounded in a relatively safe spot, what was known as a "Blighty wound." Blighty was England, the place to go if the wound was severe enough. The best time to get wounded would be at night, in the open, with rifle fire and his whole body exposed, and not when there was a rush to a dressing-room station as during an advance—therefore, on a night patrol in a quiet sector. Before July 1916, the Somme sector fit this description best, it was so quiet.

As for his biostatistical skills, he calculated his own survival chances:

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To take a life . . . a one-in-five risk . . . perhaps a one-in-twenty risk to get a wounded German to safety would be considered justifiable. . . . When exhausted and wanting to get from one point in the trenches to another without collapse, we would sometimes take a short cut over the top. . . . In a hurry . . . a one-in-two-hundred risk; when dead tired, a one-in-fifty risk.<sup>3</sup>

### *A Fortuitous Meeting*

Graves and Sassoon met at the end of November 1915, when they were both with the First Battalion of the Royal Welch near Cambrin, in South Flanders. Graves had had several month's experience in battle, including one suicidal advance in September during the Battle of Loos which decimated the Royal Welch, including the four officers who had first come to Cambrin with him. During those ten days of battle, he had only eight hours sleep and resorted to drinking a bottle of whiskey a day to prevent his breaking down in front of his men. He spent two nights bringing in dead men hanging on German barbed wire.

Scarcely a week later, while his unit was marching to the rear for a rest break, distant artillery was heard. Another suicidal attack began, resulting in the death of Charles Sorley, a twenty-year-old captain, and one of the three poets of importance considered by Graves to have died in the war.

Once, while walking along a trench in Cambrin, he suddenly dropped flat on his face. Two seconds later a shell struck the back of the trench exactly where his head had been. Graves calculated that the shell was fired only one thousand yards away so that he reacted simultaneously with the explosion of the gun. But, he reasoned, how would he have known that the shell would be coming his way? Such are the fortunes of war.

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Sassoon had just joined the same battalion and had had no war experience. One night Graves was surprised to find lying on the table a book of essays of Lionel Johnson, highly esoteric for that part of the world. On the flyleaf was the name of Siegfried Sassoon. What fate decided that both would be placed in the same battalion at the same time in France?

Glancing around to look for someone literary and Jewish, Graves had little difficulty in identifying him. They established an immediate rapport. They had many things in common aside from the German names von Ranke and Siegfried. Their backgrounds and educational milieu were similar, having grown up in a cultured middle-class environment and having gone to two elite public schools. They had by that time a similar attitude toward the war. Their sexual proclivities were similar and have been described as idealistic homosexual, not uncommon in that social milieu. Graves had claimed later that Sassoon had been sexually attracted to him, which Sassoon later denied, although Sassoon had earlier admitted a vague sexual element lurking in the background.

Although Graves was almost ten years younger, he seemed more confident, more of a natural leader, bragging about his accomplishments. Sassoon was conformist and conventional both socially and in artistic matters. Graves was rebellious. Sassoon was impressed by Graves as "a positive expert at putting people's backs up unintentionally."<sup>4</sup> Although both were tall, Sassoon was graceful, Graves clumsy. This was somewhat unfair to Graves, who was considered an excellent mountain climber, having accomplished a difficult roll across a rock with no hand-holds or foot-holds, trusting to friction as a maintaining force during his first climb. He had also managed to maintain his balance in one of his first ski runs when he found himself going dangerously fast over an icy and treacherous downhill run. Though both had promi-



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nent noses, a common acquaintance compared Sassoon to a stag or faun, and Graves to a prizefighter, which indeed he had been in school.

Both accepted the necessities of the war. With Sassoon, however, at least at that time, he wanted the war to be an impressive experience, not horrible enough to interfere with heroic emotions. He wanted to convert the idea of death in battle into an emotional experience. He awaited his first battle eagerly. Graves, on the other hand, appeared to Sassoon to want the war "even uglier than it really was."<sup>5</sup> When Graves showed Sassoon his early war poems, Siegfried frowned and said that war should not be written about in such a realistic way.

At that time, Sassoon could still create a poetry of idealism:

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.

*(Absolution)*

And:

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,  
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,  
.....

*(To Victory)*

Graves's first impression of Sassoon was that he was a very nice chap but his verses, except occasionally, did not please him very much. Graves told him that he would soon change his style.

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Early Graves poems had also been ennobling and idealistic, filled with nostalgia.

Dear, you've been everything I most lack  
In these soul-deadening trenches—pictures, books,  
Music, the quiet of an English wood,  
.....  
And Peace, and all that's good.

(1915)

His early experience in the trenches changed his perspective. In one poem, *Big Words*, a young sentry tries to convince himself that he will “feel small sorrow” if he “must die to-morrow,” believing “faith in the wisdom of God’s ways” and “memories of peace.” However,

... on the firestep, waiting to attack,  
He cursed, prayed, sweated, wished the proud words back.

To Sassoon, Graves’s countenance appeared to be somewhat twisted, as though seen through a slightly distorting mirror, and his mental war pictures were a little uncouth and out of focus. They sat together through many a dark evening, the guns booming in the valleys, discussing poetry and the war.

They decided to emulate the literary friendship between Coleridge and Wordsworth, by bringing out a modern equivalent of *Lyrical Ballads* together. Through their poetry, they could define the war by contrasting definitions of peace, such as hunting, nature, music, pastoral scenes. This would be a joint publication. Their enthusiasm for the project was dampened by their publisher, who rejected the idea outright, indicating that it would do neither one of them any good.

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Anthem to Doomed Youth

Several months later the death of a mutual close friend, David Thomas, especially changed their attitudes. Sassoon had first beheld him as an ideal friend. "... even in the half-light [of twilight] his face surprised me by its candor and freshness. He had the obvious good looks which go with fair hair and firm features, but it was the radiant integrity of his expression which astonished me."<sup>6</sup> After being shot, Thomas was presumed at first not to be badly wounded. In defiance of his doctor's orders, Thomas raised his head to take a letter from his pocket for his girl friend and died instantly. To Sassoon and Graves, deeply suspicious of women at that time, it seemed like a final irony.

After Thomas's death, Sassoon began reckless raids on German trenches, pursuing vengeance. "I went up to the trenches with the intention of trying to kill someone. . . . I had more or less made up my mind to die because, in the circumstances, there did not seem to be anything else to be done."<sup>7</sup> He became adept at hand-to-hand fighting.

One of his poems was addressed to "Brother Lead and Sister Steel":

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:  
That in good fury he may feel  
The body where he sets his heel  
Quail from your downward darting kiss.

*(The Kiss)*

And the psychologic impact of shelling:

Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they never cease—  
Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out

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And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy;  
I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

*(Repression of War Experience)*

These guns could be heard easily in southeastern England. London was less than eighty miles from the battlefield, and an officer could have breakfast in the trenches, go on leave, and eat dinner at his club in London. Such were the strange realities of that war.

Graves, also taken with the death of David Thomas, composed *Goliath and David*, a funeral ode to the fallen friend:

"I'm hit! I'm killed!" young David cries  
Throws blindly forward, chokes . . . and dies.  
And, look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,  
Goliath straddles over him.

In *The Leveller*, two men are killed by the same shell, and Graves injects his ironic twist by having the veteran sob like a child, and the youth "died cursing God with brutal oaths." And the final irony, the sergeant informing both families with the same message:

"He died a hero's death: and we  
His comrades of 'A' Company  
Deeply regret his death: we shall  
All deeply miss so true a pal."

Graves felt that a realistic depiction of war was the ultimate protest:

To you who'd read my songs of War  
And only hear of blood and fame,  
. . . . .

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To-day I found in Mametz Wood  
A certain cure for lust of blood:

. . . . .  
a dead Boche: he scowled and stunk  
With clothes and face a sodden green,  
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,  
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

*(A Dead Boche)*

And he placed the soldiers in the trenches in a metaphoric perspective:

. . . we're the little lice  
Wriggling about in them a week or two,  
Till one day, suddenly, from the blue  
Something bloody and big will come  
Like—watch this fingernail and thumb!—  
Squash! and he needs no twice.

*(The Trenches (Heard in the Ranks))*

The trenches themselves were barriers during the daylight hours. The British trenches were six- to eight-feet deep, and the only view that could be seen from them was the sky above, except for dawn and dusk, when everyone “stood to” on the fire-step, anticipating a possible raid from the enemy trench. The dawns and sunsets were glorious in Flanders, framing days of boredom between battles. Their splendor and ominous significance were described in much of the poetry of the war. Dawn and sunset were the times of attack and crucial decisions. Sassoon carried a lump of fire opal in his pocket, which he called a “pocket sunset.”

In the months after Thomas's death, Graves felt that he was near the breaking point. He went on leave to have a needed nose

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operation for injuries suffered in boxing at school. He needed it for the newer, safer type of gas-mask being used. In doing so, he missed the beginning of an offensive in which three-fifths of his fellow officers were killed. The British army assigned three or four times as many officers to the line as the Germans did, and the elite class that provided junior officers suffered disproportionate losses.

*The Fortunes of War*

Graves's leave did not prevent him from participating in the Battle of the Somme, which began on the beautiful morning of July 1, 1916. In mid-July, one-third of his battalion was lost that day before an advance because of German shelling. This and other battles left Graves with hallucinations of the war that did not leave him until years after the war was over. Shells would come bursting into his bed at midnight, and strangers would assume the faces of friends who had been killed.

If Graves dwelled on the ironies of the war and the comic mask of war's brutalities, Sassoon attacked politicians, inept generals, and unsympathetic civilians, emphasizing the contrast between the relative comfort and safety of the home front and the misery and insecurity of the trenches:

"Good-morning, good-morning!" the General said  
When we met him last week on our way to the line.  
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,  
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.  
"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack  
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.  
.....

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But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

*(The General)*

And, in *Glory of Women*:

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.  
You worship decorations; you believe  
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace  
.....  
You can't believe that British troops "retire"  
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,  
Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood.  
O German mother dreaming by the fire,  
While you are knitting socks to send your son  
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.

Sassoon depicted the insensitivity both in the war and at home:

I found him in the guard-room at the Base.  
From the blind darkness I heard him crying  
.....  
A sergeant watched him; it was no good trying  
To stop it; for he howled and beat his chest.  
And, all because his brother had gone west,  
.....  
In my belief  
Such men have lost all patriotic feeling.

*(Lamentations)*

And:

Does it matter?—losing your legs? . . .  
For people will always be kind,

*How Sweet It Is . . .*

And you need not show that you mind  
When the others come in after hunting  
To gobble their muffins and eggs.

*(Does It Matter?)*

In late July 1916, when his battalion had to retreat during heavy shelling, Graves started to run but a shell exploded behind him. He received some minor wounds and a piece of shell through his left thigh. In his memoir, Graves indicated that he must have been at full stretch in his stride to escape emasculation. However, a fragment also passed through his lung. He was put in an ambulance, lost consciousness, and was left for dead until someone noticed him breathing—but not before his commanding officer sent off a letter to his mother that he had died gallantly.

Sassoon, for one, heard about his supposed death:

So he and Tommy [David Thomas] are together, and perhaps I'll join them soon. 'Oh, my songs never sung, And my plays to darkness blown!'—[Graves's] own poor words written last summer, and now so cruelly true. . . . Robert might have been a great poet; he could never have become a dull one. In him I thought I had found a lifelong friend to work with."<sup>8</sup>

However, one of his London publishers shortly cabled Sassoon that Graves was indeed alive. "Silly old devil . . . he always manages to do things differently from other people."<sup>9</sup>

Very shortly, it was Sassoon's turn—he was invalided back to England with trench fever. Thus, both Graves and Sassoon found themselves once again in communication. First they visited Graves's home in Harlech, near Wales, then they traveled to Sas-



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soon's home in Kent. The visit discomposed Graves. Sassoon's mother was trying to make spiritual contact with her son Hamo, killed in the Dardanelles. According to Graves, he was awakened at night by wrapping sounds and shrieks, and found this "worse than France," and left abruptly. This description in Graves's memoirs offended Siegfried and was, in fact, untrue, since Graves managed to accept the family hospitality for another fortnight.

At that time, however, Graves was very much under Sassoon's influence. They agreed that they should make no public protest over the war, but to keep up the reputation of poets as men of courage by being back at the line.

Siegfried had no trouble demonstrating his courage. He received the Military Cross for bringing back wounded from a raid, and was recommended for the Victoria Cross for bravery—he had occupied that German trench for several hours, alone.

His poetry continued to express the carnage and unforeseen suffering of the war:

The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs

.....

And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like sodden sand-bags loosely filled;

.....

Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.

.....

*(Counter-Attack)*

This initial stanza of the poem, about a failed counterattack, was memorized by Winston Churchill, seeing it not as a protest against the war but as a means of increasing the war effort by showing what a soldier can endure.

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In April 1917, Sassoon was wounded, shot in the throat. He returned to London for convalescence in a state bordering on madness. He told Graves, who was also convalescing in England, that he would like to shoot Lloyd George, the new prime minister. Graves in fact had met Lloyd George several months before, and was impressed by his eyes "of a sleep-walker." Sassoon began to meet with a group of pacifists, Bertrand Russell among them. They would considerably influence his actions in the near future.

Disabled

After Wilfred Owen arrived in France with the Lancashire Fusiliers in late 1916, he entered the valley of the Somme, a scene of heavy fighting since the previous July. He wrote to his mother after four days in the trenches:

My dug-out held 25 men tight packed. Water filled it to a depth of 1 or 2 feet, leaving say 4 feet of air. . . .

The Germans knew we were staying there and decided we shouldn't.

Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life. . . .

I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water. . . .<sup>10</sup>

For almost five months he was involved in intermittent heavy fighting. His poetry gave evidence that murder and death were not the elements that the soldiers disliked about the war. Killing aroused little revulsion and fear of death was repressed, but revenge was a strong motivation. Soldiers rarely wrote about the condition of the trenches, nor would it pass the censors if they did. Unprecedented carnage and unforeseen suffering were more shocking to the audience of these war poets than any pacifist argument could be.

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Some of Owen's poetry was similar to Sassoon's in reflecting the tension of constantly standing guard:

Where once an hour a bullet missed its aim  
And misses teased the hunger of his brain.  
His eyes grew old with wincing, and his hand  
Reckless with ague. Courage leaked, as sand  
From the best sand-bags after years of rain.

.....

With him they buried the muzzle that his teeth had kissed,  
And truthfully wrote the Mother, "Tim died smiling".

(S.I.W.)

In May 1917, Wilfred was observed by his commanding officer to be behaving strangely. He was shaky, tremulous, his memory confused. He was diagnosed as having neurasthenia. He was evacuated to England and then to Edinburgh. He was considered unfit for service for six months and was posted to Craiglockhart, a sprawling Italianate institution built in the late 1870s as a hydro-pathic establishment, to sooth backs and nerves. It was a gloomy building built on a craggy prominence overlooking Edinburgh, with no natural light in the corridors . The hospital was supervised by Dr. William Rivers, a neurologist, an alienist who had charge of about one hundred shell-shocked patients at a time, mostly officers.

Owen had had an early interest in botany, and one of the physicians at the Hydro, as it was called, was an ardent botanist. A field club was organized and Wilfred contributed an oral presentation to one of their weekly Monday-evening meetings, on the perceptions of plants. He asserted that:

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. . . Plants have all the elements of perception . . . they have the glimmerings of sight; . . . vaguely and sleepily, they feel. . . . The same motives which make us wear tin-helmets in certain environments, and carry bayonets, . . . also actuate a plant, when it produces special protective coverings, sharpens its spines, wastes its young substance in riotous colours, allows those colours to fade immediately fertilization is accomplished.<sup>11</sup>

A literary journal had been initiated at the hospital just before Wilfred arrived, named the *Hydra*, and on the basis of his presentation and interests, he was asked to be editor and accepted.

### A Soldier's Declaration

It was about a month after Owen's arrival at Craiglockhart that Sassoon also arrived. Siegfried's arrival resulted from a series of events which placed him in great prominence because of his strong views of the war. He could just as easily have found himself in prison as a traitor. Sassoon had been recovering from the bullet wound in his neck a few months before. In London, he found himself in contact with many pacifists, including Bertrand Russell. July 1917 found Owen in Craiglockhart, Sassoon in his family home in Kent, convalescing, and Graves on the Isle of Wight, this time convalescing from severe bronchitis. One day in late July Robert came across a newspaper clipping of *A Soldier's Declaration*. It filled him with anxiety and unhappiness. It was a declaration by Sassoon against the conduct of the war.

It had initially been addressed to his commanding officer, and went in part:

I am writing you this private letter with the greatest possible regret. I must inform you that it is my intention to refuse to perform any further military duties. I am doing this as a protest against the

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policy of the Government in prolonging the War by failing to state their conditions of peace. . . .

I am fully aware of what I am letting myself in for.<sup>12</sup>

Enclosed was a statement of reasons for this decision.

Sassoon fully expected a court-martial but was greeted by friendly puzzlement when he reported back immediately to his unit in England. He had, in fact, been several days overdue, contemplating and drafting his letter. In a symbolic act, Siegfried also threw his Military Cross into the Mersey River.

Robert Graves entirely agreed with this statement but realized that Sassoon was in no physical condition to suffer court-martial and imprisonment. He got himself posted back to Litherland, a military unit near Sassoon, and arranged with a sympathetic officer to have Siegfried appear before a medical board to consider his condition. Sassoon was at first reticent, reconciled to a court-martial. However, Graves convinced him to come before the board, informing Siegfried that if he persisted in his refusal to appear, he would be certified insane. He would never get the court-martial he wanted. This was a fabrication. Sassoon, however, felt it prudent to appear, and as a result, was committed to Craiglockhart as a patient. Graves was ordered to escort him there.

*Il Miglior Fabbro*

At the military hospital, in the company of Owen, Sassoon immediately set himself to writing terrifying poems. And there, after several weeks, Owen knocked on his door. Three days before that fateful meeting, Owen had written to his mother:

I have just been reading Siegfried Sassoon, and am feeling at a very high pitch of emotion. Nothing like his trench life sketches has

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ever been written or will ever be written. . . . if I had a choice of making friends with Tennyson or with Sassoon I should go to Sassoon.<sup>13</sup>

I have noted the slight condescension with which Sassoon first greeted Wilfred. At the time, Sassoon had already published some work in reputable journals and had many contacts in the literary world, and Owen was still unpublished. However, they had both been influenced in their poetry by the romanticists—and Swinburne's cadences had been found in both of their works before the war.

Note the early lyricism of Owen:

Sing me at morn but only with your laugh;  
Even as Spring that laugheth into leaf;  
Even as Love that laugheth after Life.

*(Song of Songs)*

Owen admired Sassoon's lyricism:

Rain—he could hear it rustling though the dark;  
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;  
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers  
That soak the woods;

.....

But death replied: "I choose him." So he went,  
And there was silence in the summer night;

.....

*(The Death-Bed)*

On his part, Sassoon was the first to recognize Owen's true potential, noting that the "sumptuous epithets and large-scale imagery, its noble naturalness and the depth of meaning, had impressive affinities with Keats."<sup>14</sup>

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In reflections of Owen long after they first met, Sassoon wrote that:

He wasn't a fine-drawn type. [He loathed Wilfred's grammar school accent.] There was a full-blooded robustness about him which implied reserves of mental energy and solid ability. . . . it wasn't a spiritual face. . . . [His eyes seemed], like much else in his personality, to be instinctively guarding the secret sources of his inward power and integrity.<sup>15</sup>

Owen insisted that Siegfried contribute some poetry for the *Hydra*, and Siegfried convinced his reticent friend to insert his own contributions into the journal he edited. Contributions by Wilfred and Siegfried appeared in the September 1 number, making it probably the most distinguished literary issue of a magazine to ever come out of a military medical hospital.

Sassoon clearly had a strong influence on Owen's poetry. For example, Sassoon's poem *Enemies* may have influenced Owen's *Strange Meeting*:

*Enemies:*

He stood alone in some queer sunless place  
Where Armageddon ends.

. . . . .

and suddenly there thronged  
Round him the hulking Germans that I shot

. . . . .

Those patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men;

. . . . .

At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand  
Because his face could make them understand.

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### And Owen's *Strange Meeting*:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.  
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,

one sprang up, and stared  
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,

"Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn."

"None," said that other, "save the undone years,

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.

Let us sleep now. . . .”

## An Inspector Calls

Owen first met Robert Graves when Robert came to visit Siegfried at Craiglockhart. Siegfried would not miss his golf morning and so Owen agreed to meet Robert at the railway station. Owen's impression of Graves was that "He is a big, rather plain fellow, the last man on earth apparently capable of the extraordinary, delicate fancies of his books."<sup>16</sup> Graves thought Wilfred "a quiet, round-faced little man." He was given a copy of one of Owen's poems, *Disabled*:

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting long for dark,

Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park  
Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,



### *How Sweet It Is . . .*

Now he will never feel again how slim  
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands;  
All of them touch him like some queer disease.

Graves wrote to a literary contact: "I have found a new poet for you, just discovered, one Wilfred Owen: this is a real find . . . the real thing, when we've educated him a trifle more."<sup>17</sup> Owen, on his part, asked his sister to get copies of Graves's published poetry for him.

Graves got down to work, trying to educate Wilfred.

Owen, . . . you are a poet, [Graves wrote], but you're a very careless one at present. One can't put in too many syllables into a line & say ' . . . That's my way of writing poetry.' . . . one must observe the rules when they are laid down by the custom of centuries. A painter or a musician has no greater task in mastering his colours or his musical modes & harmonies, than a poet.<sup>18</sup>

In the same letter, Graves wrote to him: "Do you know, Owen, that's a damn fine poem of yours, that 'Disabled.'"<sup>19</sup> Very quickly he pointed out the "metrical outrages," criticized extra feet in the lines, and the use of jingles. Owen changed very little of the poem.

### *In My Craft or Sullen Art*

Sassoon, though, strongly influenced Owen, and there are indications that Owen's craft influenced Sassoon's poetry as well. For example, in Owen's poem *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, Sassoon's amendments of the first draft were heavily influential. The original title was *Anthem for Dead Youth*, which Sassoon advised him to change.

*How Sweet It Is . . .*

The first draft

What passing bells for those who die so fast?  
Only the monstrous anger of our guns  
Let the majestic insults of their mouths  
Be as the requiem of their burials.

.....

was finally be changed to

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

.....

*(Anthem for Doomed Youth)*

In his turn, Owen influenced Sassoon, by leading him to insert more abundant imagery, and alliterative and assonanced patterning. Owen used parhyme, in which the first and last consonants of a word were the same: ardour, odour, Eider, toll, toil, tool, etc.

These forms influenced by several of Sassoon's poems, for example, *Attack*:

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun  
In wild purple of the glow'ring sun,  
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud  
The menacing scarred slope;

.....

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,

*How Sweet It Is . . .*

They leave their trenches, going over the top,  
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,  
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,  
Flounders in the mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

John Masfield considered this Sassoon's finest war poem.

After they had left the Craiglockhart hospital, Sassoon introduced Owen to his publisher, Robert Ross, who in turn acquainted Wilfred with the London literary scene. He met Arnold Bennett, H. G. Wells, and Osbert Sitwell, among others. Ross also introduced Owen to many of Sassoon's friends, and fostered his acquaintance with Graves. Indeed, he attended Graves's wedding in early 1918 when Sassoon, having rejoined his regiment, was ensconced in Ireland. Wilfred presented the newlyweds with eleven apostle spoons. According to Graves, Wilfred remarked that "the twelfth had been court-martialled for cowardice and was awaiting execution."<sup>20</sup>

Goodbye to All That

Sassoon and Owen now returned to active service. Siegfried felt that his continuing presence with the men in the ranks was important. Sassoon, in fact, could have remained at Craiglockhart for the remainder of the war but chose to return to the front, which he felt would improve his feeling of well-being, the importance of his feeling for the men in the ranks, and the desire to continue his protest by his writing. To him, army life away from the front was demoralizing. After Ireland, Sassoon was stationed in Egypt and returned to France in early May 1918, serving again as a company commander stalking no man's land. In July, his sergeant mistook him for a German when he was returning from

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patrol and shot him in the head. Siegfried convalesced in England for the rest of the war.

Graves remained with his unit in Wales and Ireland. He was decommissioned early in 1919 just as he was developing influenza. He almost died of it. When he was demobilized, he was officially suffering from neurasthenia or shell shock. He survived to look forward to a long career of poetry, literary criticism, and novel writing. In 1929 he left England for a permanent home in Majorca, his valedictory being his memoir up to that time *Good-bye to All That*.

Robert Graves lived a long and vigorous life. He achieved great success with his two books *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, assisted by a popular television adaptation. In his later years, his mind turned back to the war. "I am in hell," he said in 1979. He developed increasing dementia. For the last five years of his life he showed no recognition at all. Unlike many of his comrades, he went gentle into that long night at the age of ninety.

Sassoon, for his part, could have written a book with the title "Hello, Again, to All That." He kept looking backward to that period. He suffered nightmares for many years, seeing the faces of dead comrades in the crowds he passed. For Sassoon, the war never seems to have ended. He sought peace, first in marriage and then in Catholicism. He objected to being known mainly as a war poet, but he remained a memorialist of the war, as late as 1945 with *Siegfried's Journey*. In 1935, he observed: "I have always—and increasingly—seen and felt the present as material for memories—I am as it were *living in the past already*, . . ."<sup>21</sup> He died serenely at age eighty.

Wilfred Owen rented a cottage in England early in the last year of the war and produced poems of a wider perspective than Sassoon ever achieved:

*How Sweet It Is . . .*

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

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

*(The Show)*

In May 1918, six months before the Armistice, he returned to France for active service. He wrote his mother:

I want no limelight, and celebrity is the last infirmity I desire. . . .  
I have already more than their recognition: I have the silent and  
immortal friendship of Graves and Sassoon. . . . Behold are they not  
already as many Keatses?<sup>22</sup>

In late September, he led his company, besieged by concentrated German fire, back to safety. Like Sassoon, he received a Military Cross. One week before the Armistice, while encouraging his men to repair a damaged footbridge under withering enemy fire, he was shot and killed. He was twenty-five years old. As the years have passed, he has gained increasing recognition as a poet. It is conceivable that he could have become one of the great poets of the last century had he lived a normal life span.

Only four of Owen's poems appeared in print in his lifetime. Siegfried Sassoon edited an edition of twenty-three of his poems in 1920 and Edmund Blunden, another remarkable war poet, published an edition of fifty-nine poems in 1931, and finally, C.

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Day Lewis published seventy-nine poems in 1964. Sassoon commented in 1920: "He never wrote his poems (as so many war poets did) to make the effect of the personal gesture. He pitied others; he did not pity himself."<sup>23</sup> Many years later, Sassoon acknowledged the superiority of Owen's poetic expression compared to his own.

In the boneyard that was Flanders and Picardy, a second conflagration passed through. Yet, the relics of the first still linger, and every week bones come to light. Off the road there are rusted buckles, and corroded small arms ammunition. There are still traces of the zig-zag of trenches. The smell of rusted iron still pervades the air in damp weather. In the relics of this past are the poetic memories that created a new cadence of expression, with rough meter, and squalid images. Nonetheless, the brilliant sunsets and the massing clouds override these images and join these memories with a bittersweet scent.

## Notes

1. John Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 205.
2. Jean Moorecroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 215.
3. Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (London: Penguin, 1960), 112-13.
4. Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 41.
5. Wilson, 216.
6. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 57.
7. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1928), 304.
8. Wilson, 276.
9. Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 94.
10. Stallworthy, 156.
11. Ibid., 199.
12. Wilson, 379.
13. Stallworthy, 204.
14. Ibid., 221.
15. Wilson, 409.
16. Stallworthy, 226.
17. Martin Seymour Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 66.
18. Stallworthy, 229.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 258.
21. Wilson, 526.
22. Stallworthy, 263-64.
23. Fred D. Crawford, *British Poets of the Great War* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988), 174.

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