

# IVOR GURNEY

## Severn & Somme *and War's Embers*

edited with an introduction by RKR Thornton



*Severn & Somme*  
and  
*War's Embers*



Photograph of Gurney dated "Christmas 1917" (GA 5.10.15). Probably that which he refers to in a letter in November 1917 (WL234).

IVOR GURNEY

*Severn & Somme*

and

*War's Embers*

edited by R. K. R. Thornton

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## A BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

- 1890 Ivor Bertie Gurney born 28 August at 3 Queen Street, Gloucester, son of a tailor. Alfred Cheesman stood as godfather.
- 1890s Move to 19 Barton Street. Attends National School and All Saints Sunday School.
- 1896 Purchase of family piano.
- 1899 Graduates to full membership of choir of All Saints.
- 1900 Wins place in Cathedral Choir, and goes to King's School. Begins to learn organ; meets F. W. Harvey.
- 1905ff Years of intimacy with Cheesman, and Margaret and Emily Hunt, who encourage his artistic talents.
- 1906 Articled pupil of Dr Herbert Brewer, organist of Gloucester Cathedral. Herbert Howells a fellow pupil from 1907.
- 1911 Wins scholarship of £40 per annum to Royal College of Music where he goes in Autumn. Meets Marion Scott.
- 1912 Friendship with Herbert Howells and Arthur Benjamin. Meets Mrs Voynich. Composes the "Elizas". Early signs of physical and mental illness.
- 1914 War declared on August 4th. Gurney volunteers but is refused.
- 1915 Volunteers again and is drafted into the army on February 9th as Private no. 3895 of the 2nd/5th Gloucesters.  
Battalion goes to Northampton in February, Chelmsford in April, Epping in June, and back to Chelmsford in August. Briefly in band in September.

- 1916 To Tidworth on Salisbury Plain in February and to Park House Camp for Active Service Training. Leaves for France on 25 May. 15 June, first Front line fighting (in the Fauquissart-Laventie sector). In August in hospital for teeth and glasses. Plans book of poems. December to February, has job in Sanitary Section.
- 1917 April, wounded on Good Friday. Sent to hospital at Rouen for six weeks. Given new number 241281 and transferred to Machine Gun Corps. Battalion moves to Ypres front in August. 10(?) September gassed at St Julien (Passchendaele). Shipped to Bangour War Hospital in Edinburgh. Falls in love with nurse Annie Nelson Drummond. *Severn & Somme* published in November. Transferred to Command Depot at Seaton Delaval.
- 1918 February, in Newcastle General Hospital for "stomach trouble caused by gas". March, convalescing at Brancepeth Castle. June, in Lord Derby's War Hospital in Warrington. July, transferred to Napsbury War Hospital, St Albans. Discharged in October. Munitions work until Armistice in November.
- 1919 March, second impression of *Severn & Somme*. May, death of father; publication of *War's Embers*.  
Return to Royal College of Music
- 1919-22 Variety of temporary jobs: organist, cinema pianist, tax officer, farm labourer. Fluent output of poems and songs. Increasing signs of mental disturbance.
- 1922 Committed to asylum at Barnwood House in Gloucester in September and transferred to the City of London Mental Hospital at Dartford in Kent. Much writing, some music, many poems and autobiographical-poetical letters of appeal.
- 1937 Dies at Dartford on 26 December. Buried at Twigworth.

# INTRODUCTION

Ivor Gurney published only two books of poems in his lifetime, *Severn & Somme* (1917) and *War's Embers* (1919). Apart from a small number of poems published in periodicals and newspapers, that was the sum of the material upon which his reputation as a poet rested until the first selection of his poetry was made in 1954. His reputation as a musician, and particularly as a writer of song-settings, had fared somewhat better and there was a more substantial body of material and a strong interest in his music. In the last ten years the balance has been adjusting in favour of the poetry, upon which particular attention has been focussed by the publication of P. J. Kavanagh's edition of *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney* (1982). This gave us a much more wide-ranging view of the types of poetry of which Gurney was capable, and demonstrated the intensity and power as well as the delicacy, poignancy and comedy which make his poetry so lively.

In order to make the point clearly about the size of Gurney's achievement and its quality and range, the later poetry gets pride of place in the *Collected Poems*, but at the cost of not representing as fully as some might like the characteristics of the early books. Only twenty-three of the hundred and four poems which they included were reprinted; and so it seemed worth while to republish on the fiftieth anniversary of Gurney's death complete reprints of these two early volumes which represent his promise and ambition and define his early achievement.

In these volumes Gurney works towards his notion of the matter and manner for poetry, from imitations of Rupert Brooke in "To the Poet Before Battle", through questionings and contradictions of Brooke, to Laforgue-like ironic juxtapositions in poems like "At Reserve Depot". The language and apparently random detail of his poems was criticised in some reviews of the time as too

journalistic, but they form the basis of his later style, and counter-balance both his musical gift and his idealistic strain. His attempts to achieve a musical rather than a simply metrical force make the poems always interesting, especially where the conventional lyric and the colloquial in language and rhythm begin to struggle with each other. A good example of this is in his development of what a reviewer called his "diminished double rhyme", which acts rather as Wilfred Owen's half-rhymes do. Gurney probably developed this himself, and it becomes a characteristic feature of his later work, but he may have seen hints of it in the work of others, since he was an assiduous reader of contemporary poetry and responded eagerly to its innovations.

In the letters and appeals which Ivor Gurney wrote from the Asylum where he spent the last fifteen years of his life he repeatedly refers to himself as "War poet", and it is true that much of the poetry which he wrote concerns itself either directly or obliquely with his experiences in France and Belgium in 1916 and 1917. But his poetry is no more limited to war than it is to Gloucester, another of his essential passions which links up with the first in the title and interests of *Severn & Somme*. Comparisons with other poets of the First World War, however, need to recognise the difference between those poems written at the time of the conflict and those poems written afterwards. As Gurney asserted when suggesting that Rupert Brooke would not have developed, "Great poets, great creators are not much influenced by immediate events; those must sink in to the very foundations and be absorbed" (WL 34). None the less, Gurney was "hurt into poetry" by his experiences, and to immediate effect. Like many of those who wrote about the war and did not survive it, he wrote of his responses with an urgency which balances the perhaps hasty quality of the technique; but just because he *did* survive the war, we must not forget what he wrote during the war.

At about the time of the publication of *War's Embers*, Gurney reported to Marion Scott that Shanks had told him that Squire considered Gurney the best of the young men just below the horizon (GA 46.30.5). The books here republished indicate the grounds on which that judgement could reasonably be made. They are the poems of a developing poet who is a remarkable musician.

They are also light and lyrical, and it seemed best to keep the poems to the forefront of the book and to leave the notes to the

back for those who wish for the wealth of detail that is available on the poems and their publication. The Gurney Archive in Gloucester Public Library is based on the material collected by Marion Scott from her years of correspondence with Gurney and her acting as "Grand Literary Agent" (and also importantly as one who enthusiastically insisted to him that he is both a poet *and* a composer). She collected carefully and so it is possible to follow with some minuteness the process of the poems and the books.

The texts for the poems are taken without alteration from the original editions. Gurney did much later add to, alter, and rewrite some of the poems, but in a way which completely changes the spirit of the books. It seemed best therefore to take the poems as representative of the Gurney of 1917–19. Even without the bias of friendship, what F. W. Harvey wrote of the second book is not too far out: "Though there may be a dozen or so bad lines, there is not a bad poem in the book".

*Note* The following abbreviations are used throughout the book:

WL *Ivor Gurney War Letters*, 1983

GA Gurney Archive (Gloucester Public Library)



