

The Collected Poems of WILFRED OWEN

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
C. DAY LEWIS

With a Memoir by
EDMUND BLUNDEN

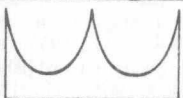
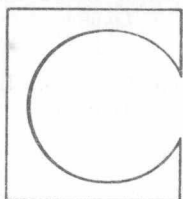


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In common with every other reader of Owen's poetry, I am indebted to Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, whose devoted editing of the poems, in their editions of 1920 and 1931, did so much for Owen's fame and has so considerably lightened the task of the present editor. I am grateful to Edmund Blunden also for allowing me to reprint, with a few minor alterations, the Memoir he wrote for the 1931 edition.

C.D.L.

MAIN DATES OF WILFRED OWEN'S LIFE

March 18, 1893

Born, at Plas Wilmot, Oswestry, Shropshire, in the house of his maternal grandfather, Edward Shaw. The Owen family remained here till 1897.

1895

Birth of Mary Owen.

1897

Birth of Harold Owen. The family had moved to Shrewsbury in the spring of this year. After about a year, the Owens moved again—to Birkenhead.

1900

Birth of Colin Owen.

April 30, 1900

Wilfred Owen registered for entry into the Birkenhead Institute. He joined the school on June 11 of this year, and remained there until 1907, when the family returned to Shrewsbury.

1907

Owen began attending the Shrewsbury Technical School as a day boy.

September 1911

Matriculated at London University.

October 1911 to summer 1913

At Dunsden vicarage, Oxfordshire, as pupil and lay assistant to the Reverend Herbert Wigan.

c. August 1913

Obtained post as tutor in English at the Berlitz School of Languages, Bordeaux. Took up the post in September.

c. July 1914

Left Berlitz School, became tutor to two boys in a Catholic family in Bordeaux.

c. September 1915

Returned to England.

October 22, 1915

Joined the Artists' Rifles.

June 4, 1916

Commissioned in Manchester Regiment.

c. December 29, 1916

Sailed to France on active service, attached to Lancashire Fusiliers.

March 19, 1917

Sent to 13th Casualty Clearing Station. Owen returned to his battalion early in April: on May 1 or 2 he was again sent to the 13th Casualty Clearing Station, and from there to the 41st Stationary Hospital. In June he went into No. 1 General Hospital, from which he was returned to England, arriving at the Welsh Hospital, Netley, about June 18.

June 26, 1917

Transferred to Craiglockhart War Hospital, Edinburgh.

November 1917

Discharged from Craiglockhart: posted to Northern Cavalry Barracks, Scarborough.

August 31 or September 1, 1918

Returned to France for active service.

October 1, 1918

Awarded Military Cross.

November 4, 1918

Killed in action, trying to get his men across the Sambre Canal.

INTRODUCTION

WILFRED Owen must remain, in one respect at least, an enigma. His war poems, a body of work composed between January 1917, when he was first sent to the Western Front, and November 1918, when he was killed, seem to me certainly the finest written by any English poet of the First War and probably the greatest poems about war in our literature. His fame was posthumous—he had only four poems published in his lifetime. The bulk of his best work was written or finished during a period of intense creative activity, from August 1917 (in one week of October he wrote six poems) to September 1918—a period comparable with the *annus mirabilis* of his admired Keats. The originality and force of their language, the passionate nature of the indignation and pity they express, their blending of harsh realism with a sensuousness unatrophied by the horrors from which they flowered, all these make me feel that Owen's war poems are mature poetry, and that in the best of them—as in a few which he wrote on other subjects—he showed himself a major poet.

The enigma lies in this maturity. Reading through what survives of the unpublished poetry Owen wrote before 1917, I found myself more and more amazed at the suddenness of his development from a very minor poet to something altogether larger. It was as if, during the weeks of his first tour of duty in the trenches, he came of age emotionally and spiritually. His earlier work, though an occasional line or phrase gives us a pre-echo of the run of words or tone of thought in his mature poetry, is for the most part no more promising than any other aspiring adolescent's of that period would have been. It is vague, vaporous, subjective, highly 'poetic' in a pseudo-Keatsian way, with Tennysonian and Ninety-ish echoes here and there: the verse of a youth in love with the *idea* of poetry—and in love with Love.

And then, under conditions so hideous that they might

have been expected to maim a poet rather than make him, Owen came into his own. No gradual development brought his work to maturity. It was a forced growth, a revolution in his mind which, blasting its way through all the poetic bric-à-brac, enabled him to see his subject clear—'War, and the pity of War'. The subject made the poet: the poet made poems which radically changed our attitude towards war. The front-line poets who were Owen's contemporaries—Sassoon, Rosenberg, Graves, Blunden, Osbert Sitwell—played a most honourable part, too, in showing us what modern war was really like; but it is Owen, I believe, whose poetry came home deepest to my own generation, so that we could never again think of war as anything but a vile, if necessary, evil.

* * *

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born at Oswestry on March 18th, 1893, of middle-class stock. His father, a man of adventurous spirit, had taken himself to India at the age of eighteen, having obtained a job with the Peninsular Railways. After four years he returned to England, married, and took a post on the railway here. But he never reconciled himself to a career which gave so little scope for enterprise and adventure.

Wilfred's mother had been brought up in a Calvinistic and rigidly 'Victorian' atmosphere. Her family had been comfortably off; but when her father died, it was found that he had lived on his capital. Throughout her married life, therefore, she had to subsist and bring up a family on her husband's salary alone. The straitened means of their parents were to affect profoundly the lives of Wilfred, his sister and his two brothers: it can also be surmised that the contrasting nature of his parents—the father's independent, impatient spirit, the mother's gentleness, conventionality and deeply religious disposition—helped to set up in Wilfred's mind that tension between opposites which so often creates the artist.

Both father and mother, though far from being intellectuals, were cultivated people. Mr. Owen was a well-informed man who kept up serious reading to the end of his life, and was not without discernment in the other arts, especially

music. Mrs. Owen had shown, as a girl, considerable technical accomplishment in painting. The civilized atmosphere of the Owen home did much to compensate for the lack of those higher educational facilities which, money being so short, the parents could not give their children. Had Wilfred had the benefit of a University education, for instance, his intellectual development would have been more rapid; but his poetry would not necessarily have been the better for that.

His relationship with his mother, whose favourite he was, remained the closest one in his short life. Indeed, his letters to her* read like those of an only child, with the warmth and the touch of possessiveness which an only son so often shows towards his mother: in his adolescence, these letters tend to be 'literary'; we are aware that he is trying to impress her, just as later, writing from France, he spares her few of the horrors, appealing—though unconsciously and tacitly—for her special sympathy. Towards his sister and younger brothers Owen is very much the eldest son: he writes to them at times almost as if he were their father, with quaint touches of pontificating and lecturing relieved by a levity which is often slightly condescending. We get the impression of a serious, clever but naïf youth, a little smug, a little 'old-fashioned', who feels responsible for the younger members of his family, as might the eldest son of a widowed mother. We see, prefigured here, the sense of responsibility Owen was to feel as an officer towards his own men in France, and as a poet towards all the soldiers fighting and suffering there.

In boyhood, Wilfred Owen had many interests. He studied botany and archaeology, became a competent pianist, began to read widely, moving on from the Sherlock Holmes stories to Dickens, Scott, George Eliot and Ruskin. Years later he was to write from Craiglockhart War Hospital, "Believe me, if the letter of Ruskin is little worshipped today, his spirit is everywhere. My one grudge against that Prophet is that he warned us so feebly against the War." It has been said that Owen was no great reader. Certainly, in his letters to his mother he does not often mention books—or his own

*Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Owen's correspondence are from letters written to his mother.

writing. But, when he died, he left a library of 325 volumes, which was not bad for a young man with very little money to spare. These included editions of many poets—Dante, Chaucer, Goethe, Southey, Gray, Collins, Cowper, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge, Burns, Browning and Tennyson, for instance; a number of French classics and text-books; nearly all Shakespeare's plays; a fair sprinkling of novels, from Jane Austen to Hardy; and miscellaneous volumes attesting to his interests outside literature. Owen's reading was at random perhaps (as a poet's often is), and undirected; but he got through a good deal of it.

At what age he began writing verse, I have not been able to determine. But the poetic temperament was fully formed by the age of eighteen. In a letter of April 2nd, 1911, he wrote "Leslie tells me you are often hearing the nightingale. Is it indeed so enchanting? I crave to hear it, and yet I should almost be afraid lest it should not be as fine as I imagine it." Some MS. notes in Harold Owen's possession, undated, but probably of this period, fill out the picture of a youth oppressed by the vague dissatisfaction and disillusionment, the morbid negativism of adolescence:

Why have so many poets courted death?

1. *Dissatisfaction when visiting some spot of literary or historical association.
The impossibility of seeing the departed hero. Uncertainty of changes in buildings, and landscape.*
2. *Mental fatigue accompanying prolonged gazing at objects of art, paintings, sculpture.*
3. *Same with beauties of Nature—omnipotent sense of transience and temporality.*
4. *Perversity of my nature—when alone, a lovely sight makes me long for someone else to enjoy it with me: with some exquisite [sic] scene or sound (nightingale) or solemn place . . . around me, a companion annoys me with lack of feeling, solemnity, sympathy (yea perception) of my emotion.*
5. *When I am reading or studying, I long to be out, up and doing. When out, on holidays, I feel time wasted and crave for a book.*

On the reverse of the folio Owen wrote,

Consummation is Consumption

We cannot consummate our bliss and not consume.

All joys are cakes and vanish in the eating.

All bliss is sugar's melting in the mouth.

Owen was not so thoroughly introverted at this age as the above notes might suggest. He could look outwards. Writing to his brother Harold, then an art student, in June, 1911, he said,

I wished you could daub some representation of a Field, which I saw blazing with yellow charlock, backed by a Beech-wood of a deep green so nearly black that it puts one in mind of the colour of an ancient black coat assuming its green old-age tints.

Such precise, and rather Hardy-esque, observation is as rare, though, in Owen's youthful letters as in his juvenilia. These early poems, glowing and grandiose like technicolour sunsets, were written in a state of infatuation. Owen had not merely fallen in love with Keats; he felt for him at once a reverence and a strong affinity. On seeing a MS. book of Keats's in the British Museum, he remarked (letter of September 17th, 1911),

His writing is rather large and slopes like mine . . . He also has my trick of not joining letters in a word . . . I seem to be strangely familiar with it.

On this characteristic of Owen, Osbert Sitwell justly observed—"He manifested a tremendous capacity for admiration, for reverence: a quality which perhaps every poet, however much of a rebel he may be in other directions, must needs possess."

* * *

The year 1911 marked a new departure in Owen's life. He had been a pupil at the Birkenhead Institute from 1900 to 1907, then attended the Shrewsbury Technical School. In September, 1911, he matriculated at London University. Money, however, was too short for him to be able to take up courses there. So, in October, he went to Dunsden, Oxfordshire, as a pupil and lay assistant to the vicar.

At this time, Wilfred Owen was still a Christian believer, and there seemed a possibility that he might in due course enter Holy Orders, after studying theology and practising pastoral work under the vicar. The effect of Dunsden upon him, however, was far different from what had been anticipated. The vicar, though an amicable man, does not appear to have been a very inspiring one: from Wilfred's letters home, we learn that the Reverend Herbert Wigan possessed a large number of picture frames, and used to take his pupil into Reading to buy pictures of the right size to fit them. Neither Owen's fellow pupils nor the parishioners offered him any intellectual stimulus. He wrote (letter of January 26th, 1912),

But the isolation from any whose interests are the same as mine, the constant, inevitable mixing with persons whose influence will tend in the opposite direction (away from systematic study)—this is a serious drawback.

But, if intellectual companionship was lacking, his work at Dunsden (for which he received £1 a month) did make one profound impression upon Owen's mind. Visiting among the rural slums of that Oxfordshire parish, he was brought up hard against certain facts of life—squalor, sickness, and a poverty far more crippling than the straitened means of his own family. This experience must have knocked holes in his introspective, subjective habit of mind, and forced him to look outwards at the real world. The tremendous force of indignant compassion which sweeps through his war poems did not have its origin in the Western Front: we feel it first in certain letters from Dunsden.

... a gentle little girl of five, fast sinking under Consumption—contracted after chicken-pox. Isn't it pitiable . . . the Father is permanently out of work, and the Mother I fancy half starving for the sake of four children. This, I suppose is only a typical case; one of many Cases! O hard word! How it savours of rigid, frigid professionalism! How it suggests smooth and polished, formal, labelled, mechanical callousness!

Letter of March 23rd, 1912.