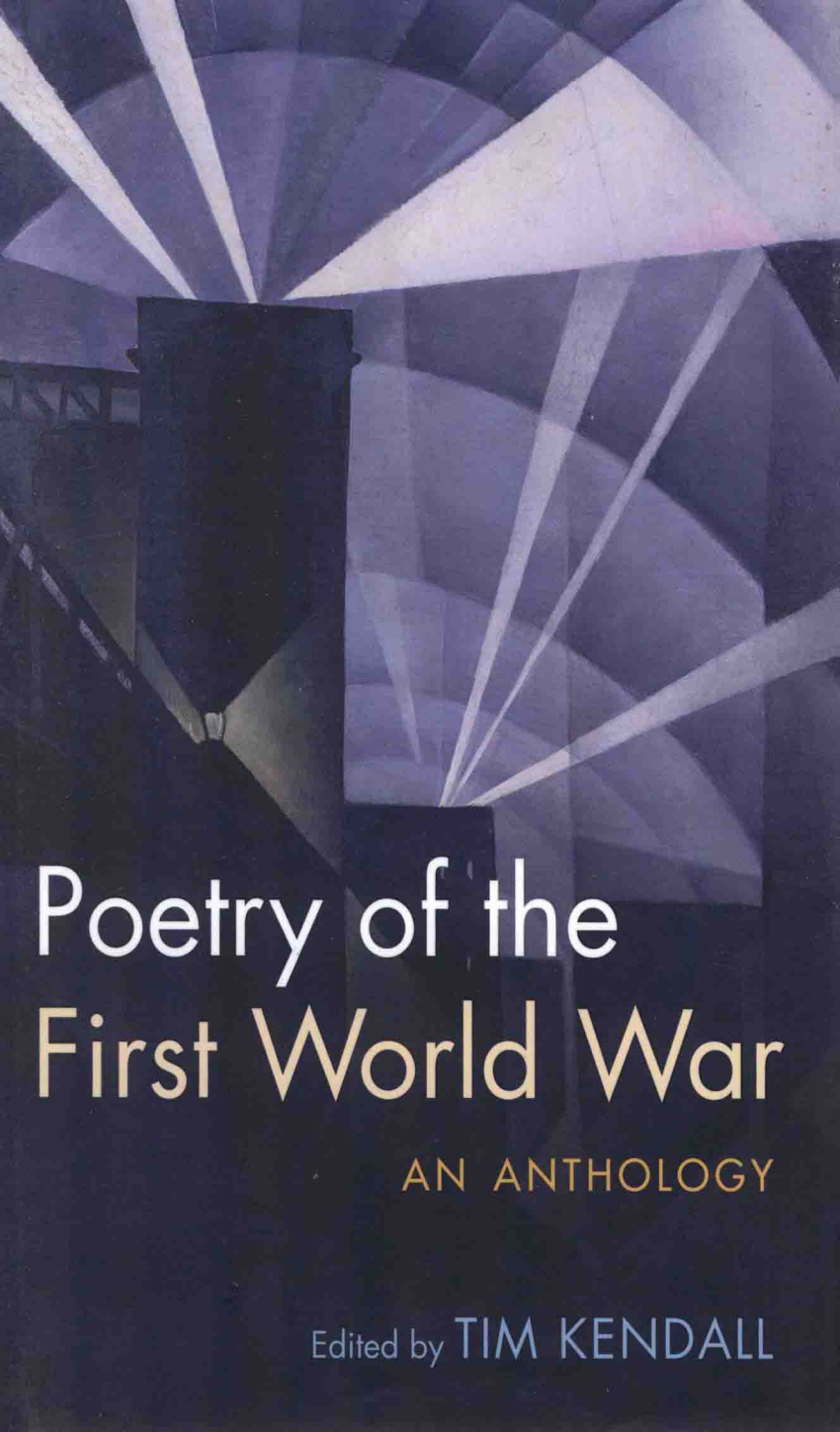

Poetry of the First World War

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by TIM KENDALL

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For
Jon Stallworthy

INTRODUCTION

'Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield?', Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother in December 1914, before providing an unlikely answer: 'The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote!' Although few among Owen's contemporaries would have expressed their resolve quite like that, pride in their nation's literary achievements was a common ingredient in the patriotism of soldiers and civilians alike. Owen could think of no better reason to die for his country than that its language and poetry might live: 'I do not know in what else England is greatly superior, or dearer to me, than another land and people.'[1]

During the First World War, poetry became established as the barometer for the nation's values: the greater the civilization, the greater its poetic heritage. That choice was wisely made because, as Owen implied, poetry was the art in which Britain could confidently claim supremacy over its enemies. The composer–poet Ivor Gurney might freely confess his indebtedness to a German musical tradition, but he insisted—not *entirely* seriously—that Germany 'never had nor never would produce poets'.[2] That supposed flaw was considered by more unforgiving critics, such as the anthologist E. B. Osborn, to be a devastating exposure of ethical failings. Whereas British soldier poetry nobly demonstrated 'the complete absence of the note of hatred for a most hateful enemy', German poets betrayed their savagery, being moved 'more by hatred for other people's countries than by love of their own'.[3]

The close identification of war poetry with a British national character persists to the present day. Its origins can be found in the belief that the writing of verse was a patriotic act because it celebrated and (at least potentially) enhanced the nation's cultural ascendancy. This was, after all, the land of Shakespeare, the tercentenary of whose death in 1916 would become an occasion to find in his works

[1] Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 2 December 1914, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 300.

[2] Ivor Gurney, 'La Rime'. Unpublished for eighty years, Gurney's poem is collected in this anthology for the first time (pp. 125–6).

[3] E. B. Osborn, 'Introduction', *The Muse in Arms* (London: John Murray, 1917), p. xvii.

what has been described as 'a repository and guarantor of moral value'.[4] Poets were able to identify themselves as inheritors of a tradition expressing and embodying the very ideals that were threatened by foreign antagonists. Small wonder that the British government, understanding that poetry could be war by other means, set about marshalling their talents. Many of the most famous writers of the day, including Thomas Hardy, Henry Newbolt, and G. K. Chesterton, came together at Wellington House in London on 2 September 1914, as guests of the War Propaganda Bureau. There they were encouraged to dedicate their art to the war effort. Within a fortnight they appeared as signatories to a letter in *The Times* calling for the 'iron military bureaucracy of Prussia' to be resisted. Such ostentatious loyalty was well rewarded. Three establishment versifiers—Owen Seaman, Henry Newbolt, and William Watson—received knighthoods (in 1914, 1915, and 1917 respectively), the last after publishing a poetic eulogy in honour of the prime minister, David Lloyd George.

The grey eminences may not have noticed, but the War arrived at a time when English poetry was already being refashioned. A new generation of poets—the Georgians—had come to prominence in 1912, thanks to the first of a series of five highly popular anthologies edited by Winston Churchill's private secretary, Edward Marsh. Moderns but not Modernists, these young writers shared the desire to counteract florid late-Victorian rhetoric. They wanted intelligibility in art, they wrote with deceptive simplicity in celebration of the rural landscape, and their assumptions about poetic form tended to be traditional, even conservative. Their first anthology was a commercial triumph, selling 15,000 copies; its successor, published in 1915, shifted 19,000. (Contrast T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for which the UK print run of 443 copies took nearly eighteen months to sell out.) This was, in literary terms, a Georgian War. Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Isaac Rosenberg appeared in the Georgian anthologies, and Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, and Wilfred Owen were closely associated with the movement. Georgianism became the touchstone for poetic quality: Owen felt no greater literary honour than to be 'held peer by the Georgians',[5]

[4] John Lee, 'Shakespeare and the Great War', in Tim Kendall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 140.

[5] Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 31 December 1917, *Collected Letters*, 521.

while Gurney believed that 'The best way to learn to write is to read classics like Milton, Keats and Shakespeare, and the Georgian poets'.[6]

Despite (or because of) its popular appeal, Georgianism has not been treated kindly by subsequent generations of literary historians, who dismiss its style as ill equipped to face the trauma of mass technological warfare. In such accounts, the soldier–poets were *shell-shocked* Georgians, their aesthetic assumptions having rendered them particularly vulnerable to the front's unimagined brutalities; Modernists, meanwhile, were experimenters, responding with appropriate urgency to a broken world. This overlooks the Georgian origins of most surviving war poetry: the only Modernist soldier–poet of any note, David Jones, did not publish his masterpiece of the War, *In Parenthesis*, until nearly twenty years after the Armistice. It also overlooks the capacity for radicalism within Georgian poetry itself. Probably the first poet to describe trench life in its actualities was a civilian, Wilfrid Gibson, whose work would appear in all five of the Georgian anthologies. 'Breakfast', a short lyric written within two months of the War's outbreak, exemplifies the Georgian emphasis on tonal restraint and a deliberately narrow formal and linguistic range:

> We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
> Because the shells were screeching overhead.
> I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
> That Hull United would beat Halifax
> When Jimmy Stainthorp played full-back instead
> Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
> And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.
> We ate our breakfast lying on our backs,
> Because the shells were screeching overhead.

'Breakfast' could not be further from the loud rhetorical styles that dominated the early months of the War. The paucity of rhymes, the repetitions, the ordinariness of the diction—the poem derives its power from its understating of high drama. A soldier dies, but Gibson ends where he began as though nothing has changed. At its best, the spare style of Georgianism was perfectly suited to its new subject matter, which was why Gibson's example showed soldier–poets as otherwise diverse as Sassoon, Owen, and Gurney how to write about

[6] Ivor Gurney to Marion Scott, 9 September 1917, *Collected Letters*, ed. R. K. R. Thornton (Ashington and Manchester: Mid Northumberland Arts Group and Carcanet, 1991), 324.

battle. They would experiment linguistically (Sassoon was the first to use the word 'syphilitic' in a poem), metrically (Rosenberg adopted free verse for poetry 'as simple as ordinary talk'),[7] and even in their rhymes (Owen's pararhymes, such as 'nervous' / 'knive us', deliberately jarred the reader), but they did so from within a context of Georgian beliefs and practices.

The Georgian poetry anthologies provided an influential model for satisfying the needs of a reading public which, with so much verse appearing at such speed, relied increasingly on editors to discern and discriminate. The war years established the anthology as the age's most representative literary medium. Dozens of anthologies appeared before the Armistice. Some focused on poetry by civilians, others on poetry by soldiers; some included foreign nationals from the Allied powers; some concentrated on England at the expense of the rest of Britain. Many continued to be filled with the kind of verse exemplified by the poet laureate, Robert Bridges:

> Thou careless, awake!
> Thou peacemaker, fight!
> Stand, England, for honour,
> And God guard the Right![8]

Older poems on military subjects surged in popularity: Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads*, first published in the mid-1890s, sold 29,000 copies in 1915 alone. But longevity was rare. In 1917, E. B. Osborn boldly announced that wartime verse by civilians had 'nearly all been cast ere now into the waste-paper basket of oblivion'.[9] His own soldier–poet anthologies have fared little better in the eyes of posterity: Robert Graves later admitted that his fellow contributors to Osborn's *The Muse in Arms* had been 'all very gallant and idealistic but with hardly a poet among them'.[10] Gallantry and idealism among soldier versifiers, and religious patriotism among their civilian counterparts, were still commonly mistaken for poetic quality.

[7] Isaac Rosenberg to Edward Marsh, 4 August 1916, *Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Vivien Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 308.

[8] Robert Bridges, 'Wake up, England!', in Anon. (ed.), *Poems of the Great War Published on Behalf of the Prince of Wales's National Relief Fund* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914), 7.

[9] Osborn (ed.), *The Muse in Arms*, p. xiv.

[10] Robert Graves, 'The Poets of World War II', *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry, 1922–1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), 308.

Apart from Rupert Brooke, whose early death occasioned an officially sanctioned martyrology, the best of the soldier–poets had no significant wartime audience. Owen and Rosenberg went unread until the 1920s; Graves and Edmund Blunden attracted only faint praise; Sassoon, the most respected of them all, remained less known for his poetry than for a courageous but ineffectual public protest in 1917 against the War's continuation. 'Did they look for a book of wrought art's perfection, | Who promised no reading, nor praise, nor publication?',[11] Gurney would angrily complain after the War. But despite the noise generated by countless wartime versifiers, somehow deep called to deep and was answered. Soldier–poets were linked by complex networks, which ensured that they read, were influenced by, and responded to one another's work. Sassoon, for example, had met Brooke, read Gibson and Charles Sorley, dedicated a volume of poetry to Thomas Hardy, and befriended Graves and Owen; Brooke knew Edward Thomas, and was fond enough of Gibson to name him as a legatee in his will; Patrick Shaw Stewart went to Eton with Julian Grenfell, and led Brooke's burial party on Skyros, having been part of the same battalion shipped to Gallipoli; Rosenberg, often portrayed as an outsider, nevertheless corresponded with Laurence Binyon as well as Edward Marsh. Many poets gravitated towards Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop in Bloomsbury, and several were published by his imprint (as were the Georgian poetry anthologies). New links were established by survivors after the War. Gurney set poems by Thomas and Sassoon to music, and became acquainted with Blunden, who in turn became a lifelong friend of Sassoon and edited Owen and Gurney. New connections were still being forged as late as 1964, when Sassoon and David Jones—those two veterans of the Royal Welch Fusiliers—met for the first and only time, establishing that, forty-eight years earlier in July 1916, Jones's company had relieved Sassoon's near Mametz Wood.

The soldier–poets came from all backgrounds: Sassoon, Shaw Stewart, and Grenfell were landed gentry, and therefore conformed to what has since become the widespread (and inaccurate) perception that the officer classes were all educated at public schools and Oxbridge. But officers such as Rickword and Owen were products of grammar schools, Private Gurney was the son of a tailor, and

[11] Ivor Gurney, 'War Books', *Collected Poems*, ed. P. J. Kavanagh (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), 258.

Private Rosenberg an East End Jew so desperately impoverished that his pacifist principles gave way to his need to earn money by enlisting. Their various circumstances point to one reason why the War produced so many fine writers: the conscripted army was far bigger, better educated, and more socially diverse than any that had preceded it. Unsurprisingly, attitudes to the War were just as various; Owen's desire to plead the sufferings of his men could hardly be shared by Rosenberg, who was the victim of anti-Semitic bullying within his battalion.

The well-worn argument that poets underwent a journey from idealism to bitterness as the War progressed is supported by Jones, who remembered a 'change' around the start of the Battle of the Somme (July 1916) as the War 'hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair'.[12] Many poets experienced this fall, out of a world where gallantry and decency might still be possible and into an inferno of technological slaughter. Yet the complexity of individual cases reveals just as many exceptions. Elizabeth Vandiver has noted that the majority of soldiers, as well as civilians, 'continued to write in unironic terms about duty, glory, and honour throughout the war and afterwards'.[13] Neither Georgianism nor the Somme cured every soldier of grandiose sentiment. The poet Arthur Graeme West expressed his bewilderment at the mismatch between the sight and stench of the dead, 'hung in the rusting wire', and the ornate idiom with which even those 'young cheerful men' who had 'been to France' continued to describe their experiences.[14] Gilbert Frankau's 'The Other Side' made the point even more bluntly by attacking 'war-books, war-verse, all the eye-wash stuff | That seems to please the idiots at home'. 'Something's the matter,' Frankau's speaker tells one of these naïve versifiers: 'either you can't *see*, | Or else you see, and cannot write.'[15]

The soldier–poets who were capable of seeing *and* writing are

[12] David Jones, 'Preface', *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber, 1937), p. ix. (For extracts from *In Parenthesis* see pp. 200–6.)

[13] Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

[14] Arthur Graeme West, 'God! How I Hate You, You Young Cheerful Men!', *The Diary of a Dead Officer: Being the Posthumous Papers of Arthur Graeme West*, ed. C. E. M. Joad (London: George Allen & Unwin, n.d. [1918]), 79–81. (See pp. 147–9.)

[15] Gilbert Frankau, 'The Other Side', *The Poetical Works of Gilbert Frankau*, ii: *1916–1920* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1923), 31–6.

often credited with having been 'anti-war', and their works are routinely recruited for propaganda by campaigners opposed to later conflicts. In accounts of the War and the art that it inspired, futility has defeated glory as the appropriate response, and Wilfred Owen has become the antidote to Rupert Brooke (who, it is often argued, would have come round to the right way of thinking if he had lived long enough). This risks damaging the achievements of the soldier–poets, because it neglects the extent to which their writings struggle with contradictory reactions to the War. Owen's description of himself as 'a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience' captures the internal divisions of the pacifist who fights, or the officer who (like Owen) acknowledges both the horrors of the War and the undeniable exhilaration and 'exultation' that battle occasionally inspires.[16] Even in his most anthologized poem, 'Dulce et Decorum Est', Owen does not subscribe to an anti-war manifesto. Like Frankau and West, he writes what can be more accurately labelled as anti-pro-war poetry, reminding civilians that the 'high zest' with which they convey their martial enthusiasms is based on ignorance of the terrible realities: 'dulce et decorum' it is certainly *not*, to die in a gas attack with blood 'gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs'. Most soldier–poets—like most soldiers—believed the War to be necessary, but wanted the costs acknowledged and the truths told.

How to tell truths to those in whose name they fought continued to be a vexed question. Having already disapproved of Sassoon's Declaration against the War, Graves advised Owen: 'For God's sake cheer up and write more optimistically—The war's not ended yet but a poet should have a spirit above wars.'[17] But on one issue, at least, the surviving veterans could agree: their experiences had set them apart from non-combatants. As Richard Aldington reported, 'there are two kinds of men, those who have been to the front and those who haven't'.[18] Whatever truths the soldier–poets brought back from the battle zone, they laid claim to a knowledge beyond the reach of civilians. A literate army drawn from all social classes was at last empowered to speak for itself with a fluency of which no previous

[16] Wilfred Owen to Colin Owen, 14 May 1917, *Collected Letters*, 458.

[17] Robert Graves to Wilfred Owen, *c.*22 December 1917, in Owen, *Collected Letters*, 596.

[18] Richard Aldington, *Life for Life's Sake: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 215.

army had been capable. Fortified with his new authority, the soldier–poet profoundly disrupted long debates about the nature and efficacy of poetry itself. Plato wanted to banish poets from his ideal republic because they were liars, lacking knowledge and deceiving with artful language. The figure of the soldier–poet reunited art and ethics, and undertook new obligations by speaking the truth to and about power. When Owen insisted, 'Above all, I am not concerned with Poetry', he artfully rebuked the artful language that Plato condemningly ascribed to poets. 'The true poet', Owen went on to explain, 'must be truthful',[19] not least because the official language of the state and its media had become untrustworthy.

Although Owen conceived the most politically radical account of the poet's role, one danger of his pre-eminence is that it has established exclusionary principles. Other soldier–poets have been measured (and inevitably found wanting) according to their ability to fulfil criteria that treat Owen as the exemplary case. Worse still, civilian poets of the War have been neglected and denigrated on account of an ideology that is overtly hostile to their contribution. Owen showed little patience even with admired precursors; compared with the extremities of combat, their emotions seemed like mere self-indulgence. Having read a biography of Tennyson, he failed to sympathize with that poet's unhappiness: 'But as for misery, was he ever frozen alive, with dead men for comforters?' Owen detected immaturities in the work as well as the man when he concluded that Tennyson 'was always a great child. So should I have been, but for Beaumont Hamel'.[20] (The village of Beaumont Hamel was virtually levelled during the Battle of the Somme.) The soldier–poet has been forced to grow up on the battlefield; the work of other poets amounts to child's play. If Tennyson could attract such resentment, what hope for Owen's civilian contemporaries, such as his cousin Leslie Gunston, whom he witheringly dismissed as rhyming 'with ease' but having 'no originality or power'?[21] Owen expressed this hard-won hauteur around the same time as Osborn's *The Muse in Arms* celebrated soldier–poetry at the expense of its

[19] Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ii: *The Manuscripts and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, Hogarth Press, and Oxford University Press, 1983), 535.

[20] Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 8 August 1917, *Collected Letters*, 482.

[21] Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 5 January 1918, ibid., 526.

civilian rival: 'The making of verse memorials', Osborn maintained, 'is perhaps the only task to which the non-combatant poet may address himself without fear of losing his sincerity, and with some hope of posterity's approval.'[22] Independently, Owen and Osborn made the case that civilians had no right to speak of war, because they knew nothing about it; all they were permitted to do was mourn.

These incipient signs of hostility towards civilian poetry in the latter years of the War seem especially conspicuous because they exist alongside a general animosity that Siegfried Sassoon directed towards civilians of many stripes (inter alia, Church of England bishops, the fathers of soldiers, women, politicians, journalists). In a representative poem like '"Blighters"', Sassoon could make a sadistic revenge fantasy sound unanswerably just:

> The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
> And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
> Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
> 'We're sure the Kaiser loves our dear old Tanks!'
>
> I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,
> Lurching to rag-time tunes, or 'Home, sweet Home',
> And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
> To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

These brutal caricatures (the cackling crowd, the shrill and drunken harlots) command our assent; reader sides instinctively with poet, not wishing to risk becoming implicated along with that music-hall audience. The enemy is found not across no-man's-land but on the home front where 'tiers' have replaced tears. The 'corpses round Bapaume' are 'riddled' but also riddling, because the poem disguises their nationality: Bapaume was a site of mutual slaughter at the Battle of the Somme. Music-hall jokes, Sassoon claims, 'mock' all soldiers, who are united in opposition to this morally complacent civilian enemy.

These attacks on the civilian population by Sassoon and Owen exerted a disproportionate influence in the post-war years; similar prejudices among other soldier–poets were rare and fleeting. Yet after the Armistice a number of polemical anthologies appeared that marginalized civilian poetry by presenting it as homogenous and tainted with pro-war rhetoric. Poets like Gibson were overlooked, or

[22] Osborn (ed.), *The Muse in Arms*, p. xiv.

their biographies were conveniently distorted to suggest that they had, in fact, seen active service. The term 'war poetry' itself shifted meaning to reflect new preferences, and became increasingly synonymous with 'soldier poetry'. Bertram Lloyd's anthology *The Paths of Glory* (1919) developed the trend in its pioneering promotion of an explicit anti-war agenda: war was simply 'an execrable blot upon civilization'. Chief among the guilty, in Lloyd's account, were 'the silver-haired swashbucklers, journalists, and poetical armchair-warriors',[23] the implication being that civilians—poets explicitly listed among them—had been uninformed warmongers. Sassoon, the most generously represented poet in the anthology, seems to have dictated the terms of Lloyd's attack: his short lyric 'The Fathers' depicts two men rather like Lloyd's 'armchair-warriors' as they sit 'Snug at the club' and discuss their sons' good fortune in having the opportunity to fight.

Not all civilian poets spent the War writing stirring verse about God and England and the glorious justice of the cause. Rudyard Kipling was never one to shirk that particular challenge, and his reputation suffered for it after the War; but with a major poem like 'Epitaphs' he stood virtually alone in reminding readers that this was a *world* war, fought by sea and air as well as on land: Kipling gave equal honour to the Hindu sepoy, the VAD nurse, the RAF pilot, the drowned sailor, the civilian bombed in London, and the victim of conflict in Cairo or Halfa. Other poets, notwithstanding Lloyd's criticism, remained sharply aware of ethical dangers in pontificating from the safety of their armchairs. Gibson worried that he might be a kind of war profiteer, 'just making copy of the bloody business';[24] tactfully, he stopped writing about trench life in mid-1915, having influenced the generation of soldier–poets that was just starting to make itself heard. For Thomas Hardy, who privately opposed the War but felt obliged to perform a public role as an encourager of the nation's morale, profound anxieties over transforming other people's sufferings into his own artistic product shaped his poetry and, on occasion, became its subject. In 'I Looked Up from My Writing', the Moon addresses the poet directly, having paused in her search for the

[23] Bertram Lloyd, 'Preface', *The Paths of Glory: A Collection of Poems written during the War, 1914–1919* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), 10, 8.

[24] Wilfrid Gibson to Edward Marsh, 4 December 1915, quoted by Dominic Hibberd, *Harold Monro and Wilfrid Gibson: The Pioneers* (London: Cecil Woolf, 2006), 19.

drowned body of a father driven to suicide by his son's death 'in brutish battle':

'And now I am curious to look
Into the blinkered mind
Of one who wants to write a book
In a world of such a kind.'

Her temper overwrought me,
And I edged to shun her view,
For I felt assured she thought me
One who should drown him too.

This encapsulates the civilian poet's dilemma. A 'blinkered mind' will not be distracted from its work, and makes no effort to alleviate the pain; it either exploits wars and suicides as its subject, or callously and inhumanely ignores them. Self-incrimination merely creates the opportunity for another poem.

This question of entitlement, occasionally broached during the War, dominated its aftermath as returning veterans laid claim to a privileged understanding of the conflict. Women's war poetry, twice removed from the work of the male combatant, therefore became doubly vulnerable to disparagement and neglect. Women had been well represented in wartime anthologies; Claire Buck has estimated that, while 'soldiers on active service wrote less than a fifth of the total output',[25] women comprised a quarter of the published poets. Their subsequent exclusion from the canon by a series of male editors and commentators took no account of the fact that several of the more prominent among them—May Wedderburn Cannan, Mary Borden, May Sinclair, Vera Brittain—had served in France or Belgium in different capacities. Borden's experiences as a nurse at the Somme, sometimes under bombardment, proved that exposure to extremes of suffering were not unique to the soldier: 'All day and often all night I am at work over dying and mutilated men',[26] she wrote in 1916.

Yet the best-known of the women poets continues to be Jessie Pope, whose notoriety relies not on the literary merits of her jingling

[25] Claire Buck, 'British Women's Writing of the Great War', in Vincent Sherry (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

[26] Quoted by Jane Conway, *A Woman of Two Wars: The Life of Mary Borden* (London: Munday Books, 2010), 52.

recruitment verse, but on the knowledge that Owen angrily dedicated an early draft of 'Dulce et Decorum Est' to her. Although he eventually dropped the dedication altogether, scholars encouraged by that initial judgement have taken the opportunity to present Pope as the epitome of civilians' ignorance. This disapproval often conceals a gender bias capable of accepting without question the frank misogyny of a poem like Sassoon's 'Glory of Women' (with its vicious pun: 'You make us shells'). Anthologies like *Up the Line to Death* (1964), which finds room for male civilians among its seventy-two poets but not a single woman, have led Judith Kazantzis to wonder whether there is a silent assumption at work, 'that war is man's concern . . . and that women quite simply cannot speak on the matter'.[27] The strongest women poets wrote powerfully throughout the War about life at home, guilt and loneliness and anxiety, and the private grief endured by wives, sisters, and mothers. Charlotte Mew's 'May, 1915' makes a drama of old poetic tropes, testing their ability to deal with the unprecedented destruction:

> Let us remember Spring will come again
> To the scorched, blackened woods, where all the wounded trees
> Wait, with their old wise patience for the heavenly rain,
> Sure of the sky: sure of the sea to send its healing breeze,
> Sure of the sun. And even as to these
> Surely the Spring, when God shall please
> Will come again like a divine surprise
> To those who sit to-day with their great Dead, hands in their hands, eyes in their eyes,
> At one with Love, at one with Grief: blind to the scattered things and changing skies.

This is no mere verse memorial of the sort approved by Osborn as suitable for civilian poets. Mew may evoke the processes of mourning by which winter leads inevitably to spring, and analogically, pain leads to 'healing', but in her switch from 'Sure' to 'Surely', she lapses from confidence into doubt. For those who 'sit to-day with their great Dead', Love and Grief have become synonymous: they are 'blind' to the blandishments of hope.

Mew's poem was remarkably prescient in its awareness that traditional assumptions about recovery and remembrance would no

[27] Judith Kazantzis, 'Preface', in Catherine Reilly (ed.), *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago, 1981), p. xxiii.

longer suffice. These concerns became pervasive in later war poetry—which, except in the most pedantic sense, did not stop with the Armistice of November 1918. Poems like Mew's 'The Cenotaph' and Sassoon's 'On Passing the New Menin Gate' addressed the inadequacies of commemoration and the many ways in which the living continued to betray the dead. For other poets, such as Ivor Gurney, whose asylum writings from 1922 to 1926 included some of the most powerful lyric poetry about the War, the victims of betrayal were the surviving soldiers who came back to a destitute existence 'on State-doles'.[28] Edmund Blunden—another poet who wrote his best work after 1918—admitted in the 1960s that he continued to be haunted by the War, and his final poem described a return, half a century later, to the site of the Battle of Ancre. David Jones, writing in 1937, expressed the earnest wish that his 'War Book' (*In Parenthesis*) might instead have been about 'a good kind of peace', but quoted from the medieval travel writer Sir John Mandeville to convey the impossibility: 'Of Paradys ne can I not speken propurly I was not there.'[29] War is what these poets knew, and it did not let them escape. In turn, they have determined the ways in which the War has been remembered and mythologized. Not since the Siege of Troy has a conflict been so closely defined by the poetry that it inspired.

[28] Ivor Gurney, 'Strange Hells', *Collected Poems*, 141. (See p. 124.)
[29] Jones, 'Preface', *In Parenthesis*, p. xiii.