

20TH CENTURY CLASSICS

# BEFORE THE BOMBARDMENT

OSBERT SITWELL



Introduced by Victoria Glendinning



OSBERT SITWELL

*Before the Bombardment*



INTRODUCED BY  
VICTORIA GLENDINNING

'Is it Winter the Huntsman  
Who gallops through his iron glades,  
Cracking his cruel whip  
To the gathering shades?'

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## CONTENTS

Introduction	I
Preface	9
I Reveille	11
II The Dawn of Friendship	17
III Situation Vacant	26
IV In Rooms	43
V Facing South	64
VI Terminus	73
VII On the Track	90
VIII The New Reign	101
IX Cannon and Anchor	111
X Treats	117
XI Behind the Lines	142
XII Northern Carnival	150
XIII No Bigger than a Man's Hand	162
XIV The Floodgays	170
XV Church-Interior	178
XVI Avis! Avis! Avis!	187
XVII Ladies of the Old School	194
XVIII The Salon	209
XIX A Little Visit	222
XX St. Martin's Summer	232

XXI	Winter	250
XXII	Promenade	266
XXIII	Tea	271
XXIV	The Pool	282
XXV	Last Post	296
XXVI	Situation Required	301
	Epilogue	306

# INTRODUCTION

By VICTORIA GLENDINNING

OSBERT SITWELL was a prolific writer, and of all the books that he wrote *Before the Bombardment* was his own favourite. He left a request that it should be buried with him; he was cremated, and a copy was duly placed in the urn with his ashes, which are buried in a cemetery near Montegufoni, his castle in Tuscany.

He was in his early thirties when he wrote *Before the Bombardment*, and it was his first novel. He had already published books of poems and short stories, but no full-length fiction. This may be one reason for his affection for the book; another and more important one may be that the writing of it, and its success, helped him across a difficult junction in his life. He and his younger brother Sacheverell had formed a close partnership, sharing a house, friends, and frequent trips abroad. Then in autumn 1925 Sacheverell married, and although Osbert liked and accepted his sister-in-law it was obvious that things could not continue quite as before. Osbert himself would never marry. He had close women friends, and *Before the Bombardment* is proof of that fact that he had understanding and sympathy for women, but his physical inclinations were towards his own sex.

The winter following Sacheverell's marriage was spent in

Amalfi. The brothers had been there together before; now Sacheverell's wife Georgia was with them. Also in the party were Peter Quennell, William Walton, and Adrian Stokes, a young art historian to whom Osbert had a growing romantic attachment. It was not a happy winter, and the tensions became painfully apparent. They were staying at the Capuccini, a hotel high on the crags above the Mediterranean. It had formerly been a monastery, and guests slept in the simple white rooms that had been the monks' cells. The writers of the party worked in their cells every morning. Sacheverell was working on an 'autobiographical fantasia', *All Summer in a Day*; Osbert also turned to scenes of his childhood, and took as his setting a hotel above the sea, like the one in which they were staying. But the hotel in the book faces the cold North Sea, on the coast of Yorkshire in England. Oppressed by the feeling that his world was breaking up, he immersed himself in what was to be *Before the Bombardment*.

His novel is also about a social world that was coming to an end. It is a reconstruction of the Scarborough of his youth, still, because of its distance from London, deeply Victorian in most of its attitudes. The three Sitwell children had spent their summers at Renishaw Hall and their winters in Scarborough, where their parents and both sets of grandparents had houses. Like Miss Fansharpe in the novel, their paternal grandmother had founded a Home for 'fallen women', rounding them up off the streets and setting them to work in a laundry which tore the Sitwells' clothes to shreds every week.

The bombardment in question actually took place, when early one morning in December 1914 three cruisers from the German fleet shelled the town. Osbert's parents were there at the time—Sir George sheltered in the cellar with

the servants, Lady Ida refused to leave her bed—but Osbert himself was in London, preparing to embark with the Grenadier Guards for the war in France.

Scarborough, which in the novel is called Newborough, was a fashionable as well as a popular spa and resort in Edwardian days, while remaining stoutly provincial. The pomps and vanities of Scarborough Cricket Week make a lively chapter in this novel, and were to be described again by the author in one of his volumes of autobiography, *Left Hand, Right Hand*. His maternal grandfather Lord Londesborough was founder and president of this annual event, with the role played by Lord Ghoolingham in the novel; the Sitwells and their relations belonged to the 'county', a group only glimpsed in ironic parenthesis in this story.

In these sideswipes Osbert Sitwell expresses his contempt and loathing for most of the values and attitudes of his class. The case against blood sports has rarely been more vehemently or wittily put, as from their 'icebound and isolated forts of ignorance, the garrisons of pheasant-coloured country gentlemen, accompanied by their mates, sally forth to slaughter the birds of the air', or to watch 'little red-brown beasts' being torn to pieces. Public schools, organized games, golf and golfers, cricket, cricketing wives, and war-mongers get the same acerbic treatment. So, it must be said, do the rich Jews who with Edward VII's patronage were making their way in society—never named here as Jews but as 'ringent Eastern gentlemen' or 'Wise Men of the East', whose guttural accents had been 'hitherto prudently confined to the purlieus of Aldgate and pawnshops of White-chapel'.

These sneers are unattractive. But Osbert Sitwell in this book is anatomizing a society that never recovered from the First World War, and stresses its stupidity, arrogance, hypo-



crisy, and greed in order to throw into relief the poor quality of the lives of the less fortunate—in this case, single women. *Before the Bombardment* is a comedy of manners, its edge sharpened by anger and pity.

Scarborough is a town of boarding-houses and hotels, and in his youth the two most important hotels were the Pavilion—managed by the parents of the actor Charles Laughton—and the Grand, which is the Superb of this novel. In the off-season, no one would stay even at the Superb by choice; in winter the rough sea and cruel east winds make Newborough an unwelcoming place. Miss Collier-Floodgaye and her companion Miss Bramley are the only visitors; they rattle about in the vast cold hotel like frozen peas, resented by the staff, though becoming objects of consuming interest to the semi-invalid genteel elderly of the town, who eke out their declining days and incomes in ‘rooms facing south’.

There is a mixture of nostalgia and appalled horror in Osbert Sitwell’s recreation of period and character. *Before the Bombardment* is only just a novel; he introduces Miss Collier-Floodgaye and Miss Bramley with what is really an essay on the dynamics of the relationship between a paid companion and her employer. Full of insight and understanding, this is good social history and good psychology; there is memorable writing here about dependence, manipulation, pride, and humiliation; and while the social pressures analysed are of their period, the intimate personal politics are universals. Osbert Sitwell’s achievement is to be funny about poor Miss Bramley, and the hopeless pathos of her life, without being condescending.

The novel proceeds in a series of episodic set-pieces: the hotel itself, the winter gardens, the harbour, the cemetery, the market hall, the moors outside the town, the charity ball

at the Superb, the church services, the cricket festival—building up into an exposition not only of a town but also of a social structure. Where the book is weakest, it seems to me, is in those chapters where we are introduced to the permanent inhabitants of Newborough, who seem mere revue sketches, or stereotypes—even though two of those who make guest appearances in this way, the desperate Misses Cantrell-Cooksey, are people treated in depth and sympathetically in an earlier short story, 'Low Tide' (in *Triple Fugue*). What narrative line there is depends on the mischievous interventions of these minor characters; and here *Before the Bombardment* becomes less witty than facetious, and rather repetitive; the genre is that of the E. F. Benson novels that Miss Bramley gets out of the library. Fortunately the more sardonic mode prevails in the novel as a whole.

*Before the Bombardment* is also a poetic novel, in which the imagery consistently contributes to a judgement on humanity that is only made explicit on the last page. The book begins and ends with evocations of the German housemaid's feelings as she rises before dawn to light the fires in the hotel. These passages are both in subject-matter and in manner like prose paraphrases of a poem, 'Aubade', by the author's sister Edith Sitwell. Much of the descriptive writing is modernist in the manner of T. S. Eliot, as can be judged by the harmonious way in which lines from Eliot, used as chapter-headings, mesh with Osbert Sitwell's poetic prose. Notes in music, or colours reflected from stained glass, become clouds of birds or butterflies overhead, in a mode that Osbert Sitwell himself would have called futuristic and which, in today's writers, would be labelled 'magic realism'.

But something odder and more purposeful than this is going on. Although the setting is cold, grey, and unspeak-

ably English, and although the documentation of clothes and personal effects is almost forensic in its precision, the prevailing imagery is exotic. Sometimes the atmosphere is underwater: the sofas and chairs in the empty lounge of the Superb are rocks on the bottom of an aquarium; in the vicarage, the furniture seems like half-living things lurking in the depths of the ocean. Elsewhere it is tropical: London's greenery in fog and gaslight recalls 'a swampy forest in South America'. The Superb is 'an Indian jungle' when 'the overwhelming gold frondage of cornice and capital' is illuminated. The vaulting of the railway station at Ebur (which is York) becomes black foliage in 'the sun slashed jungles in Africa'.

Osbert Sitwell's interest in human behaviour emerges as zoological. The implication is that we have evolved from apes, and that beneath the hypocritical respectability, society is ape-society still. It doesn't worry him very much: 'the only bad ape is the stagnant, incurious ape'. But it makes nonsense of conventional morality. And worse than this, for the moralistic critic in 1926, was the suggestion, in a virtuoso passage, that a devout church-goer such as Miss Collier-Floodgaye, sincerely exalted by incense, music, and colour, was experiencing not a foretaste of Heaven but a sensual race-memory of the beautiful but brutish primeval forest. Dying, she enters not glory but 'silence and darkness'. The promise of rewards in the next world for sufferings endured in this one is just a cruel joke.

It was Osbert Sitwell's betrayal of class, religion, and the whole edifice of 'civilized' social behaviour—perpetrated wittily, even frivolously—that caused the novel to be howled down in some quarters. One Sunday reviewer accused him of spitting on the whole Victorian age; the book was condemned as vulgar; the *Yorkshire Post*, the

local paper of his parents and their friends, called it 'merely caddish'. Only Mary Webb in the *Bookman* praised its wit, depth, subtlety, and 'savage irony'. Naturally, under these circumstances, *Before the Bombardment* was a great success; it was reprinted twice within the first three months, and was taken up by an American publisher. Osbert Sitwell's confidence was restored, and his life took off in new directions.

When he died in 1969 there were, before the Will was read, certain expectations and some speculation among his near and dear about the disposition of his property—followed by surprises and some disillusion. One of the things he did was to leave his copyright and the life-interest in his flat in the castle of Montegufoni to his own 'paid companion'—his secretary, nurse, and last friend, Frank Magro. It is characteristically apt that it should be this novel, whose plot, such as it is, turns on the making of wills and the expectation of legacies, that Osbert Sitwell chose to accompany him to the grave.



## PREFACE

THE gentle reader is invited to approach this novel as if it were a historical romance, an alas! imperfect but imaginative reconstruction of an epoch, the memory of which is almost obliterated, an inquest into the causes and conditions that preceded and perhaps were partly responsible for its effacement. The scene is laid, mainly, in an English seaside town during the opening years of the twentieth century; and the story is as much concerned with this town as with any of the characters that move through its streets.

To understand how far that period with which we deal has retreated from us, it is only necessary to find a fashion-plate of twenty years ago and match it against a Cretan wall-painting in the Ashmolean museum. The distant, mysterious inhabitants of that lost world are infinitely nearer to us in their clothes, and probably in their outlook, than our own parents.

And then seaside towns are always silted up with the debris of the past century. The predominant note at Newborough, before the bombardment, was one of long settled comfort and confident respectability. The town faced the world with a Credo the grounds of which it refused even to examine. This belief in the inherent rightness and essential righteousness of the prevailing system was, in reality, but a survival of that Swiss Family Robinson attitude toward life which the English

had adopted at the outbreak of the nineteenth century and had maintained until its close; and this belief it is, which throws so inexplicable a charm over the whole period. Elsewhere, in the years down which our narrative is laid, it may be that this confident pose was breaking up: but as a wild flower, imagined to be extinct, or an obsolete but unobtrusive wild animal, may yet linger on in a remote Welsh mountain or wide Yorkshire moor, so in this wind-bound, sea-pounded town, the nineteenth century has been allowed to project its heavy shadow across the opening years of the young era. For it is a mistake to think that a century ends everywhere at the same time, however clear may be the transition from one of these artificially made periods to another. Mr. George Moore has described exquisitely how the eighteenth century lay hidden among the lakes and woods of Ireland until the year 1860; and no doubt the enthusiastic amateur of dead epochs can still find the nineteenth century much poorer, rather angry, but none the less sure and respectable, lurking in unobserved corners, in Parliament, in the Church, in a seaside hotel.

AMALFI

## CHAPTER I

### REVEILLE

"When blood is nipp'd, and ways be foul,  
Then nightly sings the staring owl,  
    To-who ;  
To-whit, to-who, a merry note,  
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot."

THE tin tongue rattled on, high up under a dome. So loudly it clacked and racketed through the silence of this vast edifice that, surely, it must have pierced through the layers of cloud, at this season stretched like blankets, one over another endlessly, and must now echo through the ultimate blue imbecility beyond. This cerulean lining, however, was in the winter a thing utterly incredible ; while the grey blankets above and beneath yet invited slumber, warm deep slumber. But on and on it cackled, this idiot tongue, trying to inform the sleeper of its monotonous and invariable message, slave to a slave. It seemed fearful of betraying a trust. Six o'clock, six o'clock, six o'clock, it hammered and ranted.

Through an unconscious cunning born of long experience, the sleeper was able to transform the brief moments which this metallic music occupied into the most lingering period of the entire day. While still fast asleep, she could calculate precisely the last second of the alarum, and only when the final syncopical death-rattle was strangled in the clock's throat, did she, almost automatically, leave the sandy plains or issue forth from



the aromatic summer pine-forests of her native northern Germany. Indeed the bell itself usually played some part in the dream, serving both to lengthen and end it. Now her withered limbs must lumber out of bed into the frozen air ; she must switch on the light and tumble into her tousled, rumpled clothes lying on a chair, and by a judicious, though not too protracted, application of brush and sponge arrange the wisps of flaxen, flocculent hair, the straight pale eyes, the long shapeless nose, the lump on the forehead above the right-hand almost invisible eyebrow, into their usual weekday perspective, imparting to them by this process a cohesion and sense of focus which they had lacked as she lay there sleeping. All these attributes which have been described now centred round a personality, and formed Elisa, the Prussian housemaid at a hotel in the North of England. Every morning she must pass through these extraordinary experiences and mutations which constitute getting-up and dressing in this part of Britain during the winter months.

Every morning it grew colder, colder and colder, and all for fourteen pounds a year ! Ten years of it. She couldn't go on doing it for ever, really she couldn't, though it was better than that first place, at the Rectory ! Angrily, dumbly, she shook out her body, turned off the light, and creaked blunderingly out of the room. Now she was wading through the familiar stillness, a silence infringed by a thousand crepuscular crepitations, of the hotel-corridors. As she moved, these minute, crackling vibrations were lost in the cascades of sound which her clumsy feet unloosed to dash up against tiled walls. Soon it would be light, she supposed ; and, before dawn came, there were the grates and the fires,