

Poems of the First World War

Introduction

This brief selection of poems is based on work by Tom Rank on First World War poetry for a volume in the **York Notes Advanced** series (based on the selection in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, edited by Jon Stallworthy) to be published in September 2008. This will include detailed commentaries on about fifty poems by thirty poets, extensive background material and guidance on further reading.

This small selection aims to cover a range of responses to the war but assumes that some of the more famous poems by writers such as Owen and Sassoon have already been read. Once you have read these you might like to consider the question at the end. For copyright reasons more recent work cannot be included here but there are some suggested poems on the final pages, together with where to find them. For further information and links to resources on the First World War and other literary topics, visit the Literary Connections website: www.literaryconnections.co.uk

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915): Peace

Rupert Brooke's sonnet 'Peace' was inspired by his experience with the Royal Naval Division during the evacuation of Antwerp in October 1914. Brooke wrote the poem later that month, and by the end of the year had written four more to complete a sequence entitled '1914' which includes 'The Soldier', made famous when the Dean of St Paul's Cathedral read it from his pulpit on Easter Day 1915. Preceded by an unnumbered sonnet, the sequence was first published in the periodical *New Numbers* in January 1915. Early in 1915 Brooke sailed for the Dardanelles but died during the passage from a mosquito bite on the lip on April 23rd (St George's Day). He was buried in an olive grove on the island of Skyros.

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love!

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

Charles Sorley (1895-1915): When you see millions of the mouthless dead

Charles Sorley, whose father was Professor of Moral Philosophy at Cambridge, left for year's study in Germany before taking up his place at Oxford University. This was cut short by the outbreak of war and Sorley was briefly detained in Germany before returning to England and enlisting in the Suffolk Regiment. He was killed at Loos just over a year later. This sonnet was found among his belongings.

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When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, 'They are dead.' Then add thereto,
'Yet many a better one has died before.'
Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.

Edward Thomas (1878-1917): As the team's head brass

Edward Thomas was born in London of Welsh descent. A prolific writer of prose and a moderately successful journalist, he began writing poetry in 1912 but did not devote himself fully to the medium until 1913 after a meeting with Robert Frost, the American poet, who by then was living in England. Thomas enlisted in 1915 with the Artists' Rifles and was killed two years later at Arras.

As the team's head-brass flashed out on the turn
The lovers disappeared into the wood.
I sat among the boughs of the fallen elm
That strewed the angle of the fallow, and
Watched the plough narrowing a yellow square
Of charlock. Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.
'Have you been out?' 'No.' 'And don't want to, perhaps?'
'If I could only come back again, I should.
I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose
A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,
I should want nothing more...Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if

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He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.’
‘And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.’ ‘Ay, and a better, though
If we could see all all might seem good.’ Then
The lovers came out of the wood again:
The horses started and for the last time
I watched the clods crumble and topple over
After the ploughshare and the stumbling team.

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937): Ballad of the Three Spectres

Ivor Gurney was an accomplished musician who studied at the Royal College of Music before the war. He served as a private in the Gloucestershire Regiment. His own fate is in some ways reflected in this poem. Wounded in April 1917, he recovered but was then gassed in August and sent home to recover. He had a breakdown and, in Edmund Blunden’s words, ‘passed through a period of exceptional misery’. Although he recovered, the respite was only temporary and he spent the last 15 years of his life, from 1922, confined in an asylum.

As I went up by Ovillers
In mud and water cold to the knee,
There went three jeering, fleeing spectres,
That walked abreast and talked of me.

The first said, ‘Here’s a right brave soldier
That walks the dark unfearingly;
Soon he’ll come back on a fine stretcher,
And laughing for a nice Blighty.’

The second, ‘Read his face, old comrade,
No kind of lucky chance I see;
One day he’ll freeze in mud to the marrow,
Then look his last on Picardie.’

Though bitter the word of these first twain
Curses the third spat venomously;
‘He’ll stay untouched till the war’s last dawning
Then live one hour of agony.’

Liars the first two were. Behold me
At sloping arms by one — two — three;
Waiting the time I shall discover
Whether the third spake verity.

Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918): Dead Man’s Dump

Like Sassoon, Rosenberg was Jewish, but unlike the wealthy, well-assimilated Sassoons, Isaac Rosenberg’s family were poor immigrants from Russia living in the East End of London. He left school at 14 and worked in an engraver’s workshop until his artistic talents allowed him to study at the Slade School of Art. ‘I never joined the war for patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we

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must all fight to get the trouble over... I thought if I'd join there would be the separation allowance for my mother,' he wrote. Rosenberg was killed while on night patrol on 1 April 1918.

The plunging limbers over the shattered track
Racketed with their rusty freight,
Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,
And the rusty stakes like sceptres old
To stay the flood of brutish men
Upon our brothers dear.

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
Their shut mouths made no moan.
They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,
Man born of man, and born of woman,
And shells go crying over them
From night till night and now.

Earth has waited for them,
All the time of their growth
Fretting for their decay:
Now she has them at last!
In the strength of their strength
Suspended—stopped and held.

What fierce imaginings their dark souls lit?
Earth! have they gone into you?
Somewhere they must have gone,
And flung on your hard back
Is their souls' sack
Emptied of God-ancestral essences.
Who hurled them out? Who hurled?

None saw their spirits' shadow shake the grass,
Or stood aside for the half used life to pass
Out of those doomed nostrils and the doomed mouth,
When the swift iron burning bee
Drained the wild honey of their youth.

What of us who, flung on the shrieking pyre,
Walk, our usual thoughts untouched,
Our lucky limbs as on ichor fed,
Immortal seeming ever?
Perhaps when the flames beat loud on us,
A fear may choke in our veins
And the startled blood may stop.

The air is loud with death,
The dark air spurts with fire,
The explosions ceaseless are.
Timelessly now, some minutes past,

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Those dead strode time with vigorous life,
Till the shrapnel called 'An end!'
But not to all. In bleeding pangs
Some borne on stretchers dreamed of home,
Dear things, war-blotted from their hearts.

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shook shoulders slipped their load,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

They left this dead with the older dead,
Stretched at the cross roads.
Burnt black by strange decay
Their sinister faces lie,
The lid over each eye,
The grass and coloured clay
More motion have than they,
Joined to the great sunk silences.

Here is one not long dead;
His dark hearing caught our far wheels,
And the choked soul stretched weak hands
To reach the living word the far wheels said,
The blood-dazed intelligence beating for light,
Crying through the suspense of the far torturing wheels
Swift for the end to break
Or the wheels to break,
Cried as the tide of the world broke over his sight.

Will they come? Will they ever come?
Even as the mixed hoofs of the mules,
The quivering-bellied mules,
And the rushing wheels all mixed
With his tortured upturned sight.
So we crashed round the bend,
We heard his weak scream,
We heard his very last sound,
And our wheels grazed his dead face.

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936): Epitaphs of War

Kipling had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907, the first writer in English to receive the award. Born in India, he had made his name with fiction such as *Kim*, *The Jungle Book*. Kipling was deeply affected by the death in 1915 of his only son John just six weeks after his 18th birthday; his body was never found. Several of the 'Epitaphs' refer to sons and the bitterness of 'Common Form' may in part be directed by Kipling at himself. Following the war he was a member of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission and chose the inscription 'their name liveth for evermore'

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that appears on many war memorials. Kipling's 'Epitaphs' were published in 1919. There is a long tradition of commemoration in this way; after the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos wrote this epitaph to the Spartans who perished there:

Go tell the Spartans, thou that passest by,
That here, obedient to their laws, we lie.

EPITAPHS OF WAR 1914-18

'EQUALITY OF SACRIFICE'

A. "I was a Have." B. "I was a 'have-not.'"
(Together.) "What hast thou given which I gave not?"

A SERVANT

We were together since the War began.
He was my servant—and the better man.

A SON

My son was killed while laughing at some jest. I would I knew
What it was, and it might serve me in a time when jests are few.

AN ONLY SON

I have slain none except my Mother.
She (Blessing her slayer) died of grief for me.

EX-CLERK

Pity not! The Army gave
Freedom to a timid slave:
In which Freedom did he find
Strength of body, will, and mind:
By which strength he came to prove
Mirth, Companionship, and Love:
For which Love to Death he went:
In which Death he lies content.

THE WONDER

Body and Spirit I surrendered whole
To harsh Instructors—and received a soul . . .
If mortal man could change me through and through
From all I was—what may The God not do?

HINDU SEPOY IN FRANCE

This man in his own country prayed we know not to what Powers.
We pray Them to reward him for his bravery in ours.

THE COWARD

I could not look on Death, which being known,
Men led me to him, blindfold and alone.

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SHOCK

My name, my speech, my self I had forgot.
My wife and children came—I knew them not.
I died. My Mother followed. At her call
And on her bosom I remembered all.

A GRAVE NEAR CAIRO

Gods of the Nile, should this stout fellow here
Get out—get out! He knows not shame nor fear.

PELICANS IN THE WILDERNESS

A Grave Near Halfa

The blown sand heaps on me, that none may learn
Where I am laid for whom my children grieve. . . .
O wings that beat at dawning, ye return
Out of the desert to your young at eve!

TWO CANADIAN MEMORIALS

I

We giving all gained all.
Neither lament us nor praise.
Only in all things recall,
It is Fear, not Death that slays.

II

From little towns in a far land we came,
To save our honour and a world aflame.
By little towns in a far land we sleep;
And trust that world we won for you to keep!

THE FAVOUR

Death favoured me from the first, well knowing I could not endure
To wait on him day by day. He quitted my betters and came
Whistling over the fields, and, when he had made all sure,
“Thy line is at end,” he said, “but at least I have saved its name.”

THE BEGINNER

On the first hour of my first day
In the front trench I fell.
(Children in boxes at a play
Stand up to watch it well.)

R.A.F. (AGED EIGHTEEN)

Laughing through clouds, his milk-teeth still unshed,
Cities and men he smote from overhead.
His deaths delivered, he returned to play
Childlike, with childish things now put away.

THE REFINED MAN

I was of delicate mind. I stepped aside for my needs,

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Disdaining the common office. I was seen from afar and killed. . . .
How is this matter for mirth? Let each man be judged by his deeds.
I have paid my price to live with myself on the terms that I willed.

NATIVE WATER-CARRIER (M.E.F.)

Prometheus brought down fire to men.
This brought up water.
The Gods are jealous—now, as then,
Giving no quarter.

BOMBED IN LONDON

On land and sea I strove with anxious care
To escape conscription. It was in the air!

THE SLEEPY SENTINEL

Faithless the watch that I kept: now I have none to keep.
I was slain because I slept: now I am slain I sleep.
Let no man reproach me again; whatever watch is unkept—
I sleep because I am slain. They slew me because I slept.

BATTERIES OUT OF AMMUNITION

If any mourn us in the workshop, say
We died because the shift kept holiday.

COMMON FORM

If any question why we died,
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

A DEAD STATESMAN

I could not dig: I dared not rob:
Therefore I lied to please the mob.
Now all my lies are proved untrue
And I must face the men I slew.
What tale shall serve me here among
Mine angry and defrauded young?

THE REBEL

If I had clamoured at Thy Gate
For gift of Life on Earth,
And, thrusting through the souls that wait,
Flung headlong into birth—
Even then, even then, for gin and snare
About my pathway spread,
Lord, I had mocked Thy thoughtful care
Before I joined the Dead!
But now? . . . I was beneath Thy Hand
Ere yet the Planets came.
And now—though Planets pass, I stand
The witness to Thy shame.

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THE OBEDIENT

Daily, though no ears attended,
 Did my prayers arise.
Daily, though no fire descended
 Did I sacrifice.
Though my darkness did not lift,
 Though I faced no lighter odds,
Though the Gods bestowed no gift,
 None the less,
None the less, I served the Gods!

A DRIFTER OFF TARENTUM

He from the wind-bitten north with ship and companions descended.
 Searching for eggs of death spawned by invisible hulls.
Many he found and drew forth. Of a sudden the fishery ended
 In flame and a clamorous breath not new to the eye-pecking gulls.

DESTROYERS IN COLLISION

For Fog and Fate no charm is found
 To lighten or amend.
I, hurrying to my bride, was drowned—
 Cut down by my best friend.

CONVOY ESCORT

I was a shepherd to fools
 Causelessly bold or afraid.
They would not abide by my rules.
 Yet they escaped. For I stayed.

UNKNOWN FEMALE CORPSE

Headless, lacking foot and hand,
Horrible I come to land.
I beseech all women's sons
Know I was a mother once.

RAPED AND REVENGED

One used and butchered me: another spied
Me broken—for which thing an hundred died.
So it was learned among the heathen hosts
How much a freeborn woman's favour costs.

SALONIKAN GRAVE

I have watched a thousand days
Push out and crawl into night
Slowly as tortoises.
Now I, too, follow these.
It is fever, and not the fight—
Time, not battle—that slays.

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THE BRIDEGROOM

Call me not false, beloved,
If, from thy scarce-known breast
So little time removed,
In other arms I rest.

For this more ancient bride
Whom coldly I embrace
Was constant at my side
Before I saw thy face.

Our marriage, often set—
By miracle delayed—
At last is consummate,
And cannot be unmade.

Live, then, whom Life shall cure.
Almost, of Memory,
And leave us to endure
Its immortality.

V. A. D. (MEDITERRANEAN)

Ah, would swift ships had never been, for then we ne'er had found,
These harsh Ægean rocks between, this little virgin drowned,
Whom neither spouse nor child shall mourn, but men she nursed through pain
And—certain keels for whose return the heathen look in vain.

ACTORS

*On a Memorial Tablet in Holy Trinity Church,
Stratford-on-Avon*

We counterfeited once for your disport
Men's joy and sorrow: but our day has passed.
We pray you pardon all where we fell short
Seeing we were your servants to this last.

JOURNALISTS

On a Panel in the Hall of the Institute of Journalists
We have served our day.

Reading further

The following poems cannot be included for copyright reasons. They can be found in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* or in other collections.

Rose Macaulay (1889-1958): Many Sisters to Many Brothers

The poet and novelist Rose Macaulay went to school and college in Oxford but spent most of her childhood in Italy. She wrote this poem at the beginning of the war; it appeared in the popular anthology for 'boys and girls' called *Poems of Today* in 1915. By 1916, she would seem to have regretted such sentiments, for in her novel *Non-Combatants* she has a character write, in an essay on the 'Effects of the War': 'War's an insanity.... This war's produced a little fine poetry, among a sea of tosh – a thing here and there; but mostly – oh, good Lord! The flood of cheap heroics and commonplace patriotic claptrap – it's swept slobbering all over us; there seems no stemming it.' This poem does not appear in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, but is included by Martin Stephen in his valuable anthology *Never Such Innocence* (Everyman, 1988). The whole of *Poems of Today* can be found online at Project Gutenberg.

Mary Wedderburn Cannan (1893-1973): Rouen

This poem, first published in 1917, is based on Mary Wedderburn Cannan's own work in the Voluntary Aid Detachment at a hospital in Rouen during the war, as the dates at the head of the poem (26 April – 25 May 1915) confirm. She then joined MI5 to work in the Espionage Department in Paris. In her autobiography, *Grey Ghosts and Voices*, she wrote: 'A saying went round, "Went to the war with Rupert Brooke and came home with Siegfried Sassoon". I had much admired some of Sassoon's verse but I was not coming home with him. Someone must go on writing for those who were still convinced of the right of the cause for which they had taken up arms. I did not believe the dead had died for nothing, nor that we should have "kept out of the war" – the dead had kept faith, and so, if we did not grudge it, had we.' Her poem concludes:

...When the world slips slow to darkness, when the office fire burns lower,
My heart goes out to Rouen, Rouen all the world away;
When other men remember I remember our Adventure
And the trains that go from Rouen at the ending of the day.

'Rouen' can also be found in Catherine Reilly's anthology of women's poetry, *Scars Upon My Heart*.

E. E. Cummings (1894-1962): 'next to of course god america i'

The American poet E E Cummings, who published this poem in 1926, was heavily influenced by modernists such as Ezra Pound and T S Eliot. He served as an ambulance driver in France during the war and was arrested on suspicion of espionage because he and a friend had openly expressed pacifist views on the war. His poem includes the lines:

'... what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy dead'

Philip Larkin (1922-1985): MCMXIV

Larkin's poem was first published in 1964, fifty years after the outbreak of hostilities. In it he looks back on Britain in August 1914. Martin Stephen used the last line ('Never such innocence again') as the title for his anthology *Never Such Innocence*.

Owen Sheers (born 1974): Mametz Wood

The Welsh poet Owen Sheers has written about the fighting at Mametz Wood during the Battle of the Somme; his poem (published in *Skirrid Hill*, 2005) was inspired by the discovery, whilst he was making a film about the poet David Jones and the writer Wyn Griffiths, of a grave holding twenty First World War soldiers, their arms linked together. You can hear Sheers read his poem on the Poetry Archive site: www.poetryarchive.org

QUESTION

In his 1996 Appendix to *Heroes' Twilight*, called 'The Problem of War Poetry', Bernard Bergonzi writes: 'There is a danger when students, and indeed their teachers, take a handful of war poems, perhaps backed up by the spectacle of *Oh! What a Lovely War*, and treat them as sufficient evidence of what the First World War was all about.'

What would you select to represent poetry of the First World War? What are the factors that determine your choices? What other literature would you choose to accompany these poems for wider picture of writing about the First World War?

These poems are explored in the volume **Poetry of the First World War** in the York Notes Advanced series by Tom Rank (based on the selection in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*), published in September 2008.

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