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CONTEXTS IN LITERATURE

The Great War in British Literature

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1

Reading the Great War

- What is the relationship between literature and war?
- How did attitudes and values before 1914 shape the writing of the Great War?
- What impact did the development of the war have on the way people wrote about it?
- How did writing about the war evolve after the fighting was over?

Writing about war before 1914

Although the fighting ended with the Armistice (11 November 1918), politically, the Great War only ended the following year with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. Many war memorials therefore give 1914–19 as the start and end of what was one of the defining events of the 20th century. It began (for most people in Britain) very unexpectedly during a sweltering hot summer, and ended countless deaths later after much of northern France and Belgium had been reduced to a wasteland.

This uncertainty about when the Great War really ended is significant because in a sense the aftermath of the war still affects us today: we have not put it behind us; we keep returning to it. The Edwardian era which was abruptly brought to a close by the war seems as remote to us at the start of the 21st century as no doubt the Napoleonic Wars and the Battle of Waterloo (1815) did to those about to be caught up in the events of 1914. One of the most famous English novels set in the Edwardian era, L.P. Hartley's *The Go-Between* (1953), famously begins: 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' Yet novels are still being written which make the Great War seem very familiar territory, and most school students in Britain know more about the poetry of the First World War than they do about the poetry of any other period – including their own. The Great War, as we encounter it through literature, is both present and past. The voices we listen to sound like voices from our own time, not from an earlier one.

Literary historians and teachers like to label periods with particular names – Victorian, Edwardian and so on – and then fit writers into these periods. So Tennyson (1809–92) slots neatly into the Victorian period. His poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', about a disastrous incident that occurred in the Crimean War (1854), seems to epitomise Victorian values. It celebrates devotion to duty, heroism in the face of certain death – the glamour of chivalry:

Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

The words here present no apparent difficulties, but the tone of the poem ('Honour the Light Brigade! Oh, the wild charge they made!') is no longer one most people are comfortable with when discussing death in battle – and the writing of the Great War has largely been responsible for this shift.

The South Africa War of 1899–1902 was for most Victorians their first experience of a major war, albeit one fought in another continent and a different hemisphere. Boer War memorials were erected, bearing the names of individual combatants who had died – ordinary soldiers and officers side-by-side. These civic memorials reflected the fact that for the first time in living memory large numbers of English, Welsh and Scots had died fighting for their country. These numbers were later to seem tiny compared with those of 1914–18, but the impact was significant as a preparation for the Great War. In terms of literature, however, the abiding poetic statement from this era is one which provokes a very ambiguous reaction:

The sand of the desert is sodden red, –
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; –
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'
(Henry Newbolt 'Vitai Lampada')

This writing sets out to present the actuality of war ('The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead') while invoking the same qualities that Tennyson's poem was thought to celebrate; however, a line such as 'The river of death has brimmed his banks' sounds today like a substitute for real thought or description, while the idea that a mere schoolboy second lieutenant could rally 'the ranks' (i.e. the 'other ranks', not his fellow officers) by appealing to their sense of war as a game of cricket seems remote and faintly ridiculous to us. The point is, though, that it did not seem ridiculous to those who read it first nor, indeed, to those who went on reading it during the First World War and for many years afterwards. This Victorian public school idealism affirmed a vision of service, loyalty and sacrifice which was important to those who survived the war and had to make sense of the enormous death toll at the end of it.

A writer like Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), on the other hand, straddles the 19th and 20th centuries. By and large, his novels belong to the former and his best-known poetry to the latter. His attitude to war seems also to straddle the two centuries: he doesn't find glamour in war, but he manages to view it with a certain detachment. His 1915 poem 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"' sees the First World War – even while it is going on – as rather trivial compared with the fundamentals of ordinary human life:

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

The sense of timelessness here is reinforced by the use of old-fashioned words such as 'yonder' and 'wight' (meaning 'man'). Archaic **diction** in poetry – the use of a particular kind of old-fashioned vocabulary – was still conventional and indeed expected by most readers long after the end of the 19th century; and when Hardy introduces more informal diction into his writing it leaves a reader of nearly a century later rather confused:

In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just,
And that braggarts must
Surely bite the dust,
Press we to the field ungrieving,
In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just.

(‘Men Who March Away’)

This poem, written in the opening days of the war, sets out to express the feelings of soldiers cheerfully enlisting in a war that was supposed to be over by Christmas. To us the language of 'braggarts must Surely bite the dust' sounds quaint and naïve. It certainly does not sound like the authentic voice of a real army.

Neither Newbolt nor Hardy fought in the war, but it was their poetry which had been read by, and taught at school to, the generation of young men destined to be the casualties or survivors of the Western Front.

The novel 1910–14

At the outbreak of the war, a number of young writers were beginning to establish reputations and to be widely read, and the period of 1912–14 was one of considerable excitement in the arts generally – although this excitement was largely confined to those with a taste for the avant-garde and for new developments in music, art, architecture and literature. In Europe the music of Stravinsky and the paintings of Picasso seemed to signal a break, not just an evolution, from the past. Out of America came jazz; and ragtime entertainments began to replace the music hall entertainments of the Victorian and Edwardian popular theatre as the stage shows to be seen. A new generation of novelists was beginning to emerge, challenging the orthodoxies of writers such as Arnold Bennett (1867–1931) and John Galsworthy (1867–1933).

Pre-war issues: continuity and identity

Galsworthy's sequence of novels, *The Forsyte Saga*, (only half completed by 1914) seemed to leave the surface of middle-class, metropolitan London unscratched even if the relationships of the individual characters endured various strains and traumas. By contrast, the novel *Howards End* (1910) by E.M. Forster (1879–1970) explored the insecurities of middle-class England by creating two families, the Schlegels and the Wilcoxes, whose lives clash in a series of encounters – commercial, cultural and sexual – but are finally reconciled when the Wilcoxes' world of 'telegrams and anger' is shown to be less resilient than the world represented by Howards End itself. The survival of this old house on the edge of suburbia suggests for Forster a deep sense of the continuity of England and of the importance of personal relationships at a time when such things are under threat. In the novel, London is in a state of flux as the city expands and old houses (including the Schlegels') are demolished to make way for new blocks of flats. Ugliness and commerce threaten culture and continuity. The orphaned Schlegel sisters, Helen and Margaret, had a German father and English mother: their English aunt, Mrs Munt, insists they are 'English to the backbone' and Forster himself notes that they are not, as he ironically puts it, 'Germans of the dreadful sort'. The whole novel in fact argues that stereotypes and prejudices are dangerous: 'the remark "England and Germany are bound to fight" renders war a little more likely every time that it is made, and is therefore made the more readily by the gutter press of either nation'.

For Forster, personal relations, culture, landscape and a profound sense of the importance of place are the things worth preserving. For another novelist making his reputation just before the outbreak of the war, D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930), the same priorities apply, but a novel such as *Sons and Lovers* approaches them from a different perspective. For Lawrence, landscape is disfigured by industrialisation and

the same process diminishes the lives of the people who struggle to survive in the mining towns that blight the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire landscape where Lawrence himself grew up. Paul Morel, the central character of *Sons and Lovers*, refuses to become a miner; instead he tries to make a reputation for himself as an artist; Will Brangwen in *The Rainbow* (which Lawrence began to write in 1913, the year *Sons and Lovers* was published) becomes a wood carver; and in *Women in Love*, written during the war itself, one of Will's daughters, Gudrun, becomes a painter. As with Lawrence, so with his characters: as their cultural horizons expand, they move away from Nottinghamshire to London and abroad – to Germany and Italy. Will Brangwen's mother is a Polish widow, Gudrun has as lovers first the son of a local mine owner, then a German artist. (Lawrence had himself eloped with and then married a German woman from an aristocratic family.)

But for Lawrence no less than Forster, the continuity of the English landscape remains a potent symbol. At the start of *The Rainbow*, the Brangwens have been farming for generations in the Erewash valley outside Nottingham, and this landscape – almost their private territory – is violated by the coming of industry. But, just as Forster's Schlegels rely on the world of finance and business to supply the private income that enables them to enjoy the cultured life they lead, so Lawrence's Brangwens come to depend on local industry: 'The town grew rapidly, the Brangwens were kept busy producing supplies, they became richer, they were almost tradesmen.'

Pre-war issues: the role of women

Another thing that both Forster and Lawrence have in common in their novels is a preoccupation with the emancipation of women, not primarily in terms of the Vote and the Suffragette movement, but in terms of their opportunities for self-development in the modern world. While the older generation of women in their novels accept their roles within the family, the younger seek a new role and a new voice for themselves. Thus Helen Schlegel, at the close of *Howards End*, has become a single mother with no intention of marrying for the sake of propriety. Ursula Brangwen, at the close of *The Rainbow*, has miscarried a child conceived during a failed relationship, and now looks forward to a world in which women would have a different role.

The idea of England, the importance of landscape and the earth, the mechanised, industrial world and the role of women – these, then, were some of the preoccupations of writers and readers at the start of the war, and to a large extent they continued to shape, and be reflected by, the writing that came out of the war itself.

Poetry 1910–14

The Georgians

In poetry, these tensions were evident by 1914 in the different groups of young poets who were beginning to establish reputations for themselves. On the one hand were the Georgians, contributors to a new anthology called *Georgian Poetry*. (This title reflected the belief of the editor, Eddie Marsh, that the new reign – George V had succeeded Edward VII in 1910 – meant a new start for English poetry.) Broadly, the Georgian poets saw their job as being to make poetry accessible to a wide audience, to celebrate ordinary – particularly rural and suburban – life rather than grand poetic themes and to do so in a diction that was neither clichéd nor grandiose. These aspirations may sound very limited today, but they had a strong appeal at the time, and the five *Georgian Poetry* anthologies which appeared between 1912 and 1922 were immensely popular. They helped to create a new readership for poetry in the years immediately before the war and gave Rupert Brooke an audience for his sonnet sequence ‘1914’. Other war poets – Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden among them – were later to be labelled Georgians, and Wilfred Owen wrote home ecstatically to his mother, ‘I am held peer by the Georgians’ even though his poems did not actually feature in the anthologies.

Another poet who was close to the Georgians without ever actually being published in the *Georgian Poetry* anthologies was Edward Thomas, who had already established a strong reputation as a perceptive critic of the contemporary poetry scene. Up to 1914 Thomas had published a good deal of prose, particularly about the English and Welsh countryside. When, as the war began, he started to write poetry with the encouragement of his friend, the American poet Robert Frost, his writing showed the Georgian style at its most effective:

A Private

This ploughman dead in battle slept out of doors
Many a frozen night, and merrily
Answered staid drinkers, good bedmen, and all bores:
‘At Mrs. Greenland’s Hawthorn Bush,’ said he,
‘I slept.’ None knew which bush. Above the town,
Beyond ‘The Drover,’ a hundred spot the down
In Wiltshire. And where now he last he sleeps
More sound in France – that, too, he secret keeps.

- ▶ In what sense, if at all, can ‘A Private’ be called a war poem? How far does it differ from other war poems you have encountered? What do you think is the point of the poem?

The Imagists

Much less popular at the time than the Georgian poets (but in retrospect highly significant for the development of **modernism** in English poetry) were the Imagists. This group of poets was 'led' by the American writer Ezra Pound, who in 1912 published an anthology called *Des Imagistes* to promote his own poetry and that of writers such as Richard Aldington and Hilda Doolittle (whose work always appeared under her initials H.D.). **Imagism**, the name for the style of writing which appeared in the Imagist anthologies, took a more radical view of poetry than that of the Georgian poets, experimenting with free verse forms which took poetry much further from Victorian and Edwardian conventions than the Georgians were prepared to go. Whereas the Georgians were happy to deploy conventional verse forms – the sonnet, blank verse, **lyric** quatrains or (as in Thomas's poem above) rhyming couplets – the Imagists largely abandoned rhyme and iambic metre in favour of *vers libre*.

Richard Aldington, both as a poet and as a novelist, was to become one of the most important writers to fight in – and survive – the trenches, and his poetry reflects two tensions: between remaining a poet while being a soldier at the same time, and between the stylistic features which set the Imagists apart from the Georgians:

Picket

Dusk and deep silence ...

Three soldiers huddled on a bench
Over a red-hot brazier,
And a fourth who stands apart
Watching the cold rainy dawn.

Then the familiar sound of birds –
Clear cock-crow, caw of rooks,
Frail pipe of the linnets, the 'ting! ting!' of chaffinches,
And over all the lark
Outpiercing even the robin ...

Wearily the sentry moves
Muttering the one word: 'Peace'.

The Imagists took over a feminist magazine, the *New Freewoman*, and turned it into their own literary journal, *The Egoist*, which Aldington edited. The principles of Imagism, as originally set out by Ezra Pound and the poet F.S. Flint, offered a clear statement of what an Imagist poem should and should not contain:

- 1 Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective.
- 2 To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to presentation.
- 3 As regards rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

Aldington was editor of *The Egoist* until he joined the Army in 1916; he was succeeded by T.S. Eliot (1888–1965) who, though not a member of the Imagist group, was much closer to them than to the Georgians. In fact, however, it is important not to over-emphasise the differences between Georgians and the modernists – Pound, the Imagists and T.S. Eliot: at first, there was a good deal of overlapping between them, and writers such as D.H. Lawrence had poems published in both Georgian and Imagist publications.

- ▶ How well does Aldington's poem 'Picket' illustrate the Imagist principles? Compare the poem with Isaac Rosenberg's poem 'Returning, We Hear the Larks' (page 90). What do they have in common, and how do they differ, both in their themes and in their forms? Can you tell that one is written by a 'Georgian' poet and the other by an 'Imagist'?

Georgians and modernists

Later, as the optimism of the period 1912–14 was abruptly killed off by the war, Georgian poetry came to seem narrow and timid in scope. Its continuing appeal to a mainly middle-class conservative audience made it seem less relevant to a changed readership. The challenge of modernist poems such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) seemed more rewarding and more in keeping with the post-war mood of anxiety and uncertainty.

The Waste Land is all the things that Georgian Poetry is not: it is complex, elusive in its meaning and allusive in its references; its central locations are the city, not the country; it does not offer a pastoral vision of a renewed England but an unromantic panorama of urban decay and despair. The fact that it has become one of the central poems of the 20th century and T.S. Eliot one of the century's most important poets has also done much to overshadow the contribution made by the Georgians to the evolution of poetry since 1900. Yet Georgian Poetry is still important for providing the context within which most of the war poets – Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden and Isaac Rosenberg in particular – established themselves.

'England' and 'Englishness'

It wasn't surprising that the modernists should have had less interest than the Georgians in the idea of England and Englishness: Pound, H.D. and Eliot were Americans living in London, and their inspiration at first came as much from European as from English literature. A writer like Richard Aldington, though English, was also more influenced in his early career by what was happening in metropolitan London and in France and America. For the Georgians, however, the physical importance of England was not just an ideal: in the summer of 1914 several of them (Lascelles Abercrombie and Wilfred Gibson, together with Robert Frost and, intermittently, the playwright John Drinkwater, Edward Thomas and Rupert Brooke) were based in a remote village called Dymock on the Gloucestershire–Herefordshire border. Here the poets and their families lived in rented farm cottages; Frost later said – only half jokingly – that he had wanted to know what it was like to live under thatch. Here, too, they wrote and published a magazine called *New Numbers*, which helped to keep their work in the public eye between the first and second volumes of *Georgian Poetry*.

Living so close to the land during a golden summer in a rural area, it was not surprising that the poetry the **Dymock poets** wrote just as the war was about to break should have evoked an idyllic, pastoral ideal of England. It should be added that this was essentially a vision of southern England: from a literary perspective England north of D.H. Lawrence's Nottinghamshire hardly existed in the writing of 1914. The sense that not just the landscape but the actual soil of England embodied everything for which Englishmen were prepared to fight may seem sentimental today, but at the start of the war it provided a potent symbol. When Edward Thomas was asked why he was prepared to join up and fight, he bent down, picked up a clod of soil, held it out and said, 'Literally, for this.' Rupert Brooke, in an essay published in 1914, described the feelings of 'An Unusual Young Man' (in reality, Brooke himself) on hearing the news that war had been declared:

His astonishment grew as the full flood of 'England' swept him on from thought to thought. He felt the triumphant helplessness of a lover. Grey, uneven little fields, and small ancient hedges rushed before him, wild flowers, elms and beeches, gentleness, sedate houses of red brick, proudly unassuming, a countryside of rambling hills and friendly copses. He seemed to be raised high, looking down on a landscape compounded of the western view from the Cotswolds, and the Weald, and the high land in Wiltshire, and the Midlands seen from the hills above Prince's Risborough. And all this to the accompaniment of tunes heard long ago, an intolerable number of them being hymns.

(from *Letters from America*)

For Brooke, the news of the war offered a kind of epiphany, a quasi-mystical revelation ('He seemed to be raised high') of the 'English heaven' about which he speaks at the end of 'The Soldier'. Meanwhile Edward Thomas, who had probably walked more miles over southern England and Wales than anyone else of his generation, was experiencing a rather different epiphany:

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance ...

('Roads')

- ▶ Read again Rupert Brooke's sonnet 'The Soldier', and the discussion of it on pages 7–8. Now read the following comments on the poem by Christopher Hassall, who wrote one of the first full biographies of Brooke:

The 'soldier' was meant by Brooke to be still a civilian, someone who had discovered a way of bequeathing his possessions, his country to the earth (which in a way would *become* his country) and the rest, the sights and sounds, would somehow be returned whence they came, for others to enjoy ... The poetical manner is candid like the author's face. Not only has the Anglo-American tradition that was to follow in English verse [i.e. the modernism of Pound and Eliot] made the simple rhetoric outmoded, but the attitude of mind itself, the unquestioning acceptance of a state of affairs, has become suspect. To many it must seem as naive as saying the Apostles Creed and meaning what one says. Brooke wrote straight from the shoulder, as it were, without what the fashionable modern would regard as the saving grace of a qualifying remark. And yet therein lies the strength. He had not only arrived at a faith but at mastery of the traditional style.

- ▶ Do you find this view of Brooke and of his most famous poem convincing? What do you learn from this passage about a traditionalist's view of modernism?
- ▶ Read the other poems in the *1914* sonnet sequence. Do you find them more or less appealing than 'The Soldier'?

Poetry and the war 1914–16

It is hard to imagine that poetry will ever play such a role again as it did in the Great War. In the first two years of the war (until the catastrophic Battle of the Somme) this role was closely linked to the patriotic enthusiasm which led so many men to join up. The death of Rupert Brooke in 1915 prompted an obituary article in *The Times* written by Winston Churchill who called Brooke a ‘poet-soldier’ and thus helped both to create the idea both of a war poet and of the amateur soldier who was first and foremost a writer; ‘The Soldier’ was read from the pulpit of St Paul’s Cathedral as part of a patriotic sermon. The American novelist Henry James, in the Introduction to Brooke’s posthumously published *Letters from America* (1916), acknowledged that Brooke had already become a legend:

Rupert Brooke, young, happy, radiant, extraordinarily endowed and irresistibly attaching, virtually met a soldier’s death, met it in the stress of action and the all but immediate presence of the enemy ...

With twenty reasons fixing the interest and the charm that will henceforth abide in his name and constitute, as we may say, his legend ... Rupert expressed us all, at the highest tide of our actuality ...

(In fact Brooke died of blood poisoning while on a troop ship bound for Gallipoli.)

When even Henry James could launch into such eulogy, it is not hard to understand how easily Brooke’s death and poetry were exploited to raise morale and help recruitment at home. But Brooke was not the only poet writing in 1914: in the first two years of the war a great deal of poetry was written and published – not all of it straightforward recruiting propaganda. In ‘All the Hills and Vales Along’ Charles Hamilton Sorley gave the marching song an ironic twist:

All the hills and vales along
Earth is bursting into song,
And the singers are the chaps
Who are going to die perhaps.

The opening note of optimism in calling the soldiers ‘singers’ is immediately undercut by describing them as ‘the chaps Who are going to die perhaps’. The second half of the stanza adds to the ambivalent tone:

O sing, marching men,
Till the valleys ring again.
Give your gladness to earth’s keeping,
So be glad, when you are sleeping.

'Sleeping' here, as nearly always in war poetry, has undertones of death, and the implicit suggestion that death is the most desirable – or at least the inevitable – end for the soldier is made explicit in the last stanza of the poem:

On, marching men, on
To the gates of death with song.
Sow your gladness for earth's reaping,
So you may be glad, though sleeping.
Strew your gladness on earth's bed,
So be merry, so be dead.

Sorley (like another of the war poets, Edmund Blunden) went almost straight from public school into the trenches. He was travelling in Germany when the war broke out, came back to England and enlisted, was commissioned, sent to France and died during the Battle of Loos in October 1915, aged twenty. His poem seems to celebrate the chance of fighting ('Sow your gladness for earth's reaping' – notice how the earth is personified here to harvest the future happiness planted by the soldiers) with an almost Tennysonian enthusiasm: 'to the Gates of Death with song'. But this apparent note of patriotic sacrifice – the cheerful willingness to die for one's country, confident that this will ensure a peaceful future – is abruptly offset by the final line, 'So be merry, so be dead.' This is a more sober view of death than that expressed by Rupert Brooke in 'The Soldier' but it is perhaps closer to Brooke's famous comment 'Well, if Armageddon's on, I suppose one should be there.' (from *Letters from America*)

In the poetry of Edward Thomas, who was over the age of conscription and who could have remained a civilian throughout the war, a mixture of conflicting personal anxieties about whether or not to fight can be found. 'As The Team's Head Brass' presents a conversation between an elder ploughman, working alone because his work-mate has been killed in France, and a speaker uncertain whether or not to enlist:

'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 ...'

Elsewhere, in 'This Is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong', Thomas insisted that the motives for fighting had to be clearly distinguished from general anti-German propaganda:

I hate not Germans, nor grow hot
With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers.
Beside my hate for one fat patriot
My hatred of the Kaiser is love true: –
A kind of god he is, banging a drum.

The 'one fat patriot' here was Thomas's own father. At the end of this poem, however, Thomas resolves his dilemma by concluding:

... with the best and meanest Englishmen
I am one in crying, God save England, lest
We lose what never slaves and cattle blessed.
The ages made her that made us from the dust:
She is all we know and live by, and we trust
She is good and must endure, loving her so:
And as we love ourselves we hate her foe.

Once in uniform, the poets of the Great War had to come to terms with a new existence. Each responded in his own way and coped with experiences that depended on their rank and circumstances. When the poet Edmund Blunden came to introduce a revised edition of his book *Undertones of War* (1928) he said:

This book, which was written with no grander ambition than to preserve some of a multitude of impressions, and admirations, is a sketch of a happy battalion – happy in spite of terrible tasks and daily destruction. I have been blamed for casting a romantic light on such a damnable subject as real war. But I did no more than put on paper what most of my companions felt too.

On the other hand, Edward Thomas, in a poem ironically called 'Home', wrote plaintively:

If I should ever more admit
Than the mere word I could not endure it
For a day longer: this captivity
Must somehow come to an end, else I should be
Another man, as often now I seem,
Or this life be only an evil dream.

No one expressed the two senses of home (both England as a concept – the embodiment of what one was fighting for – and the specific longing to be back in the English countryside) more movingly than Ivor Gurney (1890–1937). Gurney

lived in Gloucestershire, close enough to the able to cycle to visit the Dymock poets whose work he much admired. His poetry is written with an understated irony which just manages to control an overwhelming sense of horror at the necessary actions of war:

To England – A Note

I watched the boys of England where they went
Through mud and water to do appointed things,
See one a stake, and one wire-netting brings,
And one comes slowly under a burden bent
Of ammunition. Though the strength be spent
They “carry on” under the shadowing wings
Of Death the ever-present. And hark, one sings
Although no joy from the grey skies be lent.

Are these the heroes – these? have kept from you
The power of primal savagery so long?
Shall break the devil’s legions? These they are
Who do in silence what they might boast to do;
In the height of battle tell the world in song
How they do hate and fear the face of War.

In this sonnet, every phrase that might seem to imply a conventional patriotic or propaganda response is undercut: ‘the boys of England’ focuses on the fact that the soldiers are no more than boys – often almost literally – and phrases such as ‘the power of primal savagery’ become mere rhetoric when set alongside the stark understatement of ‘to do appointed things’ and ‘They “carry on”’. Gurney’s ‘Note’ to England is a warning note: the soldiers of whom he writes are heroes, they are entitled to boast about what they are doing on England’s behalf. But what drives them on in battle is not hatred of ‘the devil’s legions’ but hatred of war itself.

This poem, published in 1917, expresses publicly the sense that war is literally unspeakable (the soldiers ‘do in silence’ the things they have to do) and not a subject for unthinking propaganda.

To be both a poet and a soldier thus imposed particular strains, which were not always kept beneath the surface: Isaac Rosenberg (see Part 3, pages 90–91) expressed in letters the suffering he felt, but managed to achieve an impersonality in his poems which gives them extraordinary power and poignancy. Writing to Lascelles Abercrombie (one of the Dymock poets, who was never able to enlist because of poor eyesight) he exclaimed, ‘Believe me, the army is the most detestable invention on this earth and nobody but a private in the army knows what it is to be a slave.’ On the other hand, in a letter to the poet Laurence Binyon

(author of 'For the Fallen', see page 7) he could write:

I am determined that this war, with all its powers for devastation, shall not master my poeting; that is, if I am lucky enough to come through all right. I will not leave a corner of my consciousness covered up, but saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, and it will all refine itself into poetry later on.

- Compare Isaac Rosenberg's letters (page 91) and his poems, 'Returning, We Hear the Larks' (page 90) and 'Dead Man's Dump'. In what ways does he manage to refine 'the strange and extraordinary conditions of this life' into poetry here?

The difficulty of being both soldier and poet is succinctly expressed by David Jones (1895–1974) in the Preface to his account of the war, *In Parenthesis*: 'We find ourselves privates in foot regiments. We search how we may see formal goodness in a life singularly inimical, hateful, to us.' Richard Aldington expresses the same dilemma in 'Living Sepulchres':

One frosty night when the guns were still
I leaned against the trench
Making for myself hokku
Of the moon and flowers and of the snow.

But the ghostly scurrying of huge rats
Swollen with feeding upon men's flesh
Filled me with shrinking dread.

(Hokku is haiku – a short, very concentrated Japanese verse form, adopted by the Imagist poets.)

By 1916, the year of the Somme, Robert Graves (1895–1985, another of the Georgian poets and the author of *Goodbye To All That*) was already protesting strongly against the continuing public demand for gung-ho patriotic war poetry. In 'A Dead Boche' he speaks directly to those who only want to hear 'of blood and fame':

I'll say (you've heard it said before)
'War's hell!' and if you doubt the same,
To-day I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

The brusquely ironic tone ('A certain cure for lust of blood') of these lines does not prepare the reader for what follows. In a second stanza that confronts the horror of war head-on, Graves describes a German corpse:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

The careful formal construction of this stanza allows no escape from the steady scrutiny of the dead man. Surrounded by an undefined 'great mess of things unclean' he still 'sat' and 'scowled'; but Graves's alliteration attaches to these actions of a living person the attributes of a corpse ('stunk ... sodden green'). No simile or metaphor is needed here to enhance the image. The corpse is still identifiable as a recently living individual by his spectacles and his hair-cut, but the 'black blood' of the final line turns him into an emblem of death in battle. There is no sign of mutual recognition or respect from one soldier to another (Graves does not hint at any such statement as 'I am the enemy you killed my friend' – the much-quoted line from Wilfred Owen's poem 'Strange Meeting') but the reader is challenged to disagree with Graves's claim that this is indeed a 'certain cure for lust of blood' – regardless of whose side you are on.

This stark delineation of the reality of war still has the power to appal today; in 1916 it did much to emphasise the growing distance between those at home who preferred to 'only hear of blood and fame' and those at the Front for whom such sights were becoming commonplace. This alienation affected writers as much as other members of the public. The Bloomsbury novelist and critic Virginia Woolf, a friend of Rupert Brooke and later of Siegfried Sassoon, felt:

... a mixture of a pacifist's horror of the glorification of militarism, and alienation from the ordinary combatant or civilian's view. The behaviour of most of her friends in wartime occupied this uneasy space between snobbish detachment and courageous resistance. Though they were naively unprepared for August 1914, when the war came they were in the vanguard of the peace movement, before a wider disillusionment with the war set in in 1916.

(Hermione Lee *Virginia Woolf*, 1997)

This idea of 1916 as a watershed in the war was shared by many people, at least in retrospect; in many ways it marks a watershed in the poetry of the period, too. After the Battle of the Somme, which began on 1 July 1916 and finally dragged to a stalemate in November, the tenor of much of the poetry changed. The poems for which Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden are best remembered, for instance, date from after this period. The poet David Jones

explained the causes of this change in the Preface to *In Parenthesis*:

This writing has to do with some things I saw, felt, & was part of. The period covered begins early in December 1915 and ends early in July 1916. The first date corresponds to my going to France. The latter roughly marks a change in the character of our lives in the infantry on the West Front. From then onwards things hardened into a more relentless, mechanical affair, took on a more sinister aspect. The wholesale slaughter of the later years, the conscripted levies filling the gaps in every file of four, knocked the bottom out of the intimate, continuing, domestic life of small contingents of men ... In the earlier months there was a certain attractive amateurishness, and elbow-room for idiosyncrasy that connected one with a less exacting past. ... How impersonal did each new draft seem arriving each month, and all these new-fangled gadgets to master.

- Choose and compare a selection of poems, some written before and some after 1916. Can you find in the post- July 1916 poems evidence to support David Jones's belief that life for the soldier became more 'relentless ... mechanical ... sinister ... impersonal'?

David Jones numbered himself among the 'amateur soldiers ... not only amateur, but grotesquely incompetent, a knocker-over of piles, a parade's despair' and Edmund Blunden called himself 'a harmless shepherd in a soldier's coat'. Richard Aldington, undergoing training in early 1916, wrote in 'Field Manoeuvres':

I am 'to fire at the enemy column
After it has passed' –
But my obsolete rifle, loaded with 'blank',
Lies untouched before me,
My spirit follows after the gliding clouds ...

Such a note of self-conscious amateurism was no longer heard after the opening day of the Somme: 60,000 British troops were killed or wounded on 1 July 1916.

Women writers and the war 1914–16

During most of the 20th century, the assumption was that the essential literature of the First World War was written by men, that women's writing was inevitably less significant as an expression of the experience of war since only men had actually fought. Only one prose work by a woman, *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain, had established itself as part of the canon (see opposite) of Great War literature, and that

was an autobiography, though it contained some of the author's poems, originally published under the title *Verses of a V.A.D.* (Voluntary Aid Detachment – V.A.D.s were volunteer nurses).

Canon as a literary term means those texts and authors that are generally assumed to represent the writing of a particular period or **genre** or, indeed, of literature as a whole. Thus, to describe *Testament of Youth* as part of the canon is to suggest it is recognised as a book central to a discussion of Great War literature. The danger of literary canons is that they can seem to imply that texts which have not found a place (or have lost their place) on the canonical list are somehow less good, less important, less worth reading. This need not be so at all, and critics today often challenge the assumptions of the canon. (See also Part 2, pages 70–71.)

In fact, a great deal of the verse published during 1914–18 was written by women and much of it, when read today, adds a significant dimension to any discussion of the writing of the period. Most anthologies of war poetry have very few poems by women, but the publication in 1981 of Catherine Reilly's *Scars Upon My Heart*, an anthology subtitled *Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War*, dramatically challenged the narrow assumption that war poetry could only reflect men's experience. The difficulty for women of being cut off from the 'men who march away' is reflected in this stanza from Nora Bomford's 'Drafts', a poem retrieved by Catherine Reilly from sixty years of obscurity and republished in *Scars Upon My Heart*:

Waking to darkness; early silence broken
By seagulls' cries, and something undefined
And far away. Through senses half-awoken,
A vague enquiry drifts into one's mind.
What's happening? Down the hill a movement quickens
And leaps to recognition round the turning –
Then one's heart wakes, and grasps the fact, and sickens –
'Are we down-hearted' ... 'Keep the homefires burning'.
They go to God-knows-where, with songs of Blighty,
While I'm in bed, and ribbons in my nightie.

The bathos of the final line and the absurd rhyme Blighty/nightie emphasises the speaker's sense of the frustration and even the indignity of not being able to share what men are going through.

As well as poems dealing with the war from the perspective of women, novels also appeared, though (like the prose works of authors such as Aldington, Blunden and Sassoon) these were often published ten years or more after the war had ended. These novels (for instance, Irene Rathbone's *We That Were Young*, 1932) usually began with the optimism of the pre-war period or the expectation that the war

would be a short and decisive interlude in a period which was seeing positive changes for women.

In the years immediately before the war, the Suffragettes (campaigning for votes for women) had been part of a more general movement seeking a greater freedom for women than society generally allowed. Better access to education (especially to university education), more opportunities for women to undertake professional work, to participate in politics and to enjoy greater social independence – these were all issues that led people to take sides over the question of feminism: thus, Vera Brittain, her brother and her fiancé all called themselves feminists; by contrast, Rupert Brooke disliked the approval of feminism shown by nearly all his friends, men and women.

Women were heavily exploited as part of the recruitment and propaganda drives at the start of the war: the German invasion of neutral Belgium was presented as the ‘rape’ of a small, defenceless country and stories of the literal rape of Belgian women were quickly spread. In Britain, recruiting posters showed women pointing doubtful young men in the direction of France under the slogan ‘Women of England Say Go’ and a popular music-hall song had the raucous refrain:

But on Saturday I’m willing,
If you’ll only take the shilling,
To make a man of any one of you.

(‘Taking the king’s shilling’ meant ‘joining the army’.)

More conventional wartime songs played heavily on the duty of women to support the morale of the men who were going to fight:

Keep the home fires burning
While we still are yearning ...

By no means all women or women writers shared these sentiments, however, and the feminist movement attracted a strong vein of pacifism: ‘BETTER IS WISDOM THAN WEAPONS OF WAR’ proclaimed a banner of the women students at Cambridge University, and the novelist Virginia Woolf shared the pacifist views of many of the Bloomsbury Group of writers and artists. Describing the impact of the war on women, Virginia Woolf wrote (in *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929):

Shall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other’s eyes that romance was killed? Certainly it was a shock (to women in particular with their illusions about education, and so on) to see the faces of

our rulers in the light of the shell-fire. So ugly they looked – German, English, French – so stupid.

For many women writing about the war, however, the main themes were patience, loss and grief, and the experiences of the Front (the major subject of what most people still assume to be ‘real’ Great War poetry) could only be imagined.

- Look at the extract from *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West and the poems by Marian Allen (Part 3, page 95 and page 75). How effectively is Rebecca West able to imagine the reality of trench life and No Man’s Land? How do Marian Allen’s sonnets convey the senses of loneliness and exclusion? Compare her poem ‘Charing Cross’ with Wilfred Owen’s ‘Spring Offensive’.

It is important to stress, though, that for many women, the war offered an opportunity to break out of the confines of their pre-1914 lives, often by taking on work that had previously been done by men and so earning higher wages than they had been able to do before. D.H. Lawrence’s short story ‘Tickets, Please’ (1919) describes the girls who took over the jobs of the ticket collectors on the Nottingham trams during the war:

This, the most dangerous tram-service in England, as the authorities themselves declare, with pride, is entirely conducted by girls, and driven by rash young men, a little crippled, or by delicate young men, who creep forward in terror. The girls are fearless young hussies. In their ugly blue uniform, skirts up to their knees, shapeless old peaked caps on their heads, they have all the *sang-froid* of an old non-commissioned officer. With a tram packed with howling colliers, roaring hymns downstairs and a sort of antiphony of obscenities upstairs, the lasses are perfectly at their ease. They pounce on the youths who try to evade their ticket machine. They push men off at the end of their distance. They are not going to be done in the eye – not they. They fear nobody – and everybody fears them.

The sense of social dislocation is neatly satirised in ‘Sing a Song of War-Time’ by Nina Macdonald, first published in *Wartime Nursery Rhymes* (1918) and rediscovered in *Scars Upon My Heart*:

Mummie does the house-work,
Can’t get any maid,
Gone to make munitions,
‘Cause they’re better paid,
Nurse is always busy,