



The Wilfred Owen Association Journal

Spring 2026



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EDITORIAL

Elizabeth Vandiver

Tacoma, WA, USA

After a long hiatus, we are delighted to send out this Spring 2026 volume of the Wilfred Owen Association Journal. We hope to return to the standard pattern of two issues per year, with the next one appearing this coming Autumn or Winter, and so we strongly urge you all to submit any material you would like to see published in the Journal. We welcome a wide range of submissions, including: essays focusing on personal reflections and reminiscences, interpretations of individual poems by Owen or comparisons of Owen's work with other poets' writings, scholarly articles, reviews of recent books, and original poetry. If you have an idea for a possible submission but are not certain if it would "fit", please write us and enquire! The Co-Editors can be reached at L.IrvineFitzpatrick@napier.ac.uk and vandive@whitman.edu.

This issue contains a robust variety of material. Colin Kerr continues his series of articles on the 1918 offensives, and also gives us transcriptions of his great-uncle Duncan Kerr's letters to his family in 1915-1919, written from Gallipoli, Egypt, and Palestine. Paul Norgate contributes another in his series of fascinating scholarly articles on Owen's poems, this one focusing on 'The Kind Ghosts', and also provides an in-depth review of Jane Potter's edition of Owen's letters. A new member, Niall Heaton, offers a gripping account, based on conversations with his grandfather, about his great-grandfather's service on the Western Front, including his involvement in the first release of gas at Loos on 25 September 1915. Professor Roland Bouyssou returns with another article exploring the wider themes of Owen's poetry, describing Owen as a 'prophet of humanism sacrificed on the altar of War', and Thomas J. P. Muldoon gives an account of his visit to the most recent (2025) Wilfred Owen Festival in Oswestry. This issue thus offers a range of insights both into Owen's poetry and into its contemporary context and its continuing importance today.

Our future plans include a Special Issue of the *Journal*, to appear this summer, which will print papers presented at the 'Wilfred Owen and Beyond' Conference held in Oxford in October 2018. We also are planning to make past issues of the *WOA Journal* openly available through a link on the WOA website. This will make it easier for members to look back at older articles that may be referenced in current issues of the *Journal*, and will also—importantly—enhance the *Journal's* visibility to a wider readership. Each current issue will continue to be sent to members by e-mail when it appears (or by post to those members who do not have e-mail), and will then be archived and available for consultation on the website as soon as the next issue is published.

Meg Crane, Editor

Linda Irvine-Fitzpatrick, Co-Editor

Elizabeth Vandiver, Co-Editor

THE ALLIED 1918 OFFENSIVES

Colin Kerr
Bath

Introduction

This is the second in a series of articles covering Wilfred Owen's front line service in the Army.¹ As I said previously, Owen's individual actions are well documented; consequently, these articles aim to look at a higher level: what were the wider strategies under which the western front armies fought at this stage in the war?

In the first article, we left the German 1918 offensive at the end of July 1918, with the offensive over. Four months of continued pressure – on the Somme, in Flanders, on the Chemin des Dames and finally in Champagne – had run the German armies into the ground. The strategic objective had failed: to defeat the French and British armies prior to the arrival of significant US armies in 1919. In fact, Pershing's US 1st Army took the field on August 1 1918, whilst Bullard's 2nd US Army was forming.

The extreme pressure under which the Allies found themselves during this period resulted in the appointment of a Supreme Commander (General Foch, of France) on the Western Front. For the first time in the war, British, French (and US) armies were now under a single point of control.

For Germany, the strategic options were limited. The US armies were now in France and would increase exponentially, whilst the German armies had given their best efforts and had not succeeded. The German submarine offensive of 1917 had been largely contained, albeit after very heavy losses in merchant ships. At home, the British naval blockade was now biting deeply in terms of food and public morale: communist groups were forming, whilst there had been mutinies in the German Fleet.

Germany's allies were also on their last legs: a British/Italian Army (General Diaz) was poised to attack the Austrian Army in northern Italy, an allied army (General Franchet D'Esperey) was about to attack the Bulgarian Army north of Salonica, whilst the last substantial Turkish army faced a British Army (General Allenby) in Palestine and British forces approached the Turkish eastern border from Mesopotamia (Iraq).

Russia was now out of the war: the Romanovs were executed at Ekaterinburg on July 16.

In the absence of any other strategy, for now the German plan was just to keep going.

For the Allied armies on the Western Front, it was now time to move to the offensive.

¹ The first article, 'The 1918 German Offensives,' appeared in the 2023 issue of the WOA Journal, pp. 22–26.

Dramatis Personae

Very roughly, the principal dispositions on the Western Front were as follows in August 1918:

	Allies (Foch)	Germany (Ludendorff)
North	British Army Group (Haig)	Army Group Prince Rupprecht
Centre	French Army Group (Maistre)	Army Group Crown Prince
South	US Army Group (Pershing)	Army Group Duke of Wurttemberg

The British offensives (and the wider political situation)

On August 8, the British 4th Army (Rawlinson), supported by the French 1st Army (Debeney), launched the Amiens offensive against the German 2nd Army (Von der Marwitz). Supported by tanks and 500 aircraft, the allies advanced 10 miles on the first day. The response was drastic; Ludendorff described it as “the black day of the German Army”, whilst, three days later, the Kaiser stated that “the war must be ended”. Later that month, 4th Army took Roye and Peronne.

On August 21, the British 3rd Army (Byng) launched the Albert offensive against the German 17th Army (Von Below), all of this being on the old 1916 Somme battlefields, taking Bapaume. On August 26, the British 1st Army (Horne) came in, attacking successfully the Drocourt-Queant “switch” line, also against the German 17th Army.

On September 3, Germany pulled the northern group of armies back 20 miles to the Hindenburg Line, giving up all of their gains from the 1918 offensives.

On September 27, the British 1st Army and 3rd Army attacked successfully the Hindenburg Line on the Canal du Nord, facing the German 2nd Army (Von Carlowitz) and 17th Army. The offensive gained 6 miles on the first day. Lens was taken on October 3.

The German Chancellor, Bethman-Hollweg, resigned on September 29, being replaced by Prince Max. Five days later, Germany formally asked President Wilson to arrange an armistice.

On September 30, the British 4th Army attacked the Hindenburg Line at the St.Quentin Canal, supported again by the French 1st Army, which then took St.Quentin.

October 8 saw the British attack on Cambrai, with 3rd Army, 4th Army and the French 1st Army against the German 2nd and 17th Armies. Cambrai fell the next day.

On October 12, Germany accepted formally the proposals of President Wilson, including the evacuation by Germany of all occupied territory.

The British 5th Army (Birdwood) came into the line, taking Lille on October 17 and reaching the River Schelde on October 22.

October 17 also saw the British River Selle offensive, with 1st Army and 4th Army and the French 1st Army.

General Ludendorff was dismissed on October 27.

On October 28th, 1st Army attacked Valenciennes, which was held by the German 17th Army, taking the city on November 3.

The final British offensive (and Wilfred Owen's final action) began on the River Sambre on November 4, with 1st Army, 3rd Army, 4th Army and the French 1st Army. Prince Rupprecht's entire Army Group now withdrew towards Antwerp, with the Crown Prince's Army Group conforming on the left. Maubeuge was taken on November 9 and Mons on November 11.

The Kaiser abdicated on November 9.

The armistice was signed on November 11 by General Foch. German forces had to withdraw back to Germany and had to hand over 5,000 guns and all aircraft. The navy had to surrender its entire battle fleet and all submarines.

The French offensives

With overall co-ordination by Foch, the French 3rd Army (Humbert) slotted in between the two British groups with the Canal du Nord offensive, facing the German 18th Army (Von Hutier) and taking Noyon. Over on the French right, the French 10th Army (Mangin) attacked towards Soissons, against the German 9th Army (Von Eben).

The French 1st Army fought throughout with the British forces, whilst 4th Army fought throughout with the US forces and 6th Army with the Belgian forces.

The US offensives

On September 12, the US 1st Army (Liggett) took out the salient at St. Mihiel, defeating the German Army Group C (Funke).

On September 26, the US forces launched the Meuse-Argonne offensive, supported by the French 4th Army (Gouraud).

The 1st Army and French 4th Army launched the Sedan offensive on November 1, facing the German 5th Army. Sedan fell on November 8.

The Belgian offensives

The Belgian Army (King Albert) had remained on the extreme left of the allied line throughout the war. On September 28, the Belgian Flanders offensive opened against the German 4th Army (Von Arnim). The Belgian forces included the British 2nd Army (Plumer) and the French 6th Army (De Boissandy). On October 19, Belgian forces took Zeebrugge and Ostend, which had become major German submarine bases, whilst 2nd Army reached the River Schelde on October 23.

The other fronts

In the Salonica sector, the allied army group (Franchet D'Esperey) launched the Dobropolje offensive on September 15, with Serb (Mistic) and French (Henry) forces, defeating the Bulgarian 2nd Army (Lukov) and the small German 11th Army (Von Steuben). Two days later, the British forces (Milne) came in against the Bulgarian 1st Army (Nerezov). On September 25, the Greek Army (Danglis) joined the allied line, whilst on September 29, French forces took Skopje. On September 30, Bulgaria surrendered: the allied forces headed north towards the Danube, which was reached on October 19 with Belgrade falling on November 1; Serbia was now free.

On September 19, General Allenby's Eastern Army smashed the Turkish Yilderim Army Group (Von Sanders) at the battle of Megiddo. The Turkish 8th Army (Jevad Pasha) was destroyed, as British forces took Nablus and Nazareth and the Arab Northern Army (Colonel Lawrence) destroyed the rail line at Dera. Following up quickly, British forces took Haifa (September 23), destroying the Turkish 7th Army (Fevzi Pasha). From there, Amman was taken on September 25 and Damascus on October 1. The Turkish leader, Enver Pasha, resigned on October 4. Beirut fell on October 8 and Aleppo on October 26.

In a major policy decision, the British component (Milne) of the Serbia army group headed for the Danube was detached east on October 10, aiming to take Constantinople (Istanbul) from the western (land) side.

On October 10, Italy launched an offensive against Austrian forces in Albania. On October 16, the Austrian Emperor, Karl, declared the Austrian Empire to be at an end. Yugoslavia was created four days later and the Emperor abdicated. The Austrian Army (Boroevic) was defeated at the battle of Vittorio Veneto (west of Venice) on October 27, by an Italian Army Group (Diaz); the Italian 10th Army was commanded by the British Lord Cavan, which included significant British forces. The Austrian forces withdrew back into Austria and surrendered on November 3. The Italian armies were now targetted on Bavaria.

In Mesopotamia (Iraq), British/Indian forces (Marshall) defeated the Turkish 6th Army (Ihsan Pasha), taking Mosul and leaving the Turkish eastern border open to British forces. British forces were also approaching Turkey's western borders (Milne) and southern borders (Allenby). Turkey surrendered on October 30, on the British battleship Agamemnon.

Conclusion

The allied offensives on the western front took 100 days and led to victory. The British armies, by now, were highly professional, integrating tanks, aircraft and sophisticated artillery spotting. The trenches had been left behind on August 1.

But this was a World War. The events on the Western Front were clearly momentous, but events elsewhere were on an unimaginable scale: two empires (Austria and Turkey) ceased to exist, new independent countries emerged and the United States became the principal world power. The world was, all of a sudden, very different.

AN EMPTY HOUSE AND A CUP OF TEA: THE GENESIS OF WILFRED OWEN'S 'THE KIND GHOSTS'

Paul Norgate

Wolverley, Worcestershire

Early in June 1917, Wilfred Owen was admitted to Craiglockhart War Hospital for Officers, near Edinburgh, suffering from shell shock. Almost exactly a year later, he was finally graded fit for General Service – 'normal again', as his father rather awkwardly put it.² He rejoined his regiment, the 5th Manchesters, in the seaside town of Scarborough.

This was Owen's second spell in Scarborough: after his discharge from Craiglockhart, he had spent the winter of 1917–18 and the following spring on light duties there. His circumstances then had been pleasant enough: he was billeted in the Clarence Gardens Hotel, overlooking the North Bay and with ready access to the town; his companions were all fellow officers, and his duties as Major-Domo, in charge of domestic arrangements, ensured him a room to himself, with a view, a fire, and space to think and write.

In the summer of 1918, however, everything was different. Owen was now based at the Northern Cavalry Barracks, outside the town, and he was reduced to living under canvas. After the shock of the German Spring Offensive, the pressure to speed reinforcements out to the Western Front was intense, and he was now fully occupied in trying to turn raw recruits into something like competent soldiers. His working days were long, gruelling and relentless, as he pointed out repeatedly to his mother in a series of letters through the month of June: 'We get up at six, and work furiously till 6 p.m., after which we are too tired to move ...'; 'Was working yesterday till 8 p.m. with 1 hr. for lunch, & ¼ hr. for tea ...'; 'Yesterday I was Orderly Officer for the Battalion, and was not able to take off my frown for five minutes on end between Reveille and midnight.'³

Owen was no shirker, however, and his grumbles were not based on an aversion to hard work. What lay behind his complaints was his anger at the shocking disconnect he perceived between what was being asked of the men (and boys) in uniform and the complacent indifference to the realities of war displayed in civilian life. Scarborough was for him no longer an idyll by the sea, rather an increasingly grating reminder of everything that was wrong about the home front: 'I wish the Bosche would have the pluck to come right in and make a clean sweep of the Pleasure Boats, and the promenaders on the Spa, and all the stinking Leeds and Bradford War-profiteers now reading *John Bull* on Scarborough Sands', he wrote sourly.⁴

² Letter 634 (July 1918) in H. Owen and J. Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters* (Oxford: OUP, 1967) and J. Potter (ed.), *Selected Letters of Wilfred Owen* (Oxford: OUP, 2023).

³ Letters 627 (6/6/18), 630 (15/6/18) and 632 (24/6/18)

⁴ Letter 643 (10/8/18). The German Navy had famously bombarded Scarborough in 1914, and was in 1918 still active in the North Sea; Owen mentions a number of incidents in his letters.

His military duties were so onerous that, despite the momentum he had built up over almost a year of intense and successful writing and revision, he was forced to admit that he had 'resolved not to unpack my books or papers while in camp'. (L.630) A letter from London, however, changed his mind. In May, Owen had been introduced to Osbert Sitwell; Sitwell had subsequently seen and been impressed by an early draft of 'Mental Cases', and now in June he wrote to request that Owen provide some further poems, for publication in the 1918 edition of 'Wheels'. This was the annual anthology of modern – and modernist – verse edited by Osbert and his two siblings, Edith and Sacheverell, and such was the Sitwells' reputation as literary *enfants terribles* that Owen was at first more than a little hesitant about becoming involved.

Having eventually committed himself, however, he drafted a rough list of what he might send. So limited was the time now available to him that nearly all the poems on the list had to be drawn from those drafted before his return to Scarborough.⁵

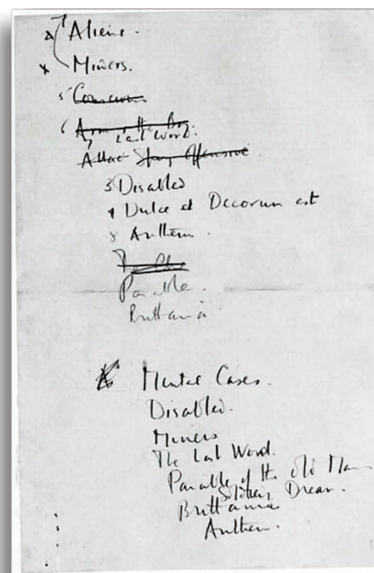


Fig i. Possible poems for 'Wheels': manuscript BL.1.43v, ADD. 43721

There are only two new titles here: one appears as 'Attac/Spring Offensive', which his subsequent deletion shows that he decided not to submit, presumably because it was not yet complete to his satisfaction; the other is – in Owen's somewhat shaky spelling – 'Brittania'. Amongst his surviving papers, there is no manuscript of a poem with the title 'Britannia'; almost certainly, however, this was an alternative title for the piece that Owen headed 'The Kind Ghosts'.⁶ In striking contrast to his productivity over the previous nine months, this was one of only two new pieces that Owen managed to complete during his three months in Scarborough the summer of 1918.⁷

⁵ Some of them – 'Miners', 'The Last Laugh / Last Words' – actually date from his first stay in Scarborough. His recent composition 'Mental Cases' appears first on the list, under one of its early draft titles, 'Aliens'.

⁶ No. 169 in J. Stallworthy (ed.), *Wilfred Owen: The Complete Poems and Fragments* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983).

⁷ His other completed piece was 'Training' (no.158). 'The roads also' (no.172), an attempt at something in more modernist style – presumably in response to Sitwell's request – was left unfinished. 'Spring Offensive' (no.177) was probably begun in Scarborough, but Owen was still working on this after his return to France.

The Kind Ghosts

She sleeps on soft, last breaths; but no ghost looms
Out of the stillness of her palace wall -
Her wall of boys on boys and dooms on dooms.

5 She dreams of golden gardens and sweet glooms,
Not marvelling why her roses never fall,
Nor what red mouths were torn to make their blooms.

The shades keep down which well might roam her hall.
Quiet their blood lies in her crimson rooms
And she is not afraid of their footfall.

10 They move not from her tapestries, their pall,
Nor pace her terraces, their hecatombs,
Lest ought she be disturbed, or grieved at all.

‘She’ is evidently a personification of England, or Britain, and Owen must have hoped that his poem would go down well with the Sitwells, who shared his disgust at what they saw as a sclerotic, inward-looking Nation at Home. Rather than simple polemic, however, ‘The Kind Ghosts’ – as frequently in Owen’s war poems – is laced with literary irony, here giving a vicious twist to a genre popular at the very beginning of the war, which exhorted the nation to awaken to reality and extolled her sons’ duty to defend her.⁸ Now, four years on, the motherland still seemed sunk in gross slumber, while ever more of her ‘boys’ were slaughtered.

Owen’s bitter satire, however, was grounded – again, as frequently in his poems – in a particular moment of his own experience. That moment is recorded in a letter (635) written on 2 July; now it was the turn of his sister Mary to hear just how little free time he had, or could afford to take:

On Sunday Aft. we went to a large empty house near the Camp, and the Lodge people provided tea in the garden. This was the sole recreation of any sort in 7 days. I dare not go out in the evening (we are not free until 8.30 or 9 p.m.) for fear of getting to bed late, which would mean disastrous inability to get up on the Bugle. For the same reason I dare not begin to read earnestly or write earnestly in the evening. I am haunted by bugles and startled by drums and perturbed by the tramp of feet every moment of the daylight hours.

⁸ Owen’s poem might read as a bitter response to Rupert Brooke’s ‘Peace’, with its wished-for awakening from ‘a world grown old, and old, and weary.’ See also (e.g.) Robert Bridges, ‘Wake Up, England!’ (printed in ‘The Times’, 8 Aug. 1914): ‘Thou Careless, Awake! / Thou peacemaker, fight! / Stand, England, for honour / And God guard the Right!’.

It is perhaps not surprising that the rather drab-sounding occasion Owen mentions – an empty house and a cup of tea – has gone unremarked by commentators hitherto. However, this was not just the occasion for another grumble about the pressures of work: embedded here are a context and a specific location for his poem, ‘Britannia / The Kind Ghosts’.

Owen’s use of upper case suggests that ‘Lodge’ was part of the house’s name, and a little research reveals that ‘near the camp’ – less than two miles from the Cavalry Barracks site on Burniston Road – was indeed ‘a large house’ with such a name: Londesborough Lodge. Situated on The Crescent and set in extensive gardens high above the Valley Gardens Park, the Lodge is a substantial nineteenth century building, one of many properties owned at the time by the Earl of Londesborough.⁹ Though not exceptionally large, the house was sufficiently grand to have played host to royalty; Edward, Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII) had been a guest there more than once.¹⁰ The Lodge gardens were particularly striking, with ‘delightful... terraces and lawns’ giving views out to sea and ‘pathways through loggias of rambler roses’ leading to woodland that stretched down to the valley below.¹¹



Fig ii. Londesborough Lodge, The Crescent, Scarborough; looking seawards.

Photo credit: <https://yorkshire.samye.org>, accessed 18/4/26.

⁹ Owen knew that the Sitwell siblings’ parents lived in Scarborough, but he probably had no idea that their family home, Wood End, was also situated on The Crescent, just two houses away from Londesborough Lodge – or that their mother, Lady Ida, was a daughter of the Earl of Londesborough.

¹⁰ During his second visit, in 1871, the Prince brought unexpected and unwelcome notoriety to the Lodge – and to the town – by falling ill with typhoid fever; the cause was deemed to be poor drainage at the Lodge. The Prince nearly died; Queen Victoria was called to his bedside; he recovered.

¹¹ After the war, the Lodge was bought by Scarborough Council; these descriptions of the gardens, and the image at fig (iii), are from a 1920s advertisement for the ‘Medical Baths’ which were one of the uses to which the property was put. See: <https://www.scarboroughatlas.org/>

Kept by the Londesborough family as a summer residence, The Lodge was probably 'empty' (as Owen encountered it) more than it was occupied. However, although the family were absent, there were staff – 'Lodge people' – on site, and the gardens were opened for events in support of the war effort. Local newspapers record various garden parties held there during the summer of 1918, including one on 30 June, the day before Owen's visit, and that there were ongoing links between the Lodge and the nearby military camp is attested by the fact that the band of the Manchester Regiment played at some of these events.¹² It seems likely, therefore, that there was an invitation – perhaps a standing invitation – for groups of officers from the Barracks to visit the gardens and take tea: an opportunity for them to relax in a peaceful, elegant setting.

Owen had no axe to grind with the Londesboroughs in particular, but – while their offer to entertain officers from the camp was no doubt well-intentioned, and while some of his companions no doubt welcomed it – something about that Sunday afternoon occasion seems not to have sat easily with him. Thrown briefly out of the maelstrom of his military duties into the sequestered opulence of what must have seemed like a miniature palace; invited (or possibly, even, ordered by his superior) to spend a couple of hours sipping tea and ignoring the realities of war, yet surrounded by evidence of a wealth and privilege that could apparently render those realities an irrelevance; all this must have felt like collusion in some grotesque fantasy of normality.

The impressions left on him by Londesborough Lodge clearly formed a significant element in Owen's shaping of 'The Kind Ghosts'. The setting of the Lodge translates readily into the 'palace' in the poem, with its 'crimson rooms', its terraces and roses, its 'golden gardens' and the 'sweet glooms' of woodland. The slumbering 'She', oblivious to the blood that is spilled to keep her safe, may be read in more than one way. Perhaps most obviously (and as suggested by Owen's alternative title), she is a 'Britannia' figure, with the warrior of tradition now reduced to an effete, indifferent dreamer.¹³ Possibly, too, 'she' is the house itself: empty, a ghost of itself, lost in dreams of a glorious past and an impossible future. The doomed 'boys' shadow the fate of the recruits Owen was labouring every day to get ready for war: bewildered young conscripts, many of them straight out of Lancashire mills – 'awful specimens, almost green-pale', as he described them. (L.630)

¹² E.g.: *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph and Hull Daily Mail*, 1/7/18, both describe a garden fete held at Londesborough Lodge on Saturday afternoon (30/6/18), opened by Viscountess Ennismore and in aid of the Mayoress's Central Committee (War Comforts Fund); the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 31/8/18, reports on a garden fete at Londesborough Lodge in aid of the NSPCC, with the band of the Manchester Regiment in attendance.

¹³ Dominic Hibberd suggests an echo of Swinburne's 'Perinde ac Cadaver' (1871), in which a surly and indifferent Britannia is upbraided for her failure to support the cause of freedom in pre-unification Italy. (Dominic Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* [Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1975]); cited in Stallworthy (1983), p.181.) Comments in his letters show that Owen read Swinburne, on and off, throughout 1917 and 1918: see L.535, 577, 611, 671.



Fig iii. Londesborough Lodge in the 1920s: terrace and gardens

<https://www.scarboroughatlas.org/map/records/eat-me/gallery/1>, accessed 18/4/26

The sole surviving manuscript of 'The Kind Ghosts' is dated by Owen '30/7/18'. A week or so later, on 8 August, he wrote to his mother: 'I send you S.S.'s last note. [The] first sentence refers to a poem I wrote last week and sent him.'¹⁴ (Letter 642) This time-frame and a later comment by Sassoon confirm that the poem Owen had sent to his friend was 'The Kind Ghosts', but in the absence of any other manuscript material we cannot know whether he had in fact produced it within the space of a week, as his letter implies, or whether he had worked it up over some longer period after his visit to the Lodge at the end of June. Either way, sending a copy to Sassoon indicates that Owen must have viewed it as reasonably 'finished' by the end of July. Sassoon's response, however, took no prisoners:

My dear W.
Bad news for you. Nobody likes your poem except me.
It moved me so much when I first read it, but I begin to see
where it fails, when ruthless criticism starts on it...

Sassoon later commented: 'I was sometimes a little severe on what he showed me, censuring the over-luscious writing ... putting my finger on "She dreams of golden gardens and sweet glooms" as an example.'¹⁵

¹⁴ This 'note' survives in the Bodleian archive, OEF 453. Sassoon was still convalescing after a head injury; 'feeling better, but not good', he wrote, and the date on his letter, 'Friday, 8th', was an error on his part: Friday was 9 August. It seems more likely that Sassoon would have mistaken the date rather than the day, but, in turn, this would mean that Owen could not have included Siegfried's note in a letter sent on Thursday 8 August. That date, however, was supplied by the editors of CL (1964); Owen's text gives only 'Thursday 7.30 a.m.'. Most likely, as elsewhere, Owen completed this letter a day or two after he had begun it.

¹⁵ *Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1920* (Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 59. Sassoon seems to misremember this quotation as coming from Owen's early work.

Sassoon's criticism may have provoked Owen into some revisions. While his July MS carries the title 'The Kind Ghosts', in the list of material Owen was considering submitting to the Sitwells it appears as 'Brittania' [sic]. His letters show that he worked on preparing a submission until well into August (eg L.645, 19/8/18) and 'Brittania' looks to be a relatively late addition to this list.¹⁶ Does that revised title indicate that Owen also produced some revised text, too? Once again, unfortunately, the absence of any other MS material makes it impossible to say.

Owen was killed in action at Ors, by the Sambre-Oise Canal, on 4 November, 1918. He had not included his poem – under either title – in the selection he managed eventually to send to Osbert Sitwell before embarking for France at the end of August. The Sitwells printed a number of his poems in 'Wheels' 1919, and in 1920 Edith Sitwell edited the first published volume of his work, but neither of these publications included 'Britannia / The Kind Ghosts'.

After the war, the Londesborough family gave up the Lodge and in the 1920s it was bought by Scarborough Town Council. Over the following century it was used for a variety of purposes, including Municipal Turkish Baths, Tourist Office and radio station. Having fallen into disrepair, it was put up for sale by the Council in 2013, and now houses the Kagyu Samye Dzong Scarborough Tibetan Buddhist Centre. The Buddhist community are engaged in a long-term project to restore and renovate the property.¹⁷



Fig iv. Kagyu Samye Dzong, June 2024; photo credit Paul Norgate

¹⁶ Hibberd, however (1975: cited in Stallworthy (1983), p.181), suggests that 'Brittania' was an early draft title.

¹⁷ I am most grateful to Ani Tselha, Manager of the Kagyu Samye Dzong, for her kind invitation to visit the Lodge, for her generous welcome and for her interest in the story of Wilfred Owen.

A CHANCE DISCOVERY

Niall Heaton (nialldheaton@gmail.com)

Trefonen / BOVTS

I'm just 21 and I have scant knowledge of Wilfred Owen, beyond what I learned for my 'A' Level in English Literature. It was with a degree of trepidation that I sat down to compose this contribution for the Wilfred Owen Association Journal; I hope that you find it interesting.

In early March, I happened to meet Chris Woods, who asked me if I'd like to recite two poems for the forthcoming Wilfred Owen Festival in Oswestry. Chris said that I could choose which poems to read – he said, 'find ones that resonate'. I am familiar with a few Wilfred Owen poems, but I thought that it would be appropriate to learn more about the First World War, to understand the context in which Wilfred Owen's poems were written.

I decided to speak to my granddad about his knowledge of the First World War; since he was born in the 1920s, he would have met many former soldiers, for whom memories of the conflict would have been all too fresh. Fortunately, though very old, he possesses a great memory and he provided many interesting facts.

He told me that my great-grandfather John S. Heaton (JSH) served in the Great War; he spoke very little about the conflict, though there was a rare exception to this rule. On Wednesday, 12th April 1950, JSH told my granddad that they would drive over to France that weekend, to visit the battlefields of the First World War.



JSH in 1915

My granddad raised a couple of points of concern; they had no passports – ‘we’re British, so it’ll be all right’ – and no currency – ‘they’ll accept ours’. They set off to Dover, with no tickets for the ferry, no GB plate on their 1930s Ford 8, and no arrangements for accommodation in France.

It was during the journey that my grandfather learned of his own father’s experiences in the First World War. In June 1915, JSH completed his degree in Chemistry at the University of Liverpool; immediately afterwards, he was told that the army was actively looking for recruits with a background in Chemistry, to ‘improve the quality of the water supply’.

German gas attacks had occurred in April and May 1915, and on 18th May 1915 Lord Kitchener, the Minister for War, publicly announced that the Allies would retaliate with gas attacks of their own. Between June and September 1915, four ‘Special Companies’ were formed within the Royal Engineers – 186, 187, 188, and 189; together, these came to be known in January 1916 as ‘The Special Brigade’. This was the first formation of the British Army that was set up specifically to conduct chemical warfare.

The Special Brigade fell under the command of Major C.H. Foulkes of the Royal Engineers, who had served in the Boer War. Foulkes had no scientific training or expertise; by contrast, the leader of German chemical warfare was Fritz Haber, who went on to win the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1918.

Foulkes initiated a recruitment drive of universities, to attract graduates with knowledge of chemistry. Many were attracted by the fact that Foulkes stipulated that recruits to the Special Brigade should start at the rank of Corporal and be paid three shillings a day. This was significantly more than the one shilling and nine pence that Privates and Pioneers received.

JSH recalled that it was common for Privates and Pioneers from other regiments to join, simply by saying that the formula for water was H_2O – leading to a transfer and an increase in pay. He also mentioned that one of his colleagues, who was previously a pharmacist, was transferred from an infantry regiment, because the recruiting officer couldn’t spell pharmacist and had written chemist.

Many of the recruits were under the impression that they were there for reasons such as ‘testing the quality of water in wells’; others believed that they might be working in specialised portable laboratories. Foulkes did little to dispel such notions. JSH told my grandfather that when he and the other recruits travelled over to France, they were in total ignorance as to what their duties might be. There was great speculation and excitement at the prospect being involved in something mysterious and unknown.

JSH signed up in August 1915 and was assigned to 188 Company. All those in the Special Brigade were given a very distinctive armband to wear; these were in the colours of the Italian flag, but were made in Paris to special order. The colours were chosen because on the same day that Foulkes took command of the Special Brigade, Italy joined the war on the side of the Allies – 26th May 1915.



This is the armband worn by JSH at the Battle of Loos. These are incredibly rare.

The armbands were worn to inform officers of other regiments that they had no authority over members of The Special Brigade and to ensure that they could move about trenches, without any hindrance or suspicion. Such armbands are very rare nowadays; they were taken out of use in early in 1916, as they caused confusion – some thought that they were worn by Italian troops.

The recruits were issued with revolvers, instead of rifles. The revolvers reinforced their authority and they would not need rifles, as they would not be advancing beyond the front lines. Additionally, rifles would be a big handicap, when they were manhandling heavy gas cylinders and other equipment into position up the communications trenches and in the specially dug launching emplacements.

Each gas cylinder was 3ft long and weighed about 160 pounds/73kg. They had to be adjoined to a flexible copper or lead pipe, This was then connected to a 10ft iron pipe, which went over the trench parapet and was aimed towards the German trenches.

Just a month after joining up, JSH took part in the Battle of Loos, the biggest British offensive to date. History records that the Battle of Loos started at 5.50 a.m. on the morning of 25th September 1915. However, at 5.20 a.m., JSH was told to make what was the first ever release of gas; he was very reluctant to do so, as the weather was less than ideal and the landscape was rather flat. For a successful gas attack, either the wind speed (and direction) or the gradient had to be favourable, but neither applied in this case. Many senior officers in the army, didn't approve of the use of gas, so it was frequently referred to as 'accessory'.

The gas released by JSH barely moved and he notified his senior officer of his concerns. A captain of the Royal Engineers, phoned through to divisional headquarters, with the message 'Dead calm. Impossible to discharge accessory'. The reply that came back was 'Accessory to be discharged at all costs'.



The Special Brigade had 5,500 gas cylinders, of which 5,100 were eventually emptied; this was not easy to accomplish, as many of the spanners for unscrewing the cocks of the cylinders proved to be misfits. Many of the connections were cross-threaded and streams of gas frequently escaped from the joints.

The results were predictably disastrous – the gas seemed to disperse in all directions, including towards the British Trenches. JSH told my grandfather that many soldiers were choking, coughing, half-blinded and feeling as if their last moments had come. Such a description is very similar to that provided by Wilfred Owen in ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’.

Watch worn by JSH

Given all the information that my grandfather provided, I knew that as a descendant of an original member of the Special Brigade, my first choice of poem for the Wilfred Owen festival could only be ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, which I chose to read in the Edmund Blunden version:

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

JSH told my grandfather that since the Special Brigade comprised a very small body of men, they had to have help from soldiers of other regiments to carry over 5000 gas cylinders to the front. Because the cylinders were so heavy, it took two soldiers to carry each one. JSH mentioned to my grandfather, that he had assistance from a soldier in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and that his name was... Robert Graves.

This was actually documented by Graves himself; he is recorded as saying of the portering – ‘This was worse than carrying the dead; the cylinders were cast iron, heavy and hateful. The men cursed and sulked ... I felt like screaming.’¹⁸

Being aware that Robert Graves visited Siegfried Sassoon at Craiglockhart and knowing that he met Wilfred Owen, I decided that my choice of a second poem had identified itself. It had to be ‘The Craiglockhart Sycamore’ – a skilfully crafted poem by Gill Learner; I appreciate it more each time I read it and I’m sure that you will too.

The Craiglockhart Sycamore

It was young then, lively with ants,
 beetles, birds. At Owen’s first sighting,
 it was June green, as green as new recruits.
 They, eager and proud, had sailed
 to a bewilderment of shattered buildings,
 splintered stumps. He will have looked up
 through the shafts of light, the verdant shift,
 to where clouds fluffed by as white as bandages,
 heard the scrape of twigs, riffling of leaves.

Its wood’s absorbed more than a century
 of sounds – the bravado of robins, jackdaws
 heckling, nurses comforting, student laughter.
 One hefty limb, pruned against cracking skulls,

¹⁸ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*. Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 1984), 136.

has been sawn, planed, chiselled, stained
and strung. Now it can measure the four seasons,
urge feet into a reel, soar cloud-high with the lark.
Its new voice will remember those who died
and sing of reconciliation, peace.¹⁹

In 1916, the numbered Special Companies were changed to 'lettered' Companies; JSH was in 'L' Company of the Special Brigade. In that year, gas was employed in shells, which allowed attacks from a much greater range. However, when German forces advanced with considerable speed, valuable equipment stored near the front line was frequently at risk of being lost.

In 1976, JSH wrote an account of how he was asked to undertake a mission to take back equipment – the article below, was published in the Special Brigade Newsletter, November 1976.

Collecting Projectors

By J. S. Heaton, 1976

The C. O. sent for me and said:

'One of our companies has left some guns (projectors) in a dump on the Mont des Cats, and we don't want them to fall into the hands of the Germans. I want you to take a lorry and twenty men and see if you can recover them. You will have to be very cautious, for the Germans are very close to this point and may have over-run it by now. Choose your time very carefully. You will need enough light to find the guns and yet you must avoid observation'.

So I collected a lorry and 20 men and we made our way to Boeschepe at the foot of Mont des Cats. The place was absolutely deserted; the silence was uncanny. I told the fellows exactly what was required and when the time was right, we crawled slowly up the hill. Nobody spoke. Just short of the top, we stopped the lorry and turned it round, ready for a quick get-away. No time was lost. We were quickly out of the lorry and scouring the search area like a pack of dogs. We soon found ten guns, but no more. We searched till it became quite dark. A flurry of light shells came over. Jerry was beginning to stir. We got back to the lorry and got away quickly.

The C. O. had not told me how many guns were involved, but with twenty men, I expected twenty guns and probably more. So it was with some trepidation, that I went to report my return with only ten guns.

He gazed sternly at me. 'Dammit', said he. 'There should only be eight.'

¹⁹ Gill Learner, *Chill Factor* (Reading: Two Rivers Press, 2016), p.13. By permission of Gill Learner and Two Rivers Press.
See Thomas J. P. Muldoon's discussion of the Wilfred Owen Quartet's instruments made from wood from this tree, in this issue pp. 37–8.



A group of soldiers from 'L' Company of the Special Brigade, each wearing a Webley .455 calibre six-shot revolver. JSH far right.

JSH served in the Special Brigade until the end of the War; he was at the Somme, Ypres and the last gas attack of 13th October 1918, in support of 3 Division at Deûlémont, during which 197 Livens projector bombs were fired.

After the War, JSH completed a PhD in Chemistry at the University of Liverpool. He went on to have a very long and distinguished career in the field of dyestuffs. He passed away on Christmas Day 1985, just 18 days after Robert Graves.

Reflections

Many scholars and academics mention that 'Dulce et Decorum Est' relates to a gas attack – the key word is 'attack'. The obvious inference is that the catalyst for the poem was an attack by a German gas division, but what evidence is there for this? It could equally apply to a faulty release of gas by the Special Brigade, caused by a change in wind direction.

Like JSH, my grandfather is highly qualified in the field of Chemistry; he says that 'Dulce et Decorum Est' gives every impression of describing (specifically) a chlorine gas attack – Owen refers twice to the gas's characteristic green colour. Typically, victims of a chlorine attack choke to death. This is because chlorine reacts quickly with water in the airways, to form hydrochloric acid; the outcome is swelling and blocking of lung tissue, resulting in suffocation.

At the time 'Dulce et Decorum Est' was written, phosgene was the primary gas that was used. However, sufferers develop symptoms, which don't fit Owen's very vivid imagery. Could it be, that Owen wrote the poem based on what he witnessed earlier in the war?

JSH: Values

What I've found very interesting is that, just like Wilfred Owen, JSH saw nothing to celebrate in having taken part in the First World War; essentially, he considered the war to be a needless and tragic waste of lives. He never spoke about the conflict and his only concession to actively remember the war was by attending reunions of The Special Brigade.

My grandfather has passed on to me many of JSH's belongings. I'm now custodian of his Special Brigade armband, his trench watch, his ID tags and some Special Brigade photos.



I also have JSH's medals – they are in their original wrapping, in the original boxes and in the outer envelope in which they were received. The medals have never been worn and the ribbons never sewn.

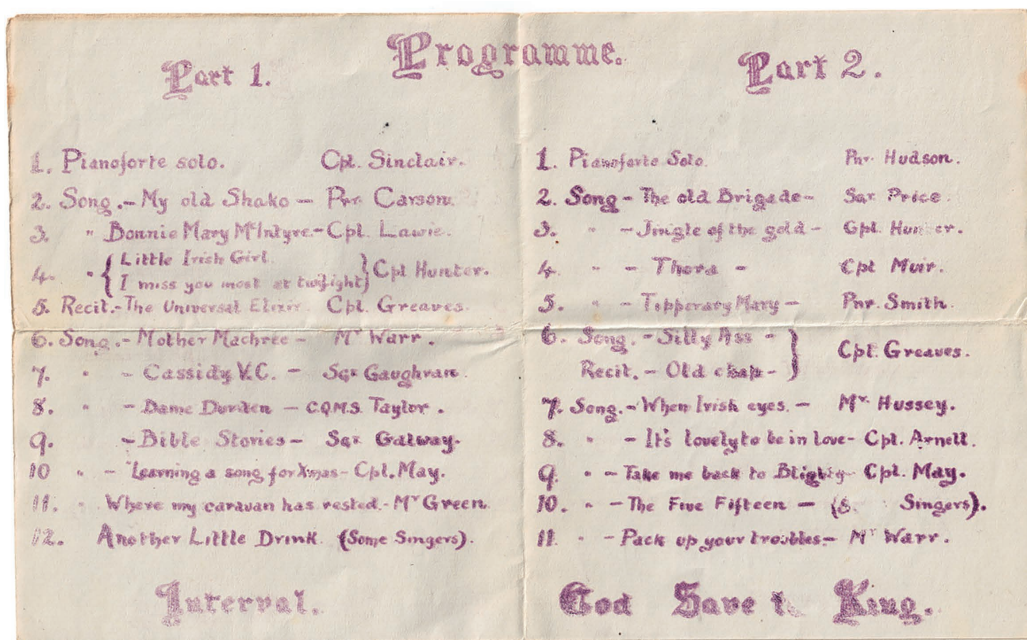
My granddad has also given me a few more things of interest, such as JSH's PhD gown; it's a beautiful thing and it would be nice to think that I might wear it one day. I was also pleased to receive two books: *Undertones of War* by Edmund Blunden and *The Wet Flanders Plain* by Henry Williamson.

The final items that I was given were about a dozen aerial photos and some original WWI concert programmes. One of the aerial photos shows nothing more than an intersection of two roads and a small dwelling, which is labelled 'The Widow's House'.

Scope for further investigation

I happened to be browsing through *The Wet Flanders Plain* and to my surprise, I found that Williamson wrote a brief account of visiting 'The Widow's House'. I'm not sure, though, if Williamson's widow is the same as the one mentioned on the aerial photo – I shall do my best to find this out. Is there anyone out there who knows about 'The Widow's House'?

The concert programmes are very interesting; the one below is the 'L' Company Christmas programme 1916. I've managed to find details of only some of the songs, so I'm going to make some further investigations.



I went into all this knowing little about my great grandfather's activities in the First World War; with the help of my grandfather, I've learned a little about gas warfare.

WW1 gas attacks are usually referred to in an oblique way; I hope that this article provides an insight into those who carried out the attacks: the Special Brigade.

I have joined the Wilfred Owen Association and should this article elicit any queries, I'll do my best to answer them.



JSH's dog tags

All photographs © Niall Heaton

DUNCAN KERR'S LETTERS: 5TH ARGYLL AND SUTHERLAND HIGHLANDERS, 1915-1919. GALLIPOLI, EGYPT, AND PALESTINE

Colin Kerr
Bath

Duncan was 33 in 1915, living at 33 Robertson Street, Greenock. He was a clerk.

His family, in 1915, was his mother Annie Kerr (his father, John, had died in 1912), sister Mary (34, an unmarried teacher), brother William (32, a bank clerk: my grandfather), brother John (30, a teacher, who became a minister), sisters Janet (28) and Christina (Chrissie) (19).

'The Charge' which he refers to in his letter of August 30, 1915, was on July 12, 1915, at Achi Baba Nullah, Gallipoli. The 5th Argylls were part of the 157th Brigade, 52nd Division, 8 Corps.

The 'Naval Scrap' in his letter of January 27, 1917, is the unsuccessful encounter between the British Harwich Force and a German destroyer flotilla. 'The raider' – the Wolf – did actually escape.

'The Great Advance' in his letter of December 5, 1917, is the taking of Jaffa on November 16; the army went on to take Jerusalem on December 9.

The 'Big Battle' in his letter of June 1, 1918, is the German attack on Mt. Kemmel, Ypres. His brother William was serving in the 2nd Army.

The reference to General Foch in the letter of August 14, 1918, relates to the Allied Amiens offensive of August 8.

MAY 25 1915, DUNFERMLINE

Dear Chrissie,

I have still to report that the gallant 'Fifths' are still in Dunfermline. There are rumours that we may leave tonight but we have heard such rumours before.

The 7th H.L.I. who are part of our Brigade left here at 4.30 this morning.

I sent home my old boots as in addition to the Army issue I have bought a good sound pair that if necessary I can stand up over the ankles in water and survey the Gallipoli Peninsula.

We are all now fully equipped and are ready for the Journey.

I feel quite easy and have been much more excited going on my holidays to Arran than I am now.

I see the Italians have joined in so that we should be able to come round Germany's rear in a very short time. This I think is Kitchener's plan, He is merely keeping the German troops in Flanders employed while he completes his arrangements for a campaign via the Danube; if you consult a map you will see that this is the most vulnerable part of the Germanic Empire.

I have a good serviceable kit, shirts socks etc. and we get it renewed out bye. We are being served out with Khaki Helmets.

You will see the Lights photo in the Telegraph some of these days, as we had our portrait taken. I hope it comes out all right, the sun was shining very brightly at the time and I am afraid we will all have screwed faces. You will receive a copy from the Photographer here. I have already paid for same.

Your affect brother,
Duncan

AUGUST 30 1915, GALLIPOLI

Dear Mary,

We have been in the firing line for four days and are going back to Reserve trenches in the afternoon – it is now 11am and the sun is very hot, in fact I am perspiring freely while writing.

We have received the Telegraphs giving descriptions of our big charge and some of the letters written should have reached home. Men who talk about the bayonets being red with blood are putting it mildly liars – for instance Watson the Ground Master's son makes such a statement while to my perfect knowledge he wasn't in the charge at all, but was wounded beside me by a stray bullet, he was resting in the ground for a while.

I am afraid that Willie MacIntyre, that is Grant Bisset's cousin is killed, he was returned by me on his way to hospital wounded but they have received no word from him and this is ominous – also his pay book came in to my possession through an irregular source, and as the Pay book is usually taken from a killed man's tunic, I am afraid the worst has happened.

I was sorry to hear of Archie McNeil's death, he was wounded in the charge and was taken in from the open early next morning, he was a quiet chap and an excellent soldier. His brother John is at Alexandria in charge of our kit bags and stores.

We hear great rumours of going home, the majority emanate from the fruitful minds of some of our fellows and as it goes along the report grows in strength until some believe that the boat is actually waiting for us.

My own personal opinion is that from the latest reports – the Dardanelles should be forced by the end of September and the only point is, will we be sent into Constantinople to garrison duty or retained on this Peninsula for a similar purpose – or sent to Egypt or home.

I am not allowed to give you the details of our position but I don't expect any further charges here so that we are very unlikely to have another heavy casualty list.

I am sure the people of Greenock will be in a great state – our men did well and are still doing well – they seem to be the youngest soldiers about here – there are many names reported as 'missing' that must be eventually returned as 'killed'.

I came across some Frenchmen yesterday and had quite an interesting conversation with them, I showed them your photo – they were quite taken up with the photo.

I will close as I have to see about the removal of our munitions, better food etc. to our new trenches.

Love to all
Duncan

SEPTEMBER 9 1915, GALLIPOLI

Dear Chrissie,

We are back again in the Reserve trenches which we always enjoy although as things are here now we are not so badly off on this side of Achi Baba, anywhere.

So far as this place goes, things are gradually moving in the right direction and whilst it is still doubtful whether we shall spend the New Year at home we shall be at least finished with this job and the only thing that will trouble us is, that we may be retained here for garrison duties until the whole business is settled. The Germans evidently don't care to face another Winter Campaign and this is a good sign. I think our people know their way about and will only strike when they are ready and when the enemy is least prepared.

The Turks out here are fighting squarely and toughly. We can hear them singing in the morning. I think it is their worship, but they are in a very bad way getting scarce ammunition food and clothing, this will very soon tell on them.

We don't know how they may treat any of our men who may be taken prisoner but one thing they did was that on the day of our famous charge, one of our wounded was taken into a trench by the Turks and when they had dressed his wounds, sent him back to our own lines.

Do you know who I met in the firing line? The Rev. Herbert Dunn, his company was touching our left, he was glad and delighted to see me, he is looking well although it's a queer change for him.

Regarding Mary's enquiries re Sgt. Graves – he was killed. Billy MacIntyre is posted as

missing but I am quite certain that he is dead and buried. I had a letter from his brother regarding him and I am replying to it tonight.

This part of the Peninsula is garrisoned practically by Scotsmen – we are in the centre, the French on our right and the Lancashire Division on our left. The Glasgow tongue is strong out here not to speak of the Ayrshire men; Kilmarnock, Ardrossan etc.

Jack Shannon has also arrived here so I believe – I saw his brother the Doctor pass down one of the saps the other day.

I am enjoying excellent health, never was better, no dysentery head aches fevers or other troubles and I hope to continue to the end of the campaign. I was informed by Lieut. Watson last night that my name had been sent forward to be promoted to Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant – Balfour will become Reg. Sgt. Major as Duguid is invalided off with dysentery. This will mean an increase of pay and it will take me out of the firing line, in fact I don't expect to return there except under some special circumstances. Will that ease your minds and to say nothing of the siller?

I hope the National Registration will hunt out all the eligible youths. Its terrible to be out here and read of strikes at home when men are being paid heavy wages and out here, the struggle in monetary value is 1/- per day!! Britain requires to feel the pinch more to bring her men folks to their senses.

Regarding John Billinger, he is still missing – we haven't recovered his body so far and until we do, we cannot return him as 'killed'. I am very sorry for his people, but this is the only message I can give for them.

Duncan

OCTOBER 12 1915

Dear Chrissie,

I hear that Arthur Ballantyne is out here, an officer in the Scottish Rifles and that he has been recommended for the D.C.M. on account of some valourous services – they are the type of men we want for officers. I haven't seen the Rev. Herbert since I first met – his regiment however hasn't been along side of us since.

We are glad to see from the paper that Col. Darroch is about again and hope that he will rejoin us shortly – the men have every confidence in him – he is a soldier to boot. Very considerate of the men and without his local connection makes him one of ourselves. I see suggested in one of his letters that Col. Darroch had led us too far on the 12th. That is absolute rubbish as Col. Darroch was wounded about 100 yards from the spot where we charged from. Col. Darroch was good, a stout officer in fact a thorough soldier and moreover a toff.

Your affect. brother

Duncan

NOVEMBER 25 1915

Dear Chrissie,

The Indian Corporal who looks after our mules has just come in and I am entertaining him to a tune on a mouth organ – he is now attempting one himself and making a fearful job of it.

I think things in Central Europe will break up, they must be near the end of their resources for men and money and if Greece does not play the traitor probably the Balkan business which at the moment looks grave, may turn out a blessing in disguise.

As I wrote home already I am due for discharge about the end of March and according to the usual procedure should leave here about a month prior to that date.

The Turks made two attacks on our lines the other day – both were very feeble and we sent them flying back with heavy loss. The General sent our division a highly complementary message over the affair.

Keep up your peckers and enlist the slackers and the war will have a speedy conclusion – we are now on the swing – Germany is now at desperation.

I am your
Duncan

DECEMBER 5 1915

Dear Chrissie,

It is now cold out here but I have plenty of clothes and have an excellent chance of keeping myself fit till the day I sail for Scotia's Shore; won't the intervening weeks seem long? The last draft brought out word that all the original hands were to be relieved and the whole 3/5 A.S.H. sent out – it is only a report, for the truth, I cannot vouch, naturally we don't get anything official out here on that subject – let us hope for the truth.

I am glad to see by the papers that recruits are rolling in – it's the only way to finish the war early.

We are getting supplies of "extras" from the Greenock Comfort Fund – although the Army rations are wonderful and their clothing astonishing – they look well after our welfare, unfortunately they can't regulate the weather.

When addressing my letters you simply drop the "c" before Q.M.S. Balfour my predecessor is now home, he will be back in time to take over when I am ready.

Wishing you again, all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year with the fervent prayer that we may all meet soon again, with all wars over.

Good night

Your affect. Brother
Duncan

DECEMBER 4 1916, OUT EAST

Dear Chrissie,

I am now well out in the desert, in the pink of health and as happy as a lord. Major Agnew and Capt. Stewison arrived yesterday and it is time – the Battalion is nothing like the old one and it is fine to see the old faces again.

For the present, I intend to keep my present rank of RQMS and not to push for a commission.

Duncan

JANUARY 2 1917

Dear Chrissie,

You will see from the papers that we have occupied El Arish – the Sinai Peninsula is now clear of the enemy – it has been practically a bloodless victory the Colonials suffering a slight number of casualties – the Australians are the men for this job, they have put in a lot of tremendous hard work and deserve great credit – they are wild men and fine and above all fearless.

Regards to all

Your affect. brother

Duncan Kerr

JANUARY 27 1917, EGYPT

Dear Chrissie,

We have just got word of a naval scrap in the North Sea in which we appear to have asserted our superiority; likewise the German raider has been disposed of.

We are however living fairly well out here, have our old bread, old beef daily, potatoes, vegetables, dates figs etc. all free – you are paying pretty stiff at home for these edibles so we have no cause to grumble.

You ask where I got the hat – well we all wear the Tam O'Shanter now – it is a better protection from the Sun than the Glengarry. Our helmets are only worn when we are in the open.

Regards to all at home

Your affect. brother

Duncan

DECEMBER 5 1917

Dear Chrissie,

You will have heard by now of our great advance here – we have thrashed Johnny Turk out here very heavily and he won't forget it. I am now within a Sabbath day's journey of Jerusalem near where the oranges grow – consult your map.

I am well and enjoying the Holy Land climate very well indeed; we are not getting any outside news at all so don't know how things are going elsewhere: but you can rest assured that here, we have had the first victory of the East.

Duncan

JUNE 1 1918, THE HOLY LAND

Dear Jonny,

Yes perhaps I have been fortunate in being left in Egypt, France is an awful place at present.

Your affect. brother
Duncan

AUGUST 14 1918

Dear Chrissie,

I don't think the war will last long now. The tide has definitely turned and Germany must by now realise that she is up against the most determined races in the world – nothing can save her, she may have some slight temporary success but every day will tell against her now – superior numbers and an open sea – she can't hold out.

General Foch took his time and his moment came to strike and he did it, more from him.

I still continue in good health. Am now a full Lieutenant, not a Captain although I have a Captain's command and should also have the rank; it may come later.

Your affect. brother
Duncan

DECEMBER 6 1918, BEIRUT

HQ, 32ND Company, E.L.C. (Pioneers)

Dear Chrissie,

Well and the whole business is all over and we are all well and safe to tell the tale – we should all feel very thankful – our families don't have to mourn the loss of some one who must never return.

Now what are my prospects of an early return home? Well part of this Corps is already being demobilised and my Coy. which is the furthest North, may have to remain another two months but I don't think any longer – after that I will probably be stationed with others at the Base until it comes my turn for a troopship and it is just possible that in the merry month of May (or April) I shall see you all again at Albion Terrace, 33 Robinson St.

Your affect. brother
Duncan

JANUARY 9 1919, BEIRUT

Dear Chrissie,

I am now esconced in a fine flat with large airy rooms adjoining our camp and am thus comfortable. My Company has been reduced to half its former size – demobilization is on the 'go' now. Although there is nothing definite about officers so far – my category – No.7 – food and drink is a fairly good one and should mean a comparatively early release.

Now there is nothing very fresh here – things are going on smoothly. We have a big Corps dinner here this month. A sort of farewell. I am on the Committee and expect to have an enjoyable time.

Your affect. brother
Duncan

JUNE 3 1919, BEIRUT

Dear Chrissie,

Still in the East but prospects of an early return are now bright. As I told you before I am still on the Priority List – well, word has come today for an officer who is No.24 to proceed today to Base depot for demobilisation. So it is just possible that this may be the last letter I shall write you from these 'furrin' parts. .

The Germans don't like our terms but I expect all their talk and palaver will end in a dignified acceptance. I should arrive home just at a nice time of year – so that I can get reclinatized ere the winter sets in.

I am not sorry that the end is now in sight and am looking forward to seeing you all in your best. It's a long way back to August 1914 and in the interval I have had a fair share of all the hardship that was going and can only now feel thankful that all our lives have been spared and that we can now return in peace and comfort with the smile of victory crossing us, to 'oor ain folk'. 'Rule Britannia and God Bless our Highland Soldiers' as a well known General once said.

Egypt is now quiet again – they are a troublesome lot.

Your affect. Brother
Duncan

WILFRED OWEN: A PROPHET OF HUMANISM SACRIFICED ON THE ALTAR OF WAR

*Roland Bouyssou, Professeur Emeritus
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In his early war poems, *1914* and *A New Heaven*, first drafted before his experience on the front line, Wilfred Owen reaches beyond the boundaries of this war by drawing on two myths: the ancient myth of the Eternal Return and the biblical myth of a Paradise in afterlife.

1914 situates the war within a non-linear, cyclical progress of time. The succession of Greek, Latin and contemporary civilizations unfolds according to a recurring process of death and rebirth through “new Springs” and regeneration sacrifices. Such a “born again” myth gives meaning and purpose to this war as it is situated within the frame of non-historical, mythical time and belongs to the natural progress of human history and civilization. Self-sacrifice therefore is not just a patriotic duty, but the participation in a timeless process of life regeneration: ‘The need / Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.’

In *A New Heaven* the poet-prophet overcomes death, as the dead shall live on in bliss. Now, this New Heaven is not ‘the New Jerusalem’ seen by St John in the Book of *Revelation*,²⁰ but a secular, earthly paradise, as the dead are not allowed into God’s company in Heaven,²¹ but will return to their motherland and be worshipped by their fellow countrymen, so ‘Death shall be no sev’rance’.²² This non-Christian, merely human approach to sacrifice, death and the afterlife opens the way to a humanistic mindset which will remain a main strand of Wilfred Owen’s poetry, in spite of many references to Christ and His teaching.

The young poet-prophet, who ignores or most likely does not yet fully realize the Evil of war, exorcizes it by obliterating its tragedy, since human sacrifice, painful as it may be, serves a purpose, and death is glorified. Those poems however reveal an early interest in metaphysical matter. *1914* and *A New Heaven* may be the product of fancy rather than ‘secondary imagination’,²³ yet they show Wilfred Owen’s preoccupation with the meaning and purpose of human life and death. Such a vast concern will be a major strand of his war poetry.

The experience of war ruins Wilfred Owen’s positive vision of sacrifice, death and the progress of mankind. The poet-prophet is now painfully groping in a meaningless, purposeless, tragic world, in spite of an unexpected, hopeful reminiscence of

²⁰ *Revelation*. Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth. (21/1).

²¹ And from High Paradise (we) are cursed and banned. L. 8.

²² *A New Heaven*. L. 10.

²³ Cf. Coleridge’s “secondary imagination” as defined in his *Biographia Literaria* and apprehended in *Kubla Khan*.

“the invincible Spring” in *Exposure*;²⁴ in this poem the myth of The Eternal Return crops up again, but in vain: ‘For Love of God seems dying’ (l.35). The Christian faith is another instance of disappointing help. The true Christ has been murdered by War at the calvary near the Ancre,²⁵ together with the ‘Church Christ’ and Holy Mary in *Le Christianisme*. Wilfred Owen is now bereft of religious and philosophical props and is left astray in a dark void and metaphysical chaos. This complete reversal is echoed in the pararhymes often used by Wilfred Owen in his verse. They are signs of an upheaval, as the traditional rhyming pattern is turned upside down: consonants, in place of vowels, echo one another. Wilfred Owen’s pararhymes sound like passing-bells for a doomed world.

Wilfred Owen’s response to the war is found both in his letters and poems; they are not merely complementary, but closely interlinked as the former underpin the latter. The letters are the journal of his experience, feelings and thoughts; the poems are choruses, or lyrical echoes to the letters. His war poetry was written mostly in England during the months between his two stints on the front line in France. The substance of his verse is made of memories recollected, not in tranquillity, but agony. This distance in time and place from the trenches enabled Wilfred Owen to broaden the perspective of his experience and to situate the war within the scope of the mystery of Evil. This war is seen not just as a temporary cataclysm, but as the actual manifestation of the universal tragedy of the human condition. Wilfred Owen’s poetry is not just about the war, but War.

Wilfred Owen is now vainly groping for some light in the darkness of a world overcome by Evil and Death. That world seems to be split between two warring Powers: ‘Field Marshal God’,²⁶ a malevolent, cruel deity with his henchmen, Michael²⁷ the Archangel and the priests ‘flesh-marked by the Beast’²⁸ on the one hand, and a benevolent Christ, ‘the gentle Christ’,²⁹ ‘kind Jesus’,³⁰ on the other. But Christ, the genuine figurehead of ‘Greater Love’, was hit on the bank of the Ancre, and ‘His disciples hide apart’.³¹ As to the hope of some afterlife, it is first questioned in *Asleep*, and then ruined in *The End*. At best it turns out to be an endless stay in some dim Nether World in which the dead poet-prophet who had ‘courage’, ‘mystery’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘mastery’³² will linger on for ever.

The ‘Devil War’ now reigns supreme over the world; sacrifice has been turned into murder, as the slaughter of Isaac by his father Abraham testifies.³³ There is no glimmer of salvation, the very creation is purposeless,³⁴ and Death is a dead end, a life-in-death in some eternal netherworld: ‘Let us sleep now...’³⁵ Life shall not ‘renew these bodies.... it is death’.³⁶ Helplessness and hopelessness reign supreme. War raises not only pity, but terror.

²⁴ ‘For God’s invincible spring our love is made afraid’ (l.33).

²⁵ *At a Calvary near the Ancre*.

²⁶ *Inspection*, l.16.

²⁷ *Soldier’s Dream*: ‘But God was vexed, and gave all power to Michael’ (l.7).

²⁸ *At a Calvary near the Ancre*, l. 7.

²⁹ *At a Calvary near the Ancre*, l. 8.

³⁰ *Soldier’s Dream*, l. 1.

³¹ *At a Calvary near the Ancre* l. 3.

³² *Strange Meeting*.

³³ *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*.

³⁴ *Futility*.

³⁵ *Strange Meeting*.

³⁶ *The End*.

In this Hell on earth there is but one comfort and duty: "Greater Love":

But they who love the greater love
Lay down their life; they do not hate.³⁷

Now, Wilfred Owen's 'Greater Love' differs from Christ's 'Greater Love', which is salvific. The poet-prophet will advocate a Christ-like, human 'Greater Love', consisting in self-sacrifice alongside one's fellow-sufferers doomed to death. Christ remains Wilfred Owen's leading light, but is stripped of His divine nature and is no redeemer. He is made into a model of secular humanism, that is a paragon of brotherhood and devotion to one's fellow-sufferers. Wilfred Owen becomes a secular prophet, as humanism consists in 'a high esteem and general love of mankind', in a world from which supernatural or divine powers are banned. The finality of man is man only and his progress. 'Greater Love' will consist in self-sacrifice for the sake of mankind, while the powers of Evil War are bent on thwarting and ruining any prospect. The poet-prophet shall walk in the footsteps of Christ on the eve of His Passion: his forehead will 'bleed where no wounds were'³⁸ and, like Christ dragging His cross up Mount Calvary, he shall 'trail your cross through flame and hail'.³⁹ His duty is to suffer and die, helplessly, alongside his companions, in hopelessness, as he can neither rescue nor save them. Unlike Christ, Wilfred Owen can achieve no redemption. There is no 'New Heaven'; and he dies as a secular Christ, a prophet of humanism, sacrificed on the altar of War.

The climax of human tragedy is probably reached in vain sacrifice, and all the more so when it is high-minded and selfless. *Futility* tells the despair of a man whose life on earth is pointless, *Strange Meeting* shows the purposeless life-in-death of the poet-prophet in eternal oblivion, and *Spring Offensive* tells the meaningless sacrifice of men on some hill: the sun, the brambles, the buttercups, the earth vainly try to hold them back, but they are swept away 'On the hot blast and fury of hell's upsurge'. In *Spring Offensive*, 'The New Spring', 'The Invincible Spring' are ruined and turned into the death throes of innocent victims at the gates of Hell.

Wilfred Owen's war choruses, whether they are satiric or lyric poetry, (as his satiric verse is nothing but angry, bitter elegies) are not mere testimonies to the sufferings of soldiers on the front line, but choruses echoing the tragedy of men vainly doomed to pain and Death. Wilfred Owen has turned that war into a paradigm of universal human tragedy. Ancient Greek tragedy, which Wilfred Owen is unlikely to have come across, raised 'pity and terror'.⁴⁰ Unknowingly, he has reached that peak of heart-rending, tragic lyricism, as his verse does raise pity and terror.

The war ordeal turned a young romantic dreamer into a poet of 'the pity of war', a prophet of Humanism, and a martyr in testimony to 'Greater Love' among men.

³⁷ *At a Calvary near the Ancre.*

³⁸ *Strange Meeting*, l. 39. Cf. 'Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground' (Luke; 22.44).

³⁹ *Greater Love.*

⁴⁰ According to Aristotle, tragedy raised pity and fear, or terror (*Poetics* 1453b1).

THE WILFRED OWEN FESTIVAL, OSWESTRY 2025

Thomas J.P. Muldoon

The Wilfred Owen Festival in Oswestry first began in 2018, a date coinciding with the Centenary anniversary of the end of the First World War and the death of Wilfred Owen.

The event launch took place on the 19th October 2018 in the Wynnstay Hotel, Oswestry. The festival included 34 varied events including readings, lectures, plays, music and art exhibitions. The festival was proposed and organised by Mr Chris Woods who chairs the Lights of Trefonen Community Group. Chris Woods is an author, historian, and photographer.

The festival brochure opened with a forward by Mr Peter Owen, nephew of Wilfred Owen and past President of the Wilfred Owen Association.

The launch concert included an evening of poetry and music, featuring the Wilfred Owen violin, made by Steve Burnett and played by actor and musician Thoren Ferguson. The evening also included performances by soprano Natasha Day, who was accompanied by the pianist David Malusa.



Photograph credit: Thomas J. P. Muldoon

A new statue of Wilfred Owen was especially commissioned by Oswestry Town Council. Local artist Tim Turner created the statue, which is life sized and features Owen in his military uniform. The unveiling of the statue in Cae Park, Oswestry took place on the 20th October 2018.

I was most fortunate to attend the concert and was immensely impressed by the evenings event and the statue unveiling on the following day. The Wilfred Owen Festival was clearly a wonderful achievement, led by Chris Woods and supported by so many from the local community.

This past year, 2025, Oswestry held a Wilfred Owen Festival with Chris Woods once again creating a mixed program of events. It was so heartening to receive such a warm welcome as a visitor to the Town. With the leadership of Chris and the collaboration of many individuals, a first-class series of events was organised, to be enjoyed by sold out audiences.

I attended events over the weekend 22nd to 23rd of March, 2025, beginning on Saturday afternoon with a lecture by local Author David Andrews, who discussed his book, *Wilfred Owen: Poet of Oswestry*.⁴¹ His talk covered a summary of the life of Wilfred Owen and a general introduction to his work. The talk was held at Oswestry library where David Andrews is current Reader and Writer in Residence. The congenial and informative discussion was very well attended and questions were taken by the author. This was followed by a second group of attendees for a repeat of the lecture, such was the demand.

On the evening of Saturday the 22nd of March, a drama double bill was performed at the Hermon Chapel, Chapel Street, Oswestry, a former Welsh congregational chapel which is now an arts centre for the performance of music, theatre, and the spoken word along with educational purposes (Hermon Arts).



The first performance was a play called 'Strange Meeting', written and performed by Shaun Higgins (Spike Rose Productions). Dressed in an immaculate First World War uniform and looking uncannily like the image of Wilfred Owen, (in the famous Gunston portraits), the actor began to weave a story based on the history, poetry, and letters of Wilfred Owen. Starting from his admission at Craiglockhart Hospital, it encompassed the historic meeting of Siegfried Sassoon and included some of the resulting poetry, moving on to Wilfred Owen's return to France and his final battle on the 4th November 1918. The emphasis was very much steeped in the rich language, humour, and story of the Oswestry poet and soldier.

Shaun Higgins as Wilfred Owen, 2025

(photograph by Thomas J. P. Muldoon; used with permission of Shaun Higgins)

The stage was set like a trench bunker (officers' accommodation). In the background lay a trestle bed with wool blanket along with other items such of small furniture, storm light etc. A washing line hung behind the actor and strategically placed along the line was a series of items such as photographs, letters, etc. used to illustrate the spoken words. This device seemed ingenious to me and worked superbly. The fourth wall was broken at times, which seemed to create a dynamic and energy, engaging the audience beneficially.

During the first part of this performance, there was an electrical 'blackout' which turned out to include the whole town. For a moment it seemed like we might not be able to continue; however, in double quick time and to the tremendous credit of the actor and the venues staff, hand held lamps were found and placed to best advantage and the performance continued.

What really struck me was how this enhanced the appreciation of the play in a couple of most unexpected ways. The combined spot lamps and the otherwise complete silence gave both an authentic look to the scene and enhanced the appreciation of the actor's voice most powerfully. Without the normal ambient sounds of electrical circuits such as amplifiers, speakers, and powerful lighting, etc., we could listen most intently. I was previously unaware of the impact of normal background noises; I did not hear them. Their absence offered profound insights and greatly enhanced the enjoyment of a riveting play.

The second play, called 'The Unknown Soldier', was written and performed by Ross Ericson; Producer and Director Michelle Yim, Grist to the Mill Theatre Company; Edinburgh Festival Award Winner.

Ross Ericson, in rain cape and First World War British uniform, took to the stage to undertake his performance with an atmospheric rendering, loaned by the spot lights and enhanced by the staging which was brilliantly designed to suit the purposes of both plays.

This enthralling story of a soldier called Jack Vaughan, 'a sergeant in the Labour Corps: a Devon man in his late thirties/early forties'⁴² who stayed after the guns fell silent, searching for those who could not return home, the dead and the missing. He is looking for someone and has a promise to keep and a debt to repay. The story is of comradeship, betrayal, and promises. And a strange request by a General?⁴³

In a Devonshire accent throughout, and with strong characterization, the story wove a tale full of humanity, surprising truths, and challenging narratives to 'old lies'. It included themes with relevance to more recent wars and our ongoing understanding. This, informed from the perspective of a character who was there.

Towards the conclusion of the second play, the normal lighting resumed, in time for a standing ovation and the raptures applause of a most appreciative audience.

On Sunday 23rd March, 2025 there was a concert of Peace and Reconciliation, held in Christ Church, Oswestry, a large and impressive venue, directed by Christopher Symons from the piano and featuring the Wilfred Owen String Quartet of instruments. Also featured was a historic violin with an amazing story, featured in a book called, "The Fiddle" by Natalie Cumming.⁴⁴

⁴² Ross Ericson, *The Unknown Soldier*, Methuen Drama (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁴³ Wilfred Owen Festival, information flyer (2025).

⁴⁴ ISBN: 9781912639083.

The Wilfred Owen quartet has three violins available, the Wilfred Owen violin, the Siegfried Sassoon violin, and the Robert Graves violin, along with the Rivers and Brock cello and the Maggie Mc Bean viola. Dr Rivers and Dr Brock cared for Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen whilst they were patients at Craiglockhart “shell shock” hospital in Edinburgh. Maggie McBean was the Matron at the same hospital.

The instruments were made from the branch of a living sycamore tree by Edinburgh Luthier, Steve Burnett. The tree lives in the grounds of what was Craiglockhart hospital, which is now part of Napier University.⁴⁵ At the beginning of this year’s festival these beautiful and important instruments were generously gifted to the Town of Oswestry by Steve Burnett, Oswestry being the town of Wilfred Owen’s birth.

The concert consisted of an exquisitely curated program of music which included works of Edward Elgar, Gabriel Faure, Ivor Gurney, and Ralph Vaughn Williams. It also included works of Benjamin Britten, John Williams, and two songs with settings scored especially for the occasion by Mr Christopher J Symons.

There were many highlights throughout the performances. Each instrument seemed to have an opportunity to express its unique voice, with each musician possessed of the mercurial skill, to sublime our consciousness with the muse of music.

Whether it was the profound and beautiful ‘Schindler’s List’ by John Williams, which was played on an historic violin by Richard Hewitt, or the vertiginous exhilaration of ‘The Lark Ascending’ by Vaughn Williams played by Alison Loram, the evening progressed through a huge range of emotions.

Four songs were sung by mezzo-soprano Samantha Lewis. Two songs with settings by Christopher Symons were based on the poems ‘Futility’ by Wilfred Owen and ‘Everyone Sang’ by Siegfried Sassoon. For the second two songs, ‘The Last Rose of Summer’ by Irish poet Thomas More and arranged by Benjamin Britten and ‘Down the Sally Gardens’ by Irish poet W. B. Yeats and arranged by Ivor Gurney, Samantha Lewis not only sang but signed the songs simultaneously. This added a balletic quality to the performance and was beautiful, adding a new dimension to our enjoyment of the works.

After the interval the program continued with the Piano Quintet in A minor, Op. 84 by Edward Elgar, with Chris Symons playing the piano and featuring the ensemble of musicians playing the Wilfred Owen Quartet of instruments. A dramatic three movement piece to end the concert, ‘all conflict and doubt banished. Just Peace and Reconciliation are here restored, may we hope that our world once again can imitate art’.⁴⁶

The musicians included:

Mr Christopher Symons, Director and piano

Alison Symons, violin

Alison Loram, violin

Richard Hewitt, viola

Sylvie Reverdy, cello

Samantha Lewis, mezzo-soprano

With grateful thanks to those who have generously permitted me to reference their materials.

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‘WITH AUTHORITY AND WITH LOVE’.

Review of Jane Potter (ed.), *Selected Letters of Wilfred Owen* (O.U.P. 2023)

by Paul Norgate
Wolverley, Worcestershire

As Jane Potter points out in her admirably measured Introduction to this new edition of his letters, Wilfred Owen was in many ways a young man typical of his time, and the arcs of narrative that emerge from his letters reveal his ambitions and strivings, his sufferings and successes, his certainties and his searchings. To the anxious student or the harassed researcher, perhaps, the letters may present simply a resource to be mined for something that will help ‘explain’ a poem. Read as what they are, however – Owen’s reporting of, and reflection on, what he felt was important, or thought his family would find interesting – they are alive with a young man’s struggle to find a place for himself in a world which, even before the outbreak of war, seemed by the day to grow more complex and less charted. And while the experience of his final years became – to use his own word – almost too ‘sheer’ to comprehend, much of his inner life we can recognise as not so different from our own.

Publication of the *Collected Letters* in 1967, edited by his younger brother Harold and John Bell of OUP, was a significant landmark in Owen’s afterlife. It followed Dennis Welland’s pioneering critical study (1960); it illuminated Cecil Day Lewis’s recent edition of the poems (1963); and it built on the interest kindled by Benjamin Britten’s ‘War Requiem’ (1962) and by BBC tv’s epic series, ‘The Great War’ (1964, marking the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict). For Owen’s reputation, perhaps more than any of these it was the publication of the letters which was the tipping point, providing context for and counterpoint to the poems and mapping the many streams which fed the tide that carried him through the *annus mirabilis* of 1917–18: ‘I am started. The tugs have left me; I feel the great swelling of the open sea taking my galleon.’ (L.578, 31/12/17)⁴⁷

Sadly, however, that ‘Collected’ edition has long been out of print, as has John Bell’s ‘Selected Letters’ (1986, reprinted 1998). Copies of both can still be sourced – if, in the case of the ‘Collected’, often only at a three-figure price – but it’s cheering to find OUP at last producing a new *Selected Letters* in an attractive format, on good quality paper, and at a reasonable price. A century or more after his death the letters remain indispensable to any student of Owen, and to their latest editor (a past Chairman of the Wilfred Owen Association) we owe great thanks for ensuring that they are kept alive and available, in a much-refreshed edition that includes some significant new material.

⁴⁷ H. Owen and J. Bell (eds.), *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters* (Oxford : OUP, 1967).

Valuably new, often fascinatingly so, are Jane Potter's footnotes, which carry forward some of those in the *Collected* but are significantly more numerous and extensive. It's an intriguing question: whether the fact that Owen and Bell did not provide any gloss on such references as, say, 'meals at A.B.C.' (L.383: the Aerated Bread Company café), or the favourite song of the troops in January 1917, when Owen first arrived in France (L.476: 'Just Try to Picture Me Back Home in Tennessee') was because they assumed that most readers in 1967 would not require it, or because such allusions to popular culture were felt to be somehow inappropriate. Potter threads a judicious path through decades of scholarship, research and simple curiosity, resisting the temptation to disappear down rabbit holes but providing enough variety to guarantee hours of happy googling.

Some of the more significant 'new' material in this edition is, of course, not really new at all; rather, it is the restoration of what should have been there all along. There were editorial omissions made in the 1967 *Collected* simply out of courtesy or consideration towards individuals then still living. But there are many other gaps in Owen's letters that are the result of his brother Harold's notorious, over-fastidious redactions. Some of these – inflicted with scissors – are, sadly, forever irremediable; others – laid on with indian ink – may eventually yield to sophisticated scanning equipment. Now, however, Jane Potter has at last been able to repair a good number of these gaps, sometimes simply by restoring a name that was edited out of the *Collected* and *Selected* editions, but elsewhere with whole sentences or more. In some instances these reveal merely trivial matters, such as Harold Owen editing out 'unattractive slang expressions' and 'words with mildly disagreeable associations such as pimples'.⁴⁸ Others are considerably more significant.

For example: concealed by omission in previous editions of his letters was the depth of bitterness and resentment that Owen stored up against his cousin, Leslie Gunston. It would be going too far to describe Leslie as Wilfred's *alter ego*, but for a decade or so the two had been indisputably close, spending much time together, sharing and mutually encouraging each other's poetic ambitions. So, having – eventually – got himself back from southern France to England at the end of 1915 and enlisted in the Army, then to discover that his cousin and oldest friend would not be following the same track must have felt to Owen something like a betrayal. That the grounds for exemption from military service were a 'heart murmur', hitherto unsuspected in the otherwise apparently fit Leslie, must have been a particularly bitter pill to swallow, when Owen himself had undergone such poor health in his teens (and had gone abroad in the hope of improving it). And then to find that Leslie's elder brother, Gordon Gunston, was also to remain a civilian – this can only have created in Owen the suspicion that all was not as it was claimed.⁴⁹ Unworthily or not, the thought must surely have crossed his mind that if two Gunston brothers could wangle exemption, why should he be putting his life on the line? One unworthy thought leads inexorably to another... Despite the kindness and generosity the Gunstons had always shown, Owen was acutely aware that his own family remained the poor relations; how far might it have been the Gunstons' comfortable social and financial situation that had eased the way to military exemption (via private medical certification, for example)?

⁴⁸ *Collected Letters*, Introduction, p. 5.

⁴⁹ According to Dominic Hibberd, Gordon Gunston's son said his father and Uncle Leslie had 'lain low' during the war; D. Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: a New Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), Ch.11, n.6.

Jane Potter's editing brings into the open this bitterness and Owen's brooding on it. What is striking – and perhaps rather disturbing – is that Owen's acid comments about it all appear to have been directed only to his mother. Potter's restored text enables us to see that Owen gave voice his feelings in letters to his mother as early as July 1916: 'There is no doubt about the craven heartedness of both [cousins]'. (L.442, 2/7/16) Beginning his first tour of duty in France, in January 1917, he was sourly ironic – 'Please tell Leslie & everybody that I really have not time nor wits to write to them from under the cannon's mouth'. (L.478, 9/1/17) But by the time he returned for his second tour in September 1918, he had become brutally blunt – 'how peculiarly reluctant I am... to have the Channel between me and all that the Gunstons typify' (L.654, 9/9/18) – and searingly honest: 'I am paralysed when I try to write to Leslie; so many of these boys [out here] are so much less fit than he'. (L.667, 15/10/18)

Yet, through all this, Owen kept up a relationship with Leslie himself that remained apparently amiable, if perhaps more distant than before (the exigencies of war service providing a ready excuse). Leslie Gunston made available for publication in the *Collected* his own selection of letters from Owen, and these evidence little disagreement between the two, other than about each other's poetry, which was now increasingly divergent in style and content. We may wonder, however, whether Gunston had done some editing of his own in choosing which letters to share publicly; whether he did or not, none of those he released mentions the personal resentment which, it turns out, Owen continued to nurse through the last two years of his life.

What should we make of the behaviour that Jane Potter's editing reveals? None of it, of course, makes Owen different from – or worse than – most of us at some time or other, but it does add shadow and nuance to the shining image that, after his death, his family and friends sought for so many years to burnish. Owen's reluctance to confront his cousin – which might have brought a permanent rift between them – is perhaps understandable; but at the same time as he was maintaining the appearance of friendship with Leslie, his comments to his mother make it clear that he was quite unwilling to forgive. It must have been painful for Susan Owen to know that the cause of such bitterness in her son was her own sister's child, and yet at the same time – however little she might wish to believe it – she surely cannot have been entirely immune to the suspicion that Wilfred's feelings were justified. Owen himself must have understood this, yet rather than keep quiet (as he did with Leslie himself), in his letters to his mother he keeps picking at the scab of resentment: the wound bleeding afresh.

It would be easy to dress all this up in dramatic terms, and certainly it must have mattered a good deal to those involved. But, rather than intrinsically shocking, this newly revealed material is a confirmation of an essential ordinariness in Owen's emotional life: how many other friendships and family relationships must have been poisoned in this and similar ways by the war? In this respect, Owen was remarkable only if we allow ourselves to believe that people who write poetry and become famous must therefore have thought and felt differently from the rest of us.

On the one hand, he felt very angry with – or about – Leslie Gunston; on the other, he could not – or would not – break with him. Which of the alternatives in that sentence, that situation, weighed most heavily with Owen? Which of us could claim to know exactly the right thing to do? In the end, Owen did attempt address the issue directly, in a letter to Leslie written at the end of October 1918 – perhaps presciently; perhaps because his mother had finally insisted that he do something to clear the air. ‘I must say that I feel sorry that you are neither in the flesh with Us nor in the spirit against war’, he wrote. (L.671, 25/10/18) Whether he felt he had done the right thing, however, and whether – or how – Leslie responded, we do not know. Ten days later, Owen was dead.

In the same vein, there is more that remains to be said about Owen’s relationship with Sassoon. The well-known letter to Siegfried written just after Owen had left Craiglockhart, for example, is rather less straightforward than at first appears. Fulsome as he is in his praise of Sassoon, Owen seems genuinely unsure of quite what to feel and – perhaps inadvertently, perhaps out of guilt – lets slip that were things important to him in his time at Edinburgh that he chose not share with his new friend. The now-notorious phrase ‘as no men love for long’ does not in fact refer to Sassoon at all: it’s a quote from an earlier letter to his mother which describes an outing with a teacher and pupils from Tynecastle School, about which – and especially about the teacher, Mamie Fullerton – Owen appears to have kept Sassoon in the dark, saying that only ‘some day’ will he tell him.

Rather than encouraging more nuanced assessment, as might be expected or at least hoped for, the rapid rise in Owen’s reputation over recent years seems too often to have encouraged a dramatising and simplification of his life and work, limiting discussion to a series of binary arguments – was he/was he not a ‘mother’s boy’ / homosexual / a coward / the greatest poet of the war...? – and so on. It’s a process perhaps triggered immediately after his death, unwittingly, by the defensive reverence of his family and friends. But what his letters show, if nothing else, is how reductive such formulations are; Owen did not live in headlines. For all his ambition and occasional big talk, he lived most of the time, like the rest of us, in uncertainties – always unsure (for example) whether he had got it right, whether his poems were actually finished or not. Of his very latest poem, ‘Spring Offensive’, he wrote to Sassoon just weeks before his death, asking: ‘Is this worth going on with?’

While preparing his edition of Owen’s poems (1931) Edmund Blunden wrote to Siegfried Sassoon: ‘I aim at an edition which will give the experts in poetical matters enough side-lights to Wilfred’s way of composition without being academic [and] without frightening away the general reader...’ That’s a good description, too, of Jane Potter’s approach to Owen’s letters in her edition. In a review comment on the dustcover, Santanu Das speaks of her editing as ‘authoritative and loving’. It’s perhaps an unexpected coupling of adjectives, yet in the same way as Blunden’s comment it seems exactly right for what Jane Potter has achieved here. And right, too, for Wilfred Owen, who wrote both with authority and with love.



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