

the county cricket team more important than either of them. . . .¹ This quiet world included in 1914, and Sassoon served in the British Army for four and a half years. During this period he wrote the short satirical poems for which he is best remembered.

He was born in London on September 8, 1886, into a prosperous family of Sephardic Jews. His parents separated when Sassoon was a child; his father died soon thereafter, and he was raised by his mother. He was educated at Marlborough Grammar School and at Clare College, Cambridge, and then spent a few years in London; Sassoon was an attractive young man, well connected and comfortably situated, and his main interests were hunting and poetry. The most interesting of his prewar poems is *The Daffodil Murderer*, a parody of John Masfield's *The Everlasting Mercy*, a long narrative poem which had been a success thanks to its treatment of low life and its forthright language. Sassoon was taken up by Sir Edward Marsh, a patron of the arts, and for a time figured in the collections of Georgian poetry he began to publish in 1912.

When war broke out in 1914, Sassoon immediately enlisted and went to France as a second lieutenant. His first war poems were written under the enchantment of a mythical ideal. In "The Dragon and the Undying" he writes:

. . . they are fortunate who fight
For gleaming landscapes swept and shafted
And crowned by cloud pavilions white.

Another poem, "The Kiss," is curious in that it may be read in two ways, either as a satire or "straight." It was inspired by a bloody-minded indoctrination speech in which the troops were urged to destroy the enemy with cold steel; Sassoon may have been taken in by the invitation to savagery, but not for long. His fellow officer Robert Graves showed him his own poems about the war, and Sassoon objected that they were too "realistic," though he would soon change his mind about the war and his proper way to write about it. He set himself the task of observing the war and his reactions to it. He wrote Edward Marsh, "I am going up to the trenches very shortly; . . . and I mean to suck in all I can when I get up there. I am always trying to impress things on my memory, and make as many notes as I can."² Two collections of Sassoon's poems appeared during the war: *The Old Huntsman* (1917) and *Counter Attack* (1918). In 1917 Sassoon was wounded and he was sent home; disgusted with the war and with the civilians who were profiting from it financially and emotionally, he threw his Military Cross into the sea and did his best to get court-martialed so that he could make his views public. Instead he was judged to be "temporarily insane" and thus denied a hearing; he eventually returned to France where he was wounded for a second time.

When the war was over, Sassoon, a declared pacifist, toured the United States, reading his poems and speaking against war. Although he continued to write poetry, his best later work was a three-volume fictionalized autobiography—*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), and *Sherston's Progress* (1936)—and several volumes of undisguised autobiography. Sassoon became a Roman Catholic in 1957; he died on September 1, 1967.

Sassoon began as a social and poetic radical; in the trenches he used to dream that one day he and Graves would "scandalize the jolly old Gosses and Strachys,"³ the established literary figures of their day. Once this wartime exuberance had spent itself, Sassoon's views of poetry turned out to be rather old-fashioned. In 1939 he observed that "for the last decade and a half the writing of straightforward and whole-

SIEGFRIED SASSOON

1886-1967

Siegfried Sassoon was born into a world of leisured ease and country pleasures, a privileged world which in retrospect he transformed into a timeless Eden. "Thinking went as slowly," he wrote, "as the carrier's van that brought the parcels from the station, and international affairs were comfortably epitomised in the weekly cartoons of *Punch*. France was a lady in a short skirt, Russia a bear, and the performances of

1. Quoted in Michael Thorpe, *Siegfried Sassoon, a Critical Study*, London, 1967, pp. 70-71.

2. Quoted in Robert H. Koss, *The Georgian Revolt, Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal, 1910-22*,

Carbondale, Ill., 1965, p. 170.

3. Quoted in Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, Harmondsworth, Essex, 1969, p. 210.

hearted verse has been increasingly out of fashion, and indirect utterance has been indulged in to an unprecedented degree."⁴ Clearly Sassoon's sympathies are all on the side of direct utterance, and in his remarks on poetry he shows little interest in exploring the very complex feelings from which simple poetic statements often derive their power. He demands from poetry a "full and living voice, seemingly natural, though often using the language of a personal poetic idiom. I mean the true vocal cadence of something urgently communicated—the best words in the best order—yes—but empowered by sincerity and inspiration." Almost certainly it was the emotion engendered in Sassoon by the war, an emotion for which "urgency" is far too mild a word, that inspired what Graves calls the "extraordinary five years of Siegfried Sassoon's efflorescence (1917–1921)."⁵ When it is nakedly expressed as in "Repression of War Experience" ("O Christ, I want to go out / And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy; / I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns"), the emotion is simply there, and although the reader is willing to credit this state of near-madness, the poem itself cannot really contain it. Other poems succeed better because Sassoon can arrange a confrontation between a rather nostalgic poetic vocabulary ("Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land") and the grim particulars of the war (the "soft, unanswering heap" of a corpse, the soldiers "in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats"). Another contrast, equally grim, is between the horror of war itself and the attitude of civilians who send their sons off to war and then enjoy the carnage at a safe distance:

I'd like to see a Tank come down the Stalls,
Lurching to ragtime tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"—
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.

4. Quoted in Thorpe, p. 189.

5. The same, p. ix.

To His Dead Body

When roaring gloom surged inward and you cried,
Groping for friendly hands, and clutched, and died,
Like racing smoke, swift from your lolling head
Phantoms of thoughts and memory thinned and fled.

Yet, though my dreams that through the darkened stair
Can bring me no report of how you fare,
Safe quit of wars, I speed you on your way
Up lonely, glimmering fields to find new day,
Slow-rising, saintless, confident and kind—
Dear, red-faced father God who lit your mind.

"Blighters"

The House is crammed: tier beyond tier they grin
And cackle at the Show, while prancing ranks
Of harlots shrill the chorus, drunk with din;
"We're sure the Kaiser loves the dear old Tanks!"

I'd like to see a Tank come down the stalls,¹
Lurching to ragtime tunes, or "Home, sweet Home,"—
And there'd be no more jokes in Music-halls
To mock the riddled corpses round Bapaume.²

1917

The Rear-Guard

(*Hindenburg Line, April 1917*)³

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know,
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

5

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw some one lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)

10

"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

15

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.
At last, with sweat of horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

25
1918

Dreamers

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
In the great hour of destiny they stand,
Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.

1. Orchestra seats in a theater or music-hall.

2. A town in northern France, one of the main objectives in the costly but successful Allied offensive against the Hindenburg Line in 1918 (see "The Rear-Guard"). "Music-halls" provided popular variety shows.

3. The Hindenburg Line (named for the Ger-

man chief of staff) was the last and strongest line of defensive trenches on Germany's western front, extending about thirty-five miles across northern France; it was not broken until August 1918. April 1917 was a low point in the fortunes of the British Army in France.

Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
 Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
 Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
 They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
 And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
 Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
 And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
 Bank-holidays,⁴ and picture shows, and spats,
 And going to the office in the train.

The General

"Good-morning, good-morning!" the General said
 When we met him last week on our way to the line.
 Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
 And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
 "He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
 As they slogged up to Arras⁵ with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Repression of War Experience

Now light the candles; one; two; there's a moth;
 What silly beggars they are to blunder in
 And scorch their wings with glory, liquid flame—
 No, no, not that,—it's bad to think of war,
 When thoughts you've gagged all day come back to scare you;
 And it's been proved that soldiers don't go mad
 Unless they lose control of ugly thoughts
 That drive them out to jabber among the trees.

Now light your pipe; look, what a steady hand,
 Draw a deep breath; stop thinking, count fifteen,
 And you're as right as rain. . . .

Why won't it rain? . . .
 I wish there'd be a thunder-storm to-night,
 With bucketful of water to sluice the dark,
 And make the roses hang their dripping heads.
 Books; with a jolly company they are,
 Standing so quiet and patient on their shelves,
 Dressed in dim brown, and black, and white, and green,
 And every kind of colour. Which will you read?
 Come on; *O do* read something; they're so wise.

I tell you all the wisdom of the world
 Is waiting for you on those shelves; and yet
 You sit and gnaw your nails, and let your pipe out,
 And listen to the silence: on the ceiling
 There's one big, dizzy moth that bumps and flutters;
 And in the breathless air outside the house
 The garden waits for something that delays.
 There must be crowds of ghosts among the trees,—
 Not people killed in battle,—they're in France,—
 But horrible shapes in shrouds—old men who died
 Slow, natural deaths,—old men with ugly souls,
 Who wore their bodies out with nasty sins.

You're quiet and peaceful, summering safe at home;
 You'd never think there was a bloody war on! . . .
 O yes, you would . . . why, you can hear the guns.
 Hark! Thud, thud, thud,—quite soft . . . they never cease—
 Those whispering guns—O Christ, I want to go out
 And screech at them to stop—I'm going crazy.
 I'm going stark, staring mad because of the guns.

Everyone Sang

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
 And I was filled with such delight
 As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
 Winging wildly across the white
 Orchards and dark-green fields; on—on—and out of sight.
 Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
 And beauty came like the setting sun;
 My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
 Drifted away . . . O, but Everyone
 Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.

On Passing the New Menin Gate⁶

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,
 The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
 Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,—
 Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?
 Crudely renewed, the Salient⁷ holds its own.
 Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
 Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
 The armies who endured that sullen swamp.

4. National holidays in Great Britain.

5. A city in northern France, in the front line during most of World War I. The British assault

against the Germans of the Western Front, on April 9, 1917, was known as the Battle of Arras. The dead "soldiers he smiled at" amounted to 84,000.

6. The names of 54,889 men are engraved on this World War I memorial.

7. Line of defensive trenches (the long excavation) in the earth from which both sides fought in

World War I. Since salients jutted out into enemy territory, they were especially vulnerable, exposing the troops in them to fire from the front and both sides.

Here was the world's worst wound. And here
with pride
"Their name liveth for ever," the Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intoleraibly nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulchre of crime.