

Isaac Rosenberg - biography

Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) was born in Bristol on 25th November 1890, the son of Barnett and Anna Rosenberg, Lithuanian Jews who had emigrated to Britain a few years before. In 1897, in search of better-paid work, the family moved to the East End of London, but their financial difficulties continued. After a brief period at St Paul's School, St George's-in-the-East, Isaac was sent to the Baker Street Board School. Here he exhibited a talent for drawing and writing which his sympathetic headmaster encouraged. He also discovered English poetry, which he read with huge excitement.

By 1904 his family could no longer afford to keep him at school and he was apprenticed to the firm of engravers, Carl Henschel, in Fleet Street. His earliest known poem dates from 1905. He disliked what he saw as soul-destroying work, and in 1907 began to attend evening classes in painting and drawing at Birkbeck College. In 1911 he was dismissed suddenly from Henschel's, but a chance encounter in the National Gallery led to an introduction to a group of wealthy Jewish women. One of these, Mrs Herbert Cohen, offered to support him at art school, and in the autumn of that year he enrolled at the Slade. Among his contemporaries were many of the leading young painters of his day, including Mark Gertler, David Bomberg and Stanley Spencer. 1912 saw the publication of his first slight volume of poems, *Night and Day*, and in the following year he was introduced to Edward Marsh, the influential patron and editor of the *Georgian Poetry* series.

Rosenberg hoped to make his living by painting. His work was exhibited in the Whitechapel Gallery, but he found himself increasingly drawn to poetry. In 1914, suffering from a chronic chest infection, he was advised to move to a warmer, dryer climate, and he traveled to South Africa to stay with a married sister. There he continued to write poetry and to paint, and lectures he gave on art were published in a Cape Town journal. He was in South Africa when war was declared; he anticipated its violence in letters to Marsh and in his poem 'On Receiving News of the War'.

He returned to England in March 1915, and published a second collection of poems entitled *Youth*. He loathed war and hated the idea of killing, but he was now unemployed and, hearing that his mother would be able to claim a separation allowance, in late October he enlisted. He was initially assigned to the 12th Suffolk Regiment, a Bantam Battalion formed of men less than 5'3" in height, but in the spring of 1916 he was transferred to the 11th Battalion, the King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment (KORL). In June that year he was sent to France. Shortly before leaving he published his third and final collection of poems, *Moses*.

Throughout his twenty-one months in the trenches he maintained a correspondence with Edward Marsh, Gordon Bottomley, and Laurence Binyon, all of whom took an interest in his poetry. His trench poems, written on whatever scraps of paper he could find, went through many drafts which he sent home to his sister Annie to be typed and then forwarded to his friends. Despite the difficult conditions under which he worked, he produced remarkable and powerful work, including *August 1914*, *Louse Hunting*, *Returning, we hear the larks*, *Dead Man's Dump* and *Break of Day in the Trenches*. These poems were not published in a single volume until 1922.

Rosenberg was killed early on the morning of 1st April 1918 during the German spring offensive. His body was not immediately found, but in 1926 the remains of eleven soldiers of the KORL were discovered and buried together in Northumberland Cemetery, Fampoux. His body could not be individually unidentified, but he was known to be among them. This cemetery was later moved, and his remains were reinterred at Bailleul Road East Cemetery, St. Laurent-Blangy, near Arras where his headstone reads 'Buried near this spot'. Beneath his name, dates and regiment, are engraved the Star of David and the words 'Artist and Poet'.

Sources:

- Noakes, V. *The Poems and Plays of Isaac Rosenberg* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

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