

Wilfred Owen: The '60s Poet

With the centenary of the first Armistice Day - and the centenary of Wilfred Owen's death a week earlier - rushing towards us, it is worth remembering that Owen's pre-eminence as the WWI poet and his "Dulce et Decorum Est" as *the* WWI poem, are both relatively recent phenomena; in fact, they date from the 1960s.

During his lifetime, Owen published only a handful of poems, none of them the ones that have become iconic. A small collection appeared soon after the war (*Poems*, 1920, reprinted 1921), edited by his friend Siegfried Sassoon and Edith Sitwell, and made some small impact, but by then few wanted to read poems about the war. It is true that W. H. Auden and his friends Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender and C. Day-Lewis adopted Owen as one of their poetic ancestors and exemplars in the late 1920s and through the 1930s, and wrote poems in dialogue with his. Two obvious instances are Spender's 1937 Spanish Civil War poem "Ultima Ratio Regum" ("the boy lying dead under the olive trees / Was too young and too silly / To have been notable ? / He was a better target for a kiss") and Auden's 1938 sonnet-sequence "In Time of War" with its Owen-resonant line: "We learn to pity and rebel". And Edmund Blunden edited a considerably more inclusive volume of Owen's poems in 1931. But, again, this attention, though admiring, hardly converted him and his work into household names.

It was the turbulent 1960s which effected that. A number of factors came together, feeding each other and precipitating the decades-dead Owen into his pre-eminent position, now seemingly unassailable. On the wider front, Alan Clark and A. J. P. Taylor wrote revisionist, popular histories of World War I: *The Donkeys* (1961) and *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (1963). (The title of Clark's book, *The Donkeys*, played on a favourite commonplace about the rank-and-file troops: "lions led by donkeys".) These offered a demythologising view of the war, shifting sympathy towards the plight of the ordinary soldier and castigating the Higher Command as high-handed and ludicrously incompetent. This was a view underpinned at the time by Joan Littlewood's sharp musical farce *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1963) and later hilariously reinforced by the final 'Blackadder' series *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989).

More portentously, in 1964, BBC2 gave the epic stamp to "The Great War", as it was still sometimes known, by running a 26-episode documentary with much original footage. With the Vietnam War and other insurrections producing shock waves of protest round the world, with (among many others) Philip Larkin in "MCMXIV" (ie 1914) lamenting "Never such innocence again", with Roger McGough explaining "Why patriots are a bit nuts in the head", with Bob Dylan singing the finger-pointing "Masters of War" and Donovan mourning the "Universal Soldier", the *Zeitgeist* for Owen as "the national poet of pity" (Hibberd 2002, 142) had arrived.

And his arrival was abrupt and, however belated, apparently inevitable and ubiquitous. Benjamin Britten constructed *War Requiem* (1962) around nine of Owen's poems. C. Day-Lewis edited an enlarged and annotated *Collected Poems* (1963). His work was given a dominant presence in two highly influential and widely taught anthologies of WWI poetry: Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918* (1964) and Ian Parsons's *Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War* (1965). Indeed, Parsons gave Owen pride of place with thirteen poems and highlighted his work's enduring significance in his

introduction. In 1967, John Bell and Owen's brother, Harold, brought out a *Collected Letters*, and the biographies and fictionalised accounts, such as Pat Barker's brilliant *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-1995), were to follow.

The claim for Owen as, in essence, a poet of the '60s, might seem initially quirky, but is, I think, in its own terms, unanswerable. Of course, his war poems had always (so viscerally) dramatised World War I as a kind of hellish cockpit, with the imagined reader a pitying spectator watching, often in appalled close-up, the actions of unwilling victims subject to irresistible human, mechanical, chemical and political forces. The poems had always been that. But it was the 1960s which allowed that vision to achieve its full horror and pity.

Works Cited

Hibberd, Dominic. *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*. London: Phoenix, 2002.

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