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"The Poetry is in the Pity": Wilfred Owen and the Memory of the First World War

A memorial to the poets of the First World War stands in the corner of Westminster Abbey. Inscribed upon the memorial are sixteen names, including Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg and Rupert Brooke. One voice, however, speaks for this collective: also inscribed upon the stone slab, encircling the names of all the other poets, are the words of Wilfred Owen: "My subject is War and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the Pity" (1963, 31). This memorial reflects Owen's prominent reputation. He is, without doubt, the most famous poet of the First World War.

We take Owen's fame for granted today, and few would deny his literary quality. But there was nothing inevitable about the poet's rise to prominence. When Owen was killed in action in November 1918, a week before the Armistice, he was largely unknown. Only five of his poems had been published, and these had not reached a large audience. How, then, did Owen become such an important figure?

In 1920 the publishing house Chatto &Windus published the first collection of Owen's poetry, edited by Edith Sitwell and Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon - another well-known poet of the war - had met Owen when both were convalescing at Edinburgh's Craiglockhart hospital in 1917. He encouraged Owen to write during this period, and would continue to champion his poetry after the Armistice. Sassoon and Sitwell's edition did not sell in great numbers, but newspapers responded favourably. The Manchester Guardian, for instance, described Owen's poems "as enough to rank him among the very few poets whose work has more than a passing value" (1920, 3).

As the 1920s progressed, Owen began to attract more readers, particularly as disillusionment with the war began to surface. In 1929 a publishing boom in war memoirs and novels - the most successful of which was Erich Maria Remarque's 1928 *All Quiet on the Western Front* - revealed a public appetite for books which depicted the conflict as horrific and futile. Owen was not yet a household name, but his poetry chimed with these representations of the war. In 1930 the BBC included his poetry in its Armistice Day radio broadcast, and in 1931 Chatto & Windus decided to a publish a new collection of his poems, edited by the war poet and memoirist Edmund Blunden. This new edition was also a critical success: a reviewer in the *Sunday Times* wrote that "I cannot believe that anyone who really cares about English poetry will leave this book unread" (1930, 9).

Despite this, in 1936, W. B. Yeats famously omitted Owen from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, arguing that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" (1936, xxxiv). Yeats's decision was controversial, however, and the BBC's magazine, the *Listener*, expressed surprise at this omission (Redmayne 1936, iv). Indeed, the literary world was generally more appreciative: Ian Parsons's anthology, *The Progress of Poetry* (1936), for example, included seven of Owen's poems. Editors were also drawn to Owen throughout the Second World War, his poems appearing in Julian Symons's *An Anthology of War Poetry* (1942) and Robert Nichols's *Anthology of War Poetry 1914 - 1918* (1943).

During the 1960s Owen's reputation increased dramatically. The composer Benjamin Britten incorporated Owen's poems into his *War Requiem* (1962), which marked the consecration of the new Coventry Cathedral. Chatto & Windus also played a crucial role, publishing a new collection of Owen's work, edited by Cecil Day Lewis, in 1963. Evolving understandings of the First World War further bolstered Owen's reputation. In the light of the Second World War - which had a clearer moral justification - people increasingly began to view the First World War as a futile bloodbath. Owen's poems, which emphasised the war's devastation, complemented this perspective. Critics responded enthusiastically to his work, and anthologies - such as Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death* (1964) - privileged the poems of Owen and Sassoon over more patriotic or heroic depictions.

Educationalists also started to recognise Owen's significance. His poetry first appeared on A-Level examination papers in 1961 and was taught and examined regularly in subsequent years. From 1967 onwards, many pupils studied Owen at O-level, his poetry reaching an even wider audience after the government increased the school-leaving age to 16 in 1972. Although not all schools taught Owen, many pupils encountered his poetry throughout the 1970s and beyond. These developments cemented Owen's position within the canon of English literature and reinforced a moral message that warned against the brutality of war. Gradually, Owen's poetry became central to popular understandings of the conflict.

Literary, commercial and educational factors, therefore, combined with an evolving memory of the war centred on suffering rather than heroism, enhanced Owen's reputation throughout the twentieth century. In 2018, a hundred years after his death on the Western Front, Owen retains his position as the pre-eminent poet of the First World War.

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