CHAPTER 1

The death of the hero

'Poetry', Wordsworth reminds us, 'is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', and there can be no area of human experience that has generated a wider range of powerful feelings than war: hope and fear; exhilaration and humiliation; hatred – not only for the enemy, but also for generals, politicians, and war-profiteers; love – for fellow soldiers, for women and children left behind, for country (often) and cause (occasionally).

Man's early war-songs and love-songs were generally exhortations to action, or celebrations of action, in one or other field, but no such similarity exists between what we now more broadly define as love poetry and war poetry. Whereas most love poems have been in favour of love, much – and most recent – war poetry has been implicitly, if not explicitly, anti-war. So long as warrior met warrior in equal combat with sword and lance, poets could celebrate their courage and chivalry, but as technology put ever-increasing distance between combatants and, then, ceased to distinguish between combatant and civilian, poets more and more responded to 'man's inhumanity to man'. Not that heroic societies were oblivious to the domestic consequences of their heroes' 'brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art'. *The Iliad* ends with Andromache watching from the walls of Troy, as her husband's broken body is dragged away behind

his killer's chariot: 'she mourned, and the women wailed in answer'.[1] Similarly, as the hero's funeral pyre is lit at the close of the Old English epic, written 1,500 years later,

> A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
> with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
> of her worst fears, a wild litany
> of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
> enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
> slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.[2]

Hers, however, is not the last word. That is spoken by Beowulf's warriors:

> So the Geat people, his hearth-companions,
> sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
> They said that of all the kings upon the earth
> he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
> kindest to his people and keenest to win fame.[3]

Such societies recognized the cost of warfare, but the code to which they subscribed counted it a necessary price for the pursuit of fame, honour, renown. This was to be acquired by generosity in peace, mighty deeds in war, loyalty to the living and loyalty to the dead.

That heroic tradition died, and another was transplanted to English soil, when King Harold's foot-soldiers were cut down on a ridge above Hastings by the cavalry of William, Duke of Normandy. Less than a hundred years before, one of the last Old English poets had chanted or declaimed in a Saxon hall the poem we know as 'The Battle of Maldon'.[4] And three hundred years after Harold and his housecarls had gone the way of Byrhtnoth and his thanes, cut down on the shore of the Blackwater estuary, the first new English poet introduced to a more cultivated audience

> A knight […] a worthy man,
> That fro the time that he first bigan
> To ridden out, he loved chivalry […][5]

The intervening years had seen Duke William's son Henry, in the words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 'dubbed a rider', married to a Saxon girl, and the two peoples and the two languages fused and intermingled. Under the influence of the troubadours, the Church, and the new learning out of Italy, *chivalry* had come to mean more than *cavalry*, that other derivative of the Latin *caballarius*, a horseman. The descendant of Duke William's superbly efficient but hardly sophisticated *chevalier* could, like Chaucer's Squire,

> Wel […] sitte on hors, and faire ride;
> He coude songes make, and wel endite,
> Juste and eek daunce, and wel purtreye and write.

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had been founded before Chaucer was born, and in his lifetime the first of the so-called 'public schools', Winchester, opened its doors to the sons of noblemen and gentlemen. By 1440, when Eton was founded, the word *gentleman* had come to denote a clearly defined social status, inferior to nobility and superior to the yeomanry, but not necessarily dependent on ancestry. These schools and those others later modelled on them grafted the 'classical learning of the monastic schools upon the chivalric training in honour, in sport, in military exercise, in social intercourse, in courtesy and generosity, in reverence and devotion, of the schools of Christian knighthood'.[6]

Chaucer had seen military service – had been captured and ransomed – in France, where two centuries later fought and was wounded Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, who returned to translate Books III and IV of the *Aeneid* into blank verse. Raleigh served in the Huguenot army at Jarnac

and Moncoutour; Gascoigne saw military service in Holland; Donne took part in the Earl of Essex's two expeditions to Cadiz; Davenant was knighted by Charles I at the siege of Gloucester; Lovelace served in the Scottish expeditions of 1639; and the Earl of Rochester showed conspicuous courage in the Second Dutch War of 1665–6.

The chivalric tradition, transmuted into the courtly tradition of the High Renaissance, required proficiency in the arts of war as well as in such peaceable arts as music and poetry. The courtier–poet was expected to serve his king in much the same way as the Anglo-Saxon *scop* took his place in the shield-wall with his lord. The Earl of Surrey left a moving elegy to his Squire;[7] Gascoigne, a rueful account of his capture and ransom;[8] and Donne condensed his experience of Cadiz into an epigram.[9] Considering how many courtier–poets had experience of battle, however, the reader in a later century – when war poems are commonly written by those who have never seen a battlefield – may be surprised by how rarely Renaissance poets write of war. Conventions had changed. Love had become the subject proper to a poet. On the rare occasion when the blast of war blows through a poem, it is likely to be the carefully orchestrated overture to a protestation of devotion, such as Lovelace, the dashing Cavalier, offers 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars'.[10] Paradoxically, the convention that proclaimed the subject of warfare too gross for the polite art of poetry sanctioned, and indeed required, a select use of military terminology in the imagery of the love lyric. Cupid is an archer. The besieging lover, having no shield proof against his darts, can only hope that his Beloved in a spirit of Christian compassion will surrender.

During the eighteenth century, soldiering reached the low place in British society that it was to hold until the Great

War, an occupation despised by the middle and working classes as a disgrace hardly less than prison. If an eighteenth-century poet wrote of war – which he seldom did – it was as a remote phenomenon. So John Scott of Amwell declares:

> I hate that drum's discordant sound,
> Parading round, and round, and round:
> To me it talks of ravaged plains,
> And burning towns, and ruined swains,
> And mangled limbs, and dying groans,
> And widows' tears, and orphans' moans;
> And all that Misery's hand bestows,
> To fill the catalogue of human woes.[11]

As the French Revolution made its contribution to that catalogue, warfare once more became a subject of interest to British poets. The Napoleonic wars moved Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell to patriotic outpourings.[12] Coleridge and Wordsworth, on the other hand, 'hailed the rising orb of liberty'. Both were subsequently disillusioned, and in Book 4 of *The Prelude* Wordsworth writes movingly of his meeting with a battered veteran of Wellington's armies. No poet of the Romantic period, however, was more alive to the horrors of war than Byron; alive not only to sufferings of the combatants but to the domestic consequences. The eyes of the dying Gladiator in *Childe Harold* are

> with his heart and that was far away;
> He reck'd not of the life he lost nor prize,
> But where his rude hut by the Danube lay
> *There* were his young barbarians all at play,
> *There* was their Dacian mother – he, their sire,
> Butcher'd to make a Roman holiday […][13]

Byron, as a schoolboy at Harrow, had been steeped in the classics. He visited Greece in 1809 and 1810 and the first two

cantos of *Childe Harold*, based on his experiences, launched a tidal wave of literary philhellenism.

> By the time of the Greek Revolution in 1821, the educated public in Europe had been deeply immersed in three attractive ideas – that Ancient Greece had been a paradise inhabited by supermen; that the Modern Greeks were the true descendants of the Ancient Greeks; and that a war against the Turks could somehow 'regenerate' the Modern Greeks and restore the former glories.[14]

Invoking the example of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans, commemorated in Simonides' epigram,[15] Byron sounded the call to arms:

> Must *we* but weep o'er days more blest?
> Must *we* but blush? – Our fathers bled.
> Earth! Render back from out thy breast
> A remnant of our Spartan dead!
> Of the three hundred grant but three,
> To make a new Thermopylae.[16]

His love for the land of Pericles and Homer proving stronger than his hatred of war, he set off for Greece with half a dozen military uniforms and a couple of helmets, gilded, crested, and bearing the family motto: 'Crede Byron'.

Like every other philhellene who took that road, he was to learn how unrelated were the reality and the dream. Those more fortunate, who returned with their lives, brought tales of betrayal and brutality, squalor and needless suffering, that anticipate the war correspondents' revelations from the Crimea thirty years later. The philanthropic spirit of the age that urged Florence Nightingale to the hospitals of Scutari found expression in anti-war poems by Thackeray[17] and others, but these were counterbalanced by many sounding a savage note, and the one poem from the Crimean War to have survived in the popular memory celebrates a heroic exploit. Significantly, since Tennyson's imagination had long been

engaged with the chivalric world of King Arthur and his knights, it was the *cavalry* charge of the Light Brigade in 1854 that spurred him into song.[18]

It is one thing to 'Honour the charge' of professional cavalrymen of one's own country against foreign gunners thousands of miles away, but quite another to watch one's own countrymen – many of them boy civilians in uniform – killing and maiming each other. Walt Whitman was drawn into the American Civil War by a brother, wounded in the Battle of Fredericksburg, who was in need of nursing. He remained, long after his brother was better, a non-combatant witness to the horrors of war, tending his wounded:

> Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
> Straight and swift to my wounded I go […][19]

He regards them as '*my* wounded', seeing the results of cavalry action from a markedly *un*-Tennysonian perspective:

> The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through I examine,
> Hard the breathing rattles, quite glazed already the eye, yet life struggles hard,
> (Come sweet death! Be persuaded O beautiful death!
> In mercy come quickly.)

His eyes unclouded by the chivalric vision, his tongue untrammelled by the chivalric diction and rhetoric, he perceives 'in camp in the daybreak grey and dim' what Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were to perceive in the trenches of the Western Front:

> Young man I think I know you – I think this face is the face of the Christ himself,
> Dead and divine and brother of all, and here again he lies.[20]

While America was forging a new society in the fires of civil war, Britain was making one of those cautious

adjustments to the old society by which she had avoided civil strife for three hundred years. Thomas Arnold, as headmaster of Rugby from 1827 to 1842, had revitalized the public-school system. Perceiving that the country and the empire needed more – and more efficient – civil servants and managers than the aristocracy and landed gentry could supply, he and the headmasters of the many Anglican boarding schools that opened their gates in the 1850s sought to make 'Christian gentlemen' of the sons of the middle classes. The ethos of these schools was essentially chivalric. As readers of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* will remember, schoolboy fights were elevated into gentlemanly duels, and on the playing fields the same code of etiquette called for 'fair play' and 'the team spirit'. Each school was dominated by its chapel, which suited the philistine respectability of the devout bourgeois, and the curriculum was dominated by Latin, and to a lesser extent, Greek. In 1884 there were twenty-eight classics masters at Eton, six mathematics masters, one historian, no modern-language teachers, and no scientists. As late as 1905, classics masters still formed more than half the teaching staff.

The poet–spokesman for the public schools at the end of the nineteenth century was Henry Newbolt. The title of his poem 'Clifton Chapel' acknowledges a debt to Matthew Arnold's 'Rugby Chapel', but whereas the headmaster's son addressed his father and 'the noble and great who are gone', Newbolt exhorts a new generation of imperialists:

> To set the cause above renown,
> To love the game beyond the prize,
> To honour, while you strike him down,
> The foe that comes with fearless eyes;
> To count the life of battle good,
> And dear the land that gave you birth,

And dearer yet the brotherhood
That binds the brave of all the earth.
[…]

God send you fortune, yet be sure,
Among the lights that gleam and pass,
You'll live to follow none more pure
Than that which glows on yonder brass:
'*Qui procul hinc*,' the legend's writ, –
The frontier-grave is far away –
'*Qui ante diem periit*:
Sed miles, sed pro patria.'[21]

In a more famous or notorious poem, 'Vitaï Lampada' – a title taken from Lucretius, meaning '[They pass on] the Torch of Life' – he envisaged the public-school ethic at work on a frontier far away:

The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'[22]

Newbolt's repeated celebration of the imperialist officer and gentleman, carrying to his country's battlefields a sporting code acquired on the playing fields of his public school, parallels a poetic reappraisal of the private soldier initiated by Kipling's *Barrack-room Ballads* and sustained by Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*.

Requirements for a commission in the army had altered radically since the 1850s. 'In place of the old patronage system came, first, limited competition – examination for the select few whom the authorities had personally nominated – and then, in 1870, open competition.'[23] The year 1870, of course, saw the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War that inaugurated the era of violence in international politics,

precipitating further army reforms, the rapid mechanization of warfare, and the growth of imperialist ideologies. Malvern van Wyk Smith has shown how in Britain, at the start of the Boer War, militarist and pacifist doctrines were clearly defined and opposed; and how, because the Education Acts of 1870 and 1876 had made the army that sailed for South Africa the first literate army in history, the British Tommy sent home letters and poems that anticipate those his sons were to send back from the Western Front.[24]

These factual and often bitter accounts of combat, to say nothing of the greater poems by Thomas Hardy,[25] had been forgotten by 1914 when that War we still – many wars later – know by the adjective Great was greeted in some quarters with a curious gaiety and exhilaration. Rupert Brooke captured the mood of that moment in a sonnet to which he gave the paradoxical title of 'Peace'.[26] His first line 'Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour' – and the 'hand' and the 'hearts' that follow reveal one of his sources: the hymn, and ironically it is a hymn translated from the German, beginning

> Now thank we all our God
> With heart, and hands, and voices [...]

Shortly before Brooke's death, the Dean of St Paul's read aloud in a sermon from the Cathedral pulpit another of his 'war sonnets', 'The Soldier'.[27] So the soldier-poet was canonized by the Church, and many other poets – civilians and soldiers alike – found inspiration for their battle-hymns, elegies, exhortations, in the well-thumbed pages of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

Most of the British poets we associate with the years 1914 and 1915 had a public-school education and this, more than any other factor, distinguishes them from those we associate