SURVIVORS’ SONGS

From Homer to Heaney, the voices of men and women have seldom been more piercing, more poignant, than in time of conflict. For fifty years, Jon Stallworthy has been attuned to such voices. In Survivors’ Songs he explores a series of poetic encounters with war, with essays on Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, and others. Beautifully written, this moving book sets the poetry and prose of the First World War and its aftermath in the wider context of writing about warfare from prehistoric Troy to Anglo-Saxon England; from Agincourt to Flanders; from El Alamein to Vietnam; from the wars of yesterday to the wars of tomorrow.

JON STALLWORTHY is a poet and a Fellow of the British Academy. Formerly Professor of English Literature at Wolfson College, Oxford, he is the author of prize-winning biographies of Wilfred Owen and Louis MacNeice, the editor of Owen’s Complete Poems and Fragments and of The Oxford Book of War Poetry. He has published many volumes of poems, works of literary criticism, anthologies of poetry, and a memoir, Singing School: The Making of a Poet.
SURVIVORS’ SONGS

from Maldon to the Somme

JON STALLWORTHY
WITH A POPPY
for Macnair Jon Stallworthy
11.11.01—

What was it for,
that War to End Wars?
It was for us.
It was for you and yours.
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When W.H. Auden, acknowledging the powerlessness of the unacknowledged legislator to alter the events of 1 September 1939, wrote ‘All I have is a voice’, he articulated a general truth about his calling, his mystery. All any poet has is a voice. Apart from the finger-print, the human voice-print is arguably our most distinctive feature and one that alters less than most from youth to age. Some voices do not then fall silent but continue, from age to age, speaking to an ever-increasing audience ‘Of what is past or passing or to come’.

By 1939, Auden had lost his belief in the poet’s voice as an agent of effective political change: ‘poetry makes nothing happen’, his elegy ‘In Memory of W.B. Yeats’ declared. He would not have dared say that to the living Yeats, who saw painters, poets, playwrights, sculptors as the architects of civilization, generally, and in his own time and place, specifically, those who made the 1916 Easter Rising ‘happen’, ‘When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side’.

History suggests that the voices of Auden and Yeats each articulate a truth. In the short term, ‘poetry makes nothing happen’. British, French, Spanish, German, and Italian poets of Auden’s ‘low dishonest decade’ could not avert the Spanish Civil War or the Second World War. In the longer term, however, the writers of the Irish Renaissance can be credited with educating and energizing the freedom-fighters
of 1916 and after; much as the poets of the First World War – the principal subject of the essays in this book – can be credited with kindling the anti-war fury that blazed through the streets of London in February 2003.

I have spent many of the most rewarding hours of my life listening to the voices of absent friends – Thomas Hardy, William Yeats, Wilfred Owen, David Jones, Wystan Auden, Keith Douglas, and Old Uncle Tom Eliot and all – singing

of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

and I think of the essays in this book as thank-you letters expressing gratitude in terms that, I hope, may lead other readers to listen to their voices and hear in them what I have heard.

Good poets are survivors – even if, like Keats and Owen, they die at twenty-five – and it pleases me to remember a poem I learnt as a boy, one of the few to break the sound-barrier of translation, William Cory’s version of Callimachus’s 2,000-year-old epigram:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

Wolfson College,
Oxford
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to many friends who, over many years, have helped in many ways with the preparation of this book: in particular, the late Mr John Bell, Dr Sarita Cargas, Dr Santanu Das, Dr Christopher Dowling, Ms Angela Godwin, Mrs Sue Hales, Professor Seamus Heaney, Dr Dominic Hibberd, Mrs Jenny Houlsby, the late Professor Gwyn Jones, the late Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Dr Stuti Khanna, Dr Nancy Macky (my hawk-eyed editor), Dr Jane Potter, Mrs Gail Purkis, Mr Michael Ramsbotham, Dr Ray Ryan, Dr Maartje Scheltens, Professor Vincent Sherry, Mr Dennis Silk, Ms Jennifer Speak (my exemplary indexer), Ms Sue Usher, and those others whose work is acknowledged in my notes.

I also wish to thank the ever-obliging staff of the following institutions: Bodleian Library, British Museum, Britten–Pears Library (Aldeburgh), English Faculty Library (Oxford), Humanities Research Center (University of Texas at Austin), Imperial War Museum, Kings College (Cambridge) Library and Wolfson College (Oxford) Library.

Some of the essays collected here have been revised since their first appearance in the following publications:

‘The Death of the Hero’ in my Oxford Book of War Poetry (Oxford University Press, 1984);

‘Survivors’ Songs’ in my Gwyn Jones Lecture, Survivors’ Songs in Welsh Poetry (University College Cardiff Press, 1982);
Acknowledgements

‘England’s Epic?’ in Slightly Foxed, 15 (autumn 2007);
‘Who was Rupert Brooke?’ in Critical Survey, 2, 2 (autumn 1990);
‘Owen’s Afterlife’ in my selection of Wilfred Owen’s Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 2004);
‘Henry Reed and the Great Good Place’ in Henry Reed’s Collected Poems (Oxford University Press, 1991, and Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2007); and

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