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Edited by Santanu Das

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PART I

Historical and Critical Contexts

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## Reframing First World War Poetry: An Introduction

In some papers found in his kit after his death in the Battle of Loos on 13 October 1915, the twenty-year-old Charles Hamilton Sorley had scribbled in pencil what would become one of the most celebrated sonnets of the First World War:

When you see millions of the mouthless dead  
 Across your dreams in pale battalions go,  
 Say not soft things as other men have said,  
 That you'll remember. For you need not so.  
 Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know  
 It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?  
 Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.  
 Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.  
 Say only this, 'They are dead.' Then add thereto,  
 'Yet many a better one has died before.'  
 Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you  
 Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,  
 It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.  
 Great death has made all his for evermore.<sup>1</sup>

Repeatedly anthologised, yet forever startling, Sorley was deeply suspicious of the 'sentimental attitude' adopted by Rupert Brooke in his war sonnets, but he would nonetheless fall back on this traditional yet flexible form to rebut the dead hero's 'fine words' with his studied monosyllabic force: "'They are dead.'"<sup>2</sup> The power of this bleak, disturbing sonnet partly lies in the way the insistent spondees and the desolate imagery of the octave reach some sort of climax in the opening lines of the sestet with the exhortation and the classical allusion (the quotation in line 10 refers to Patroclus's death in the *Iliad*, as Vandiver discusses in Chapter 3 of this volume), only to be intensified by the haunting gaze ('Then, scanning...') and the sudden, ominous, darkly comic shock of 'It is a spook'. The eeriness of the image is enhanced by the poignant circumstances of the poem's posthumous

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discovery. Like John Keats's spookier and chilling fragment 'This Living Hand', written a month before his death, Sorley's poem operates on that fine threshold where poetic form and personal tragedy meet.<sup>3</sup>

Often regarded as the 'transitional' figure between the early and later soldier-poets, the Germanophile Sorley, like his poem, was unusual for the time.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the poem provides one of the earliest examples of what we now regard as the classic features of First World War poetry: the lyric testimony of the broken body – mouth, eyes, the 'gashed' head – set against the abstract rhetoric of honour; the address to the reader ('you') that we associate with the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon (see Cole, Chapter 5 in this volume), as opposed to the egotistical 'I' of Brooke; the 'pale battalions' haunting the shell-shocked dreams of veterans, limning John Singer Sargent's dream-like *Gassed* (1919) and Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and becoming the iconic image of the war. Robert Graves found Sorley's poetry so powerful that he introduced it to Sassoon, who in turn introduced it to Wilfred Owen. And, spook-like, First World War poetry knows no habitation or rest. Mixing cultural memory with linguistic desire, it has ranged far beyond the covers of the book. It appears on postcards, posters and in politician's speeches, in memorials and epitaphs, and has inspired every art form, from Sean O'Casey's play *The Silver Tassie* (1928) and Benjamin Britten's musical tribute *War Requiem* (1962) to the BBC TV series *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989) and Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* (1991). War poetry, as represented by a small group of 'anti-war' soldier-poets, has come to dominate First World War memory. We seldom *read* such poetry; it is usually a matter of re-reading, remembering, returning – with familiarity, surprise, sometimes resistance. Given its centrality in the school curriculum in Britain and much of the English-speaking world, we associate it with a part of our former selves. Today, a hundred years after the war, the poetry of the soldier-poets has coalesced, beyond literary history and cultural memory, into a recognisable structure of feeling. Here lies an undeniable part of its power and some of the larger critical problems.

As this *Companion* seeks to show, the scope of First World War poetry is far wider than that of the trench lyric. Many of the works considered here extend and sometimes disturb conventional notions of 'First World War poetry' and make us interrogate the usefulness of the term 'war poetry'. As indicated in the Preface, a 'war poem' contains much besides the war. In addition, our understanding of even familiar war poems has been largely transformed by recent scholarly enquiry into fields as diverse as cultural history, modernism, psychoanalysis and gender studies. Whereas the Preface explains the aims and structure of this *Companion*, here I examine the trajectory of the term 'First World War poetry' and the quiet but powerful expansion of

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## REFRAMING FIRST WORLD WAR POETRY

the canon over the last three decades through an investigation of particular contexts and poems. This inquiry explores some of the broader frames of reference and the critical cross-currents underpinning the volume.

### What Is 'First World War Poetry'?

The 'war poet' and 'war poetry', observed Robert Graves in 1942, were 'terms first used in World War I and perhaps peculiar to it'.<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives examples of a number of words related to artistic representation of warfare from the nineteenth century – 'war music' (1847), 'war-ballad' (1854), 'war poem' (1857), 'war story' (1864), 'war pictures' (1883) – which, according to Matthew Bevis, show 'the perplexed Victorian fascination with warfare'.<sup>6</sup> However, the *OED*'s only reference to 'war poetry' from the period is telling: 'We have no such war-poetry' (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1865). Of course poetry, as Jon Stallworthy's classic *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (1984) shows, has always been interested in combat, from the *Iliad* and *The Battle of Maldon* to Tennyson's 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'; two highly popular poetic works of the late nineteenth century, he importantly reminds us, were about private soldiers – Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892) and A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). At the turn of the century, the Boer War (1899–1902) – which had the first literate army in British history – inspired poetry by both combatants and civilians, including Thomas Hardy.<sup>7</sup> But Graves's observation still holds true. From Anglo-Saxon times to the Boer War, war poetry in English was written largely by civilians and did not have a clearly defined identity; with the extraordinary outpouring between 1914 and 1918, it established itself as a genre and the soldier-poet became a species.

On Easter Sunday 1915, when Dean Inge read out 'The Soldier' by Brooke from the pulpit at St Paul's Cathedral, he was at once creating and anointing a secular saint: the 'poet soldier'. Over the next three years, the 'poet soldier' would morph into 'soldier-poet', and by the 1930s he had become, according to Edmund Blunden, 'as familiar as a ration card'.<sup>8</sup> The term 'war poetry' or 'war verse', by contrast, starts gaining currency from 1917 and crests in popularity in the post-war years. In her 1917 essay 'Contemporary British War Poetry, Music and Patriotism', Marion Scott – friend and music teacher of Ivor Gurney – noted an 'enormous increase in poetic output' related to the war, ranging 'from genius to doggerel'.<sup>9</sup> This was partly the result of a conjunction of particular historical factors: a late Victorian culture of heroism and patriotism, a dominant public school ethos among the officer classes as well as the more general spread of education. Above all, the processes of recruitment – first voluntary and then the Conscription Act

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of 1916 – meant that the British army had an enormous number of highly educated young men.<sup>10</sup> Some 2,225 poets from Britain and Ireland alone, according to Catherine Reilly’s exhaustive bibliography, wrote war poetry; only a handful among them are remembered today.<sup>11</sup> In his letters of 1917, Owen refers to ‘war impressions’, ‘war poem’ and ‘War Poetry’, but in the celebrated Preface (1918) to his intended collection of poems, he eschewed the term ‘war poet’: ‘That is why the true War Poets must be truthful’.<sup>12</sup> This makes Gurney perhaps the first soldier-poet to consciously lay claim to the title; from 1923, he referred to himself as ‘First War Poet’ [sic], signing it on the back of the envelope in the place of the seal.<sup>13</sup>

The conflation of First World War poetry with the trench lyric was encouraged by the soldier-poets and anthologists, and consolidated with the publication of memoirs such as Graves’s *Good-Bye to All That* (1929) and Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930). Rapidly, the trench poets claimed centre-stage; civilian poets such as Hardy and Kipling moved to the margins. In the politicized climate of the 1930s, Owen and Sassoon became cultural icons. Both figure prominently along with other combatant poets in Frederick Brereton’s *Anthology of War Poems* (1930) and Robert Nichols’s *Anthology of War Poetry, 1914–18* (1943). However it was with the renewed swell of interest in the group in the 1960s, with the musical *Oh What A Lovely War* (1963) and anthologies such as Brian Gardner’s *Up the Line to Death* (1964) and I.M. Parsons’s *Men Who March Away* (1965), that the canon began to take shape more firmly. The process was completed by, among others, two literary critics: Paul Fussell, with his enormously influential *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), and Jon Silkin with the *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979). And the circle of knowledge that Vera Brittain lamented shut her off from her beloved Roland in the trenches seemed to tighten forever.

Over the last thirty years, the First World War and its literature have been powerfully reconfigured. Works such as Jay Winter’s *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) have broadened our understanding of the war and its plural legacies, while feminist scholars have drawn attention to the experience of women and children, fundamentally changing the way we ‘reconceptualise war – and therefore the vocabulary of war’.<sup>14</sup> First World War poetry has not remained untouched. The recovery in recent years of poetry by women, civilians, dissenters, working-class and non-English (particularly Irish, Scottish, Welsh and American) writers in anthologies by critics such as Simon Featherstone, Dominic Hibberd, Margaret Higonnet, Tim Kendall, Vivien Noakes, Catherine Reilly and Mark W. Van Wienen has led both to a powerful expansion and rethinking of the canon.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, developments in the general critical field – cultural studies, queer theory, work on testimony and trauma – have left their mark. The frameworks and critical

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idiom used to understand the popular soldier-poets have accordingly shifted: we have moved from a moral register of the ‘truth of war’ to an exploration of textual complexity and wider socio-cultural contexts; there is closer interrogation of the relationship between poetic form and historical, political and psychic processes; and far greater attention is being paid to questions of difference (class, nationality, gender and sexuality, among others).<sup>16</sup> Many of the scholars contributing to this *Companion* have, through their editions, anthologies and monographs, played a seminal role in this transformation. Often, work on a specific area such as Anglo-American modernism or women’s war literature or Irish war poetry has altered our idea of the whole corpus. W.B. Yeats’s decision to leave out Owen from the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) is well known, but to understand Yeats’s own ‘war poetry’, as Fran Brearton does in *The Great War in Irish Poetry* (2000), is to ‘extend the idea of war to the idea of conflict, of which actual warfare is, as it was for the soldier poets, only one manifestation’.<sup>17</sup> The same could be said for war poems by non-combatants and civilian writers further afield, such as the ‘Canadian Kipling’ Robert Service or the Indian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore whose wartime writings alert us to the global contexts of war poetry. However, colonial war poetry remains barely visible even in the recently expanded canon. On the other hand, to read Ezra Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), H.D.’s *Choruses from the Iphigenia in Aulis and the Hippolytus of Euripides* (1919) or T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) through the lens of the First World War (see chapters by Sherry, Howarth and Froula in this volume) is to recognise a form of war poetry in which the war may not be the only or even the dominant story, or may get mixed up with other wars, or with peace. First World War poetry is often perceived as a bend in the course of twentieth-century verse, gathering only the detritus of the trenches, but this *Companion* shows instead how the war fed into and funneled the main poetic currents of the day, including different traditions of nineteenth-century lyricism and early-twentieth-century modernism.

Canons are retrospective constructions, and few more so than what we consider today as First World War poetry. Between 1914 and 1918, the most famous war poem was Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’, followed by Julian Grenfell’s ‘Into Battle’. Angry responses such as Arthur Graeme West’s ‘War Poets’ (1916) – directed at ‘a University Undergraduate moved to verse by the war’ and beginning with ‘God! How I Hate you, you young cheerful men’ – hint at the dominant contemporary culture of commemorative or patriotic war verse West rails at and which has not survived.<sup>18</sup> The battle lines we erect today between soldier-poets and civilians were not that sharply drawn then. Anthologies published in 1914 – *Poems of the Great War* and *Songs and Sonnets for England in War Time* – included poems by both combatants and civilians, as did the first ‘anti-war’ collection, *Poems Written during the Great War* (1918).<sup>19</sup> George Herbert

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Clarke's compendious *A Treasury of War Poetry: British and American Poems of World War, 1914–1919* (1919) cuts across both soldier/civilian and pro-/anti-war divides and gives us an idea of the popular war poets of the day: Brooke and Grenfell appear alongside not just Sassoon, Graves, Robert Nichols, Francis Ledwidge, Gilbert Frankau and Frederic Manning but also writers such as Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater, Thomas Hardy and Rudyard Kipling. Prominent by their absence are Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. War poetry could also be more international, if of an imperial cast. In the Christmas of 1918, the periodical *The Bookman* included a supplement devoted to the war poets: it featured poems by Sassoon, Graves, Gurney, Grenfell, Madox Ford, alongside American Alan Seeger, Canadians Robert W. Service and John McCrae, Australian Leon Gellert and the lone woman-poet, Vera Brittain.<sup>20</sup> Definitions are seldom static, and the label 'war poetry' has journeyed somewhat like Owen's 'long-strung creatures' which 'curve, loop and straighten' as they move.<sup>21</sup>

So we may have to reframe the question: what is First World War poetry in English as we understand it now? At its expansive best, it is a diffuse category cutting across different genres and nationalities: it includes works by the familiar soldier-poets and the anonymous contributors to the famous trench journal *Wipers Times*; non-combatants and civilians; men and women; jingo-imperialists and conscientious objectors; Georgians and modernists; poets from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the United States as well as from the former dominions and colonies (see the 'Chronology of Poets' for an extended list). In formal terms, it ranges from epic and satire through the sonnet, villanelle, ode, pastoral, elegy and ballad to the limerick and the trench song. Our contemporary understanding of the First World War as 'different wars', the cultural turn in literary studies and, at a more experiential level, our heavily mediated relationship as witnesses to violent events around the world have widened our perspectives. Does this expansion blur the distinction between cultural history and literary criticism, especially when the works by the majority of the poets listed in Reilly's bibliography veer towards 'doggerel' than 'genius'? The anthologist today has to tread a delicate line between questions of literary value and the representation of different voices. Moreover, does this seemingly catch-all definition put 'First World War poetry' as a special category at risk? In the concluding 'Conversation,' Jon Stallworthy notes that the term has 'become so elastic now' that one has to use it 'in a sort of quotation marks.' Indeed, 'Lest we forget' seems to have become 'Lest we exclude'. Yet, given the history of marginalization and for a fuller understanding of First World War poetry, it is important to retain an expansive definition and a flexible critical framework alert to different political, cultural and historical trajectories. All First World War poetry was not written by 'war poets', just as all poetry written by the war poets is not war poetry. *The Waste Land*

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and ‘After Troy’ can be read as war poems but they do not make Eliot or H.D. ‘war poets’; on the other hand, it is debatable whether Owen’s ‘Maundy Thursday’, even if revised at Craiglockhart in 1917, is a ‘war poem’.

Where do we draw the line? Are all poems written between 1914 and 1918 war poems? Not necessarily – all wartime poems, like all poems by war poets, cannot be called war poetry. To qualify as a First World War poem, the war does not have to be directly present or mentioned, but at the same time some context of the war has to be registered and evoked, however obliquely. In the ‘Conversation’, Michael Longley observes: ‘if the cosmos of a poem is the Great War, then that’s it’. Longley’s father fought in the First World War and his celebrated poem ‘Wounds’, written in 1972, shows how private memories of his father’s service on the Western Front resurfaced during the Irish Troubles and got fused with images of contemporary violence. In her discussion of the poem in this volume, Fran Brearton uses the resonant phrase ‘post-war Great War poems’ to refer to such later but intimate engagements with the conflict (Chapter 15).

**Combatant Poetry: Testimony, Lyric and the Body**

In her 1918 review, ‘Two Soldier Poets’, Virginia Woolf raises a point that continues to fuel debates about combatant poetry. ‘It is difficult to judge him dispassionately as a poet’, Woolf writes of Sassoon, ‘because it is impossible to overlook the fact that he writes as a soldier’.<sup>22</sup> Given the perilous intimacy of life and art, writings on trench poetry remain one of the last citadels of humanist criticism. After all, Owen’s poetic credo – ‘My Subject is War, and the pity of War; the Poetry is in the pity’ – provides one of the most powerful refashioning of poetry as testimony in the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> Some critics might say: after such experience, what theory?

This privileging of the overtly testimonial, the experiential and the affective in writings on First World War poetry, often resulting in the marginalization of other voices, has been critiqued in recent years. James Campbell has called it the ‘ideology of combat gnosticism’: the idea that ‘the experience of fighting provides a connection to Reality, an unmediated Truth’ to which only combatants with direct exposure have access.<sup>24</sup> As he rightly notes, combat experience is by no means the ‘only’ voice of the war and even less an index of a poem’s literary value; moreover, it cannot be used either to define or ‘authenticate’ a war poem. However, it will be almost equally unwise to go to the other extreme and ignore the particular contexts of trench poetry: recognition of difference does not necessarily mean fetishization, or a politics of hierarchy and exclusion. The poetry of the trenches cannot be wholly dissociated from its material conditions: to overlook their

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specificity would empty the genre of its intimate bodily and emotional history. Our knowledge of such extreme circumstances *does* affect our reading of even such formally superb poems as ‘Futility’ or ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’. The epistemological relation of these real-life experiences to artistic form, affect and cultural memory is historically more complex, delicate and deep-rooted than a neat, gendered ideology of ‘combat gnosticism’. Indeed, the question of why and how a group of soldier-poets came to represent the voice of a nation in Britain forms the basis of the cultural historian Jay Winter’s essay in this volume (Chapter 16).

The trench experience was one of the most sustained shatterings of the human sensorium: it thrust the soldier’s fragile body between the ravages of industrial modernity on one hand and the formlessness of matter on the other. Trench artefacts and documents – letters, diaries, notebooks, sketch-books – regularly fuse meaning and materiality, pointing to the ‘contact-zone’, the daily conditions which inspired much of the poetry.<sup>25</sup> The idea of chance, so prominent in trench writing, finds its poignant material trace in the diary of A. Reid. Here, on the last page, the date ‘Sunday 29th July, 1917’ is inscribed in anticipation of the day’s record, but only a blank space exists: Reid was killed before the day ended (Figure 2). As one opens the diary of J. Bennett (Figure 3a), one sees on the first page a sketch (‘Old Bill’) followed by a piece of witty doggerel about ‘Mud’, showing how humour, drawing and verse existed together as a coping mechanism, while his obsessive repetition of ‘Dull cold day’ (Figure 3b) echoes the commonest theme of trench verse. Rosenberg’s poem ‘In the Trenches’ is contained within a grimy and fragile letter (Figure 4), and Vivien Noakes recalls how, while editing his poems, dustings of mud fell off from many of the manuscript pages. After three weeks at the Front, Owen writes to his mother, ‘I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air, I have perceived it, and in the darkness, *felt*’.<sup>26</sup> For Owen, touch becomes the ground of both testimony and trauma. As I have argued elsewhere, the visual topography of everyday life was replaced by the tactile geography of the trenches: in the dark, subterranean world of the Western Front, men navigated space not through reassuring distance of the gaze but through the tactile immediacy of their bodies.<sup>27</sup> ‘Creep’, ‘crawl’, ‘burrow’ and ‘worm’ are regular verbs in trench lyrics, suggesting the shift from the vertical axis of the human body to the horizontality of the beast. In the foreword to Rosenberg’s *Collected Works*, Sassoon notes: ‘Sensuous frontline existence is there, hateful and repellent, unforgettable and inescapable’.<sup>28</sup>

However, this does not make combatant poetry the unmediated receptacle of experience. If the surrounding material world was important, so was