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Edited by Patricia Ledward and Colin Strang

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*Edited by
Patricia Ledward
and Colin Strang*



*With an Introduction by
Edmund Blunden*



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[More information](#)

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction.</i> BY EDMUND BLUNDEN	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Part I</i> 'We saw doom patterned in the ordinary sky'	1
II 'Line after line, we wheel to enter battle'	15
III 'After the sirens sound'	26
IV In Memoriam	34
V Songs in Wartime	45
VI Love and Friendship	62
VII 'In the midst of death is life'	76
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	95
<i>Index of Authors</i>	96
<i>Index of First Lines</i>	97

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INTRODUCTION

The poetry written during the War of 1914–1918 and inspired or modified by that War was various enough, but could be divided mainly into two classes. There was the work of the veteran authors, such as Hardy, Kipling, Stephen Phillips, and some who happily are still with us; and there was the expression of the young and often unknown writers, who were called in a general way the Soldier Poets. From the older men, especially at the outset, we heard characteristic utterances. As time went on, we found a deepening interest in the imparted feelings and perceptions of those on whom the intense experience had fallen most urgently. Not the least impressive thing was to discover how many of that war generation had relied upon verse as a way of reflecting intimately and independently. Far more of them practised poetry than published it themselves or even divulged it to a friend in some interval between the immediate tasks of active service.

Parallels between the two Wars are to be drawn with reserve. But here in the third year of the new World War an anthology appears which brings out the impression made lately by other evidences. It tells us that this time as last, war has not silenced the Muses in England armed and embattled. Young men and women are responding to what is happening to themselves and to humanity at large in the terms, symbols and logic of poetry. Not all of the writers assembled by Miss Ledward and Mr Strang, I suppose—for the majority of the contributors are personally unknown to me—are engaged in active service; but all represent the generation which particularly comes face to face with war. The reader who is eager to know something more of the present than he

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 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

can readily find in the day's round will mark what these soldier poets have to say; our consideration of it will perhaps be most thoughtful where their matter, impulse, declared or implied judgment varies from the mass of things circulated in time of war.

For now, as at all periods, and especially when the peace-time allurements of literary reputation, social reward and the rest of Vanity Fair are out of season, poetry is written because its principle is one of 'the innocent eye'. Its mood is that of seeing where the truth is, or recording things observed and apprehended which may open the way thither. The poets do not necessarily agree with one another, nor must they be always in one mood; this may be seen in the following pages. One writer may tell us,

All Nature's agents image war to me.
 Even that butterfly above the ditch
 Flutters with sinister intent; a bee,
 Heavy with honey, drones at bomber's pitch. . . .

Another finds the same infection of all things lovely:

I tread
 The white dust of a weed-bright lane; alone
 Upon Time-Present's tranquil outmost rim,
 Seeing the sunlight through a lens of dread,
 While anguish makes the English landscape seem
 Inhuman as the jungle, and unreal
 Its peace.

Yet to a third a missel-thrush's song is still quite a cheerful and untroubled performance:

No thought of rationing or raid
 Occurred to mar his serenade,
 And politicians were to him,
 I knew, superfluous and grim.
 He honed his beak for an encore;
 He cared no whit about the war.

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Frontmatter

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There is a theme on which, I believe, these poets are in accord; it is one of joy, though set against a background of fiery shadow. Not long ago the god of love was becoming something of a scarecrow, but the error has been admitted. The young poets are with Robert Burns so far as this subject is concerned. They have done with analytical approaches and consultations, and they speak clearly and universally:

I know that in my mind
You stay when others pass,
And entering a room
The sun is in your face.

Or again,

Now in this quiet hour, listening to traffic,
While the sun sways us and the music hovers
Over this tragic season: while the guns
Boom on over the continent, I see
Amplify the simple movement of our love.

As a series of thoughts upon the War in its relation to the lives and ardours of the writers, the poems do not easily yield to one definition; possibly 'In Time of Suspense' (p. 11) portrays in the fullest way the new generation meeting the new breaking of nations. Neither in that nor in any other of the poems is there any militarism, or personal claim, or study of revenge. There is not even much irony, though disenchantment finds a voice:

When I was a civilian I hoped high,
Dreamt my future cartwheels in the sky,
Almost forgot to arm myself
Against the boredom and the inefficiency
The petty injustice and the everlasting grudges.
The sacrifice is greater than I ever expected.

To measure the time deliberately is for some a way past disenchantment:

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So now, leaning against my gun, in these fields and
 Plains of Belgium, conscious of the warp and fret
 Of spring on the hedges and forests, I accept! I accept!
 For there lies all our power; the power of the young and
 the lonely.
 I know that the past is lies, and the present only
 Important. I see in life service, and in dying an end
 Of loving.

The way in which war saps at the treasured conquests of
 the human spirit is occasionally exposed:

In nature class the schoolboy's head
 is taught to contemplate, instead
 of flower pot and cactus stump,
 a budding aluminium dump.

The chances, the prospect, are touched upon, but without
 elaborate protest:

After the band has gone
 There will be music
 But how many of us will be there to hear it?

Through all, sparing as are the allusions to the actual
 ordeals of individuals, I feel the burden of their fate. The
 music of the verses it may be, that conveys something
 more than the details in the words; or, as to the things
 notified in the words, perhaps it is from the things which
 are not mentioned and which lie beyond the stanzas
 written that the profounder emotion is stirred. Here a
 brief reference to the technical side of the poems in
 general may be in place. We have witnessed in the years
 before the war a great deal of revolutionary ingenuity
 in the writing of poetry, and may have thought it was
 wasted. It had the look of being done chiefly because
 the inventors were determined to avoid beaten tracks,
 and escape the epithet 'literary'. If we say that it was
 metrical and idiomatic experiment, its transitory character

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

is still in our minds. But in respect of the informal and sketch-like pieces which the present volume contains, that reflection does not arise. The growth is natural and proper to the strained circumstances. All the polishing in the world would not increase, indeed would impair, the fresh and significant appeal of these songs of emergency. The question of their being called 'literary' or not did not trouble their writers, who had just time to leave a word with us before the column was moving off once more:

All this shall pass,
 But this shall be again, . . .
 Peace enters singly as she always came
 When she desired Eternal rest:
 It is her singleness impressed
 Upon a soul, a soul, a soul,
 That shall in time give wisdom to the whole.

In the end, as with the poetry of that other War, the striking thing about this anthology is the separate ways the poets have taken and the singleness of temper and trust which they achieve. Within the narrow limits which each inevitably receives in such a collection, it is not possible to consider them as we have been enabled to consider Brooke, Sorley, F. W. Harvey, Sassoon, Owen and others whose distinct writings formed at length the poetic truth of the earlier conflict. But they in their turn, speaking in solitariness, contribute to a sensitive and honourable interpretation of the difficult as well as deadly problem of these years. It is not the least of England's titles to eminence that so many of her sons and daughters, in the midst of the most exacting and devastating changes of fortune, can view life through the medium of poetry, and 'gently take that which ungently came'. As a member of another generation I conceive it to be a great privilege to have been admitted thus to a private world

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[More information](#)

of incident, sympathy and philosophy which in real life might have been long hidden by shyness or want of conversational eloquence; and it seems to me that all who are anxious to explore the meaning of the present and to understand those on whom the future depends will find valuable enlightenment here, and only in such pages as these.

EDMUND BLUNDEN

1942