

*Reflections on an
exhibition of the work
of the war poets, at
Imperial War Museum,
'Anthem for doomed
youth'.*

The history of the twentieth century reads like a cosmology of human evil. The Imperial War Museum, the site of the new exhibition celebrating the 'War Poets' of WWI quite aptly has a clock which counts out the number of deaths as would occur each minute in this century were it to have the same homicide rate as the last. It is an egg-timer for Thanatos, and in the same basement as a permanent exhibition commemorating WWI it exerts an oddly anachronistic presence. Yet no matter, it purveys a sense of the great impersonal massacre which mankind engaged in because it wanted to or felt it had to. The temporary exhibition on the Great War's soldier poets conveys a sense of the personal experience. This it does very well.

There are ten poets featured – Brooke, Grenfell, Sorley, Owen, Ledwidge, Sassoon, Graves, Blunden, Rosenberg, Thomas, Jones and Gurney. Not all died in the war, with some like Graves and Sassoon living up to the 1960's, but they were mostly non-officers, and experienced the trenches and front lines. They tried to find beauty though could not find much of it. As Sorley wrote to the Master of Marlborough, the shell-fire falling in a cascade of colour could look like 'the end of a beautiful world.' Picaresque, yes, but (stray) shell fire killed Francis Ledwidge.

GERMANY

This trade unionist republican from Slane signed up to the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers because Germany was 'an enemy common to our civilisation'. He had his doubts about supporting England. When he learnt of the execution of three fellow poets after the 1916 Easter Rising by fellow British Army men he was more than unsure. Yet he was the product, as were the richer sons of England, of a culture of romantic bravado. He wrote to his publisher in 1915, 'I would sooner be known as a man when the world's trouble is over than a poet.'

The loss in the Great War of the more plutocratic sons of England may well have helped buckle the 'Big Houses'. Yet when one speaks of the more privileged Rupert Brook or Julian Grenfell one must think also of a loss of art unmade, and artists only partly developed. This was their promise and their tragedy. Brooke was the foppish poster boy for the war (a musical piece was written for him which plays over the tannoy in this gallery, and it is as soporific as warm whiskeyed milk). Having trained as a soldier, he died quite pointlessly of blood poisoning before reaching the front.

ENCOMIUM

Churchill published in the *T.L.S.* an encomium to his unknowing patriotism, as famously evidenced in 'The soldier', with its little corner of poesy, 'That is for ever

England.' Grenfell on the other hand hated aesthetes, and used to occasionally attack them using an Australian stock-whip, around the grounds of Balliol. His monstrous arrogance was nearly matched by his vivacity. He wrote immethodic prose on fox hunting, on 'pig sticking', as he practiced both. Yet he also left some very moving poetry behind on war:

*In the air death moans and sings,
But day shall clasp him with strong hands,
And Night shall fold him with soft wings.*

This is not perfect poetry, yet it has power. Charles Sorley learnt German *in situ*, and consequently had a great empathy for the German people. He did not err in his moral choice, but he could see the very human folly in the Teutonic 'future bigly planned.' In a phrase full of bathos he wrote to friend AE Hutchinson, 'But isn't all this bloody?' He was important in that he saw the scale of things; the vaulted expanse of the charnel house:

*When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go.*

Equivocation is to be found in his attitude, for he did not see death in his generation's war as a replay of that ancient quarrel between Hector and Priam on the field of Troy. Death like most things has a quality of context, and not every man is of the Homeric scale. Sorley knew that he was subject to geo-politics, not destiny. As such, he presaged Siegfried Sassoon, who was a conscientious objector while he remained in the army. He was of similar disposition to Grenfell, and published 'Memoirs of a fox-hunting man', as he later published 'Memoirs of an infantry soldier.'

POINT

He became disillusioned with the war in its later stages. He at one point suffered a nervous breakdown (the Medical Report is exhibited, dated 28th July 1917). A letter which he wrote around this time was found in 1918 on a Birmingham to Preston train. In it he claimed that, 'The war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.' Whether this was clear thinking or not we can leave to the historians. His turn of the nap of a verse, on the other hand, was sure. Describing a smiling general passing men on the way to the front he wrote:

*"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.'*

Sassoon was left both physically and mentally damaged by the war. How could he not have been? To feel is to suffer,

THE TWO BLEND – THAT'S WAR

something which Wilfred Owen knew all too well. 'The poetry is in the pity', he claimed. The proof is in the works. Owen's status is unquestioned. The exhibition reveals something about the man – often whimsical, though revealing as whimsy always is. For example, a German Army bugle which he found near the front and kept with him; its leathered ram's horn shape making it an unlikely souvenir. There are two fine white hairbrushes, childhood photos, a picture of him looking proud in his uniform. The details count for something.

Though one wonders whether or not this exhibition could have been more thoroughly curated for visual and physical material, it might be proffered that the war was of a time when life was not supersaturated with visual documentary deliciae. Lives were not so photographed, not so filmed and snapped and visually captured. It is moot – the exhibition has the feeling of a last look. That century is gone and its lessons perhaps only half learned, if at all. The humanity of which these young men spoke has, meanwhile, changed little, as it seems perpetually just out of reach, an unbruised apple too high in the tree for boys to climb to.

'Anthem for doomed youth' is an exhibition worth seeing. It serves to remind one of how our better nature can find voice amid the churned blood-swirl of war, like Heaney's 'mudflowers of dialect' grown out of Eliott's 'stony rubbish.' The eponymous book accompanying the exhibition is also of merit, tracking the good and jingoistic in the work. The good meets the bad and the two blend – as in war.

WAR REQUIEM
I Requiem aeternam
Chorus
 Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine:
 et lux perpetua luceat eis.

Boys
 Te decet hymnus, Deus in Sion:
 et tibi reddetur votum in Jerusalem;
 exaudi orationem meam, ad te omnis caro veniet.

Chorus
 Requiem...

Tenor Solo
 What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.
 No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
 What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Chorus
 Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison.
 Kyrie eleison.

Chorus
 Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord:
 and let light eternal shine upon them.

Boys
 Thou, O God, art praised in Sion;
 and unto Thee shall the vow be performed in
 Jerusalem;
 Thou who hearest the prayer, unto Thee shall all
 flesh come.

Chorus
 Rest...

Chorus
 Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy
 upon us.
 Lord have mercy upon us.

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Wilfred Owen's poetry was transformed into liturgy by Benjamin Britten.

