

In the Trenches

One man's mission to wage peace with words



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Portrait of Wilfred Owen NPG1515 by John Gannon

Wilfred Owen

BY STEPHANIE ANDERSON

In a 2003 interview, a news reporter asked poet Sam Hamill, the founder of the group Poets Against the War, "You didn't really believe *poets* could stop a war, did you?" Of course, by now, we know that Hamill and his fellow poets-in-arms did not stop the war in Iraq. But what they did instead was spark conversations, discussions, debates—and the creation of new art. Since its inception, the Poets Against the War website has published more than 13,000 new, original poems in response to the war and the current political climate. The poets found themselves being asked time and time again why they couldn't just "leave

an apolitical poem."

Was it hubris or a healthy dose of pure, old-fashioned hope that led Hamill and other poets to believe they could stop a war with little more than their words? Creating art—specifically, poetry—is not a new response to war. Hamill and the others joined

politics out of it." Hamill talked about how poets are observers and absorbers of culture, human behavior, nature, everything around them. How could they not be affected by a war and its politics? Poet Philip Levine succinctly answered the question in a National Public Radio interview: "It is nearly impossible to write

Dulce et Decorum est.

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Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began the trudge.
^{Now} ~~Some~~ marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Deaf even Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.
gas shells dropping softly

Then somewhere near in front: Whew... fop, fop, fop,
Gas-shells? Or duds? We loosened masks in case, -
And listened. ~~Nothing.~~ ^{Nothing.} Far no rumouring of Krupp,
Then ~~sudden~~ ^{sudden} poison hit us in the face.
Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! - An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

a long list of war poets that came before them—poets whose work never stopped a war, but indeed made room for the conversation. The war poems of T.S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, Siegfried Sassoon, W.B. Yeats, Rupert Brooke, and Yusef Komunyakaa made them famous. While many of these writers have achieved iconic status in the literary canon, it is the poetry of one slight, soft-spoken young English poet that is often regarded by critics and scholars as the first—and perhaps best—example of war poetry. The brief life of its author, Wilfred Owen, captivates as much as his words.

The eldest of four children, Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born on March 18, 1893, at Plas Wilmot, Oswestry, in west central England. Though Owen's father, Tom, worked steadily as a railway official, the family never had enough money and moved several times during Wilfred's childhood. Owen's mother, Susan, was of Welsh descent, and her strict Calvinist upbringing affected her parenting of her children. She refused to permit them to attend the theater and believed that drinking and smoking were immoral. Nevertheless, Susan was artistic, played the harp and painted well, and she became the young poet's most devoted supporter.

By all accounts, young Wilfred never aspired to be anything but a poet. Much of his time was spent writing or memorizing poems. His chief influence was Keats, and many of his earliest poems are direct imitations of or odes to the poet. Several sonnets were elegies to Keats, including "Written in a Wood, September 1910," and "Sonnet" (1911), which was written after a visit to Teignmouth where Keats lived from 1818 to 1820. "Sonnet" includes an excerpt of the inscription on Keats's tombstone. According to Owen biographer Arthur Ormont, Owen's poems, with a few exceptions, were influenced very little by anything outside of the old masters and, later, by World War I. Some of the earliest work includes snippets of family outings and the landscape of the English countryside, but many of these poems were reflections on the art of poetry itself, including "To Poesy" (1909-10) and "Science Has Looked" (1912).

Though Owen's father seemed to understand little of the "poet's life," Owen drew his deepest support from his mother and brother Harold, and kept in close correspondence with them throughout his short life. The family struggled financially throughout the children's upbringing, and for the eldest son to eschew a working life for a literary one undoubtedly caused turmoil between Owen and his father.

Although his family did not appear in his poems, their struggles with money certainly affected Owen. While the Owens lived for a time in Shrewsbury, young Wilfred created his own "study," which consisted of little more than a desk in the corner of an uncomfortable bedroom. Ormont wrote in his 1972 biography of Owen, *Requiem for War*, that Owen enjoyed re-creating his idea of the poet toiling away in poverty and despicable living conditions. His only wish was that he was toiling in a garret in France. Harold Owen recalls his brother carrying around a notebook and thinking constantly about poetry. Every minute was spent composing or memorizing. Ormont wrote, "This compulsion not to waste time came from his feeling that if he did waste it, he would have only himself to blame if he failed to become a poet in the time allotted to him, which he instinctively felt was short."

Ormont stated in *Requiem for a Dream* that, while many young writers hone their skills by keeping journals or diaries, Owen wrote frequent and painstakingly wrought letters, often composing several drafts before posting them. Much of what biog-

raphers and scholars know about Owen comes from the vast collection of letters he wrote to his mother, who reportedly saved everything he wrote from the age of five, stashing them in cupboards and boxes around the Owen home.

In fact, with what we now know about Owen's early years, it is amazing that he became a poet at all. For one, he had virtually no formal training. He had no financial means to travel or attend school, and no early mentor or benefactor, as did many young artists. He excelled in school as a child, even tutoring his brother Harold when Harold's grades began to slip. He was admitted to London University, but did not receive high enough marks on his entrance exams to win a scholarship. Owen was unable to afford to attend the university and went to Dunsden Vicarage instead, where he studied theology and received some pro bono English schooling by a teacher at University College in Reading. She later encouraged him to apply for a scholarship to Reading, which he failed to receive. After hearing the news of yet another missed opportunity for an education, he fell ill with what some people claim was pneumonia and others claim was a nervous breakdown. In spring 1913, Owen was sent to the south of France for several months to recover—a move that ultimately changed the course of his life.

In France, Owen recovered, began teaching, and met the French poet and pacifist Laurent Tailhade in the summer of 1914, who would prove to have a major impact on Owen's views on war. It could not have come at a more appropriate time, as war broke out between France and Germany that August. Even in the midst of war, Owen was still fixated on poetry and, like Tailhade, hated violence. Ormont wrote that Owen viewed the war as just another "roadblock" to his becoming a poet. His brother Harold wrote in his family's memoirs, "He was influenced by nothing outside himself, even a war. ... He only had one purpose in living—to write poetry. If a war was likely to destroy or even retard his poetry, he would have nothing to do with a war."

Months later, however, Owen began to change his tune, feeling guilty that so many of his countrymen were joining the fight while he was scribbling away. Even so, his desire to join the war effort was still fueled by his desire to write. In a letter to his mother in the winter of 1914-15, Owen wrote, "Do you know what would hold me together on a battlefield? The sense that I was perpetuating the language in which Keats and the rest of them wrote! I do not know in what else England is greatly superior or dearer to me, than another land or people." He continued to teach and write in France until it grew too dangerous. He crossed the English Channel on a course back to England in September 1915. Within the next month, he enlisted in the British Army. He was 22 years old.

Owen proved to be a remarkable soldier and quickly rose through the ranks to become a regiment officer, surprising nearly everyone who knew him, including himself. In May 1917, a shell hit a railway embankment where Owen and his men were camped, launching him into the air. For several days, Owen hid in a small railway cutting, with the remains of a fellow officer lying nearby. Owen's shell shock was so severe he was evacuated from the front line to a military clearing station, then sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh, Scotland.

The poet voiced some of his most bitter denunciations of the violence of war in a letter to his mother, written while recuperating: "I am more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom. Already I have comprehended

a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was: Passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace; but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed; but do not kill. ... I think pulpit professionals are ignoring it very skilfully [sic] and successfully indeed. ... Am I not myself a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience? ... Thus you see how pure Christianity will not fit in with pure patriotism."

His stay at Craiglockhart proved to be an important turning point for both Wilfred Owen the soldier and Wilfred Owen the poet. He met Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow wounded soldier and poet, and the two quickly formed a friendship. Sassoon, unlike Owen, was born into privilege and was part of the British gentry. In July 1917, at the suggestion of Bertrand Russell, Sassoon wrote a statement denouncing the war to the House of Commons to be read by its pacifist member, but the letter was unceremoniously dismissed by the British Under-Secretary of War.

Owen wrote prolifically at Craiglockhart and became the editor of the hospital's magazine, *The Hydra*. Many scholars cite the time spent at Craiglockhart as the critical point of maturity in Owen's work, and certainly the poet focused himself nearly exclusively during this period on writing the poems for which he would become renowned. In October 1917, Owen wrote five poems, including perhaps his most famous, "Dulce et Decorum Est," written in an outrage at what he viewed as the blind patriotism of the media. It tells the story of a soldier unable to protect himself during a mustard-gas attack:

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! — An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime....

The poem's final lines, borrowed from Horace, "The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori," translate to "How sweet and proper it is to die for one's country."

In July 1917, Owen began compiling several of his poems (all written the month before, except for one) into a collection. The arrangement of his contents page and the draft of his preface also revealed his views of the war. Poems were grouped into sections with titles that included "Heroic Lies," "Indifference at Home," "Willingness of Old to Sacrifice Young," "Horrible Beastliness of War," and "Foolishness of War."

The preface exemplified Owen's newly developed outlook on poetry, as well: "This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity. Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why the true Poets must be truthful." Poetry for poetry's sake, to Owen, no longer mattered. Ironically, the war did not "destroy" or "retard" Owen's best writing, but created it, nourished it, and enlivened it without so much of a trace of either sentimentality or detached distance.

But perhaps the most chilling irony is that Owen, like many great artists before and after him, never lived to realize his full potential or even to see his work celebrated. Only a handful of his poems were published during his lifetime, and, save for a small enclave of family and supporters in the English literary communi-

ty, Owen wrote in virtual obscurity. In October 1918, he was awarded the British Military Cross for "conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty." One month later, on November 4, 1918, just one week before the Armistice and the end of World War I, Owen died in battle in France. He was 25 years old.

After news of Owen's death reached Siegfried Sassoon, he wrote to Owen's mother asking permission to edit and gather her son's poems into a collection for publication. Since then, numerous books of his poetry have been published and read around the world, and his fame has increased in the decades following World War I. Much attention is paid to his tender age, and the fact that he fought and died in a war while simultaneously writing haunting and often gruesomely detailed poetry about it. Owen was the master of the elegiac poem, and has been lauded for his use of assonance and slant-rhyming style. But why have so many critics and fellow poets dubbed him "the greatest poet of the Great War"? Perhaps, as Ashley Marshall, a graduate student at Penn State University studying 18th- and 19th-century modernist poetry, notes, it is his ethos as a soldier that gives his work particular resonance.

"Yes, he's a representative war poet," Marshall says. "He's also representatively modern in his refusal to offer or find consolation. But he's also absolutely right, isn't he, to insist that the readers can know nothing of the war or of loss that great? He's right to insist upon the distance between us all, and to insist that the poetry is not what matters. ... The poetry may help force confrontation, but it's meant to hurt us rather than heal us."

In the years following his death, Owen inspired a generation of post-World War I writers looking to the creation of art to make some sense of the catastrophic devastation the war had caused, including W.H. Auden, Ernest Hemingway, Stephen Spender, and Dylan Thomas. Arthur Orrmont wrote in *Requiem for War* that "they saw in Owen a rebel against the established authority ... who had linked poetry to propaganda in the struggle for social justice; who, far from remaining aloof from the battle, had sacrificed himself and his art on the altar of truth." Later, Owen's work gained a surge in popularity among American readers during the Vietnam War. And the legacy of his war poetry endures today, not only with the work of Sam Hamill and Poets Against the War, but in the mainstream media, as well.

Eighty-five years after Wilfred Owen's death, writer Adam Cohen invoked Wilfred Owen in a November 9, 2003, editorial in the *New York Times*. Cohen wrote that Owen "is often portrayed as antiwar, which he was not. What he stood for was seeing war clearly, which makes him especially relevant today. The Bush administration has been loudly attacking the news media for misreporting the Iraq conflict by leaving out good news. Owen would counter—in vivid, gripping images—that it is the White House, with its campaign to hide casualties from view, that is dangerously distorting reality." Cohen echoed Owen's words in "Dulce et Decorum Est"—to act honorably, but not to distort our views of war with "the old Lie"—or new ones.