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THE POET AT WAR

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School
of the University of Louisville
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

August, 1948

by

E.R. Hagemann



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DATE: August 24, 1948

Dedicated To
Lieutenant Francis D. Dishinger, USMCR,
killed in action
on Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands,
as a member of the Ninth Regiment,
Third Marine Division,
February, 1945.

Who, had he survived World War II, would have understood and appreciated what I, as former comrade and fellow United States Marine, have attempted to do in these pages.

In part this thesis is an answer to Frank's question: "I wonder how other men have faced war?"

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Frontispiece

And there amid the baleful glimmers of the storm, below the dark disorder of the clouds that extend and unfurl over the earth like evil spirits, they seem to see a great livid plain unrolled, which to their seeing is made of mud and water, while figures appear and fast fix themselves to the surface of it, all blinded and borne down with filth, like the dreadful castaways of shipwreck. And it seems to them that these are soldiers.

The streaming plain, seamed and seared with long parallel canals and scooped into water-holes, is an immensity, and these castaways who strive to exhume themselves from it are legion. But the thirty million slaves, hurled upon one another in the mud of war by guilt and error, uplift their human faces and reveal at last a bourgeoning Will. The future is in the hands of these slaves, and it is clearly certain that the alliance to be cemented some day by those whose number and whose misery alike are infinite will transform the world.

-- Under Fire, by Henri Barbusse.

INTRODUCTION

The artist, whether he was novelist, poet, painter or essayist, was caught in the maelstrom of violence and destruction that was World War I. Conscription was employed in most nations participating in the War and the artist, with his accurate, discerning eye and his sensitivity, was destined to report the War as he actually saw it unfold before him. A great part of the creative activity these artists engaged in was an analysis and reportage of the years from 1914 to 1918. Before the Armistice had been signed on November 11, 1918, Henri Barbusse had published his indictment of war, Le Feu, in 1917. The novel was awarded the Prix Goncourt for that year. Barbusse's work was the beginning of a stream of war books, poems, dramas and essays that was to come in the nineteen twenties and the nineteen thirties of the Twentieth Century. Practically every participant nation in the War was represented in this tremendous output of war literature.

Such Americans of literary talents as John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Paul Green, Robert E. Sherwood, Laurence Stallings, E. E. Cummings and Archibald MacLeish served at the front and later expressed themselves regarding war.

In Germany Ernst Toller, George Grosz, Ernst Junger, Rudolf Binding, Erich Maria Remarque and Rainer maria Rilke had served in the armies of the German Reich.

England was represented by Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Herbert Read, Edmund Blunden, Charles Hamilton Sorley, Isaac Rosenberg, Ford Madox Ford, Robert nichols, Robert Cedric Sherriff, Richard Aldington, Usbert Sitwell and A. A. Milne.

Much of the literature to come out of the war years was autobiographical in tone and subject matter. The high-point of production of the war memoirs was reached in the closing years of the nineteen twenties. A literal flood of personal remembrances was placed on the open market. The output moved one reviewer to remark that "war diaries have become so much more numerous, appearing in battalions instead of platoons."¹

It is the war memoirs of Graves, Sassoon, Read, Blunden, Sorley and Rosenberg that this thesis is to be concerned with.

Previous approaches to an analysis or examination of this war literature have been concerned with the works of an individual as a part of the larger whole or an individual analysis of a work as an entity in itself.

1. _____, New Statesman, December 7, 1929, Vol. 34, supplement xvi.

Nowhere, to my knowledge, has anyone attempted a synthesis of several works to determine a picturization of war and the reactions to war of the individuals concerned and the effects of war on those individuals.

It is the intention of this thesis to use the autobiographical records of six English poets, Graves, Read, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Sorley and Blunden, to gain an overall view of war and its effects on the individual as reflected by personal writings. In the main, the thesis will be a genetic study of the experiences in the war, the reactions to the war and the final residues of both the experience and reaction that is to be found in autobiographical records of these English poets. It is my intention, genetically speaking, to follow the lives of the poets from their induction into the Army and the reasons for joining; into combat; their relations with the Home Front; their revulsions to war, both psychological and literary, with a section devoted to Sassoon's lone mutiny in 1917; an examination of the new ideas and concepts gained by the men concerning, particularly, death, the enemy and comradeship and, finally, a comparison of the techniques, methods and impressions to be gained from each man's autobiography.

I have selected the works of these English poets because I feel that their reactions, writings and concepts

are typical of many hundreds of thousands of men who saw and experienced much the same as they. Secondly, I feel that for the most part, the works to be examined are of a high literary quality and offer the reader a variety and, at the same time, a similarity of approach and concept. Two of the group, Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Hamilton Sorley, were killed in the War and their accounts are, in the main, records. The men who survived were given the opportunity to recollect in perspective their experiences and thus another aspect of war writing, that of nearness and standing apart from the experience, is apparent. Thirdly, the Englishmen lived in a society which was not concerned with military aggrandizement, in which conscription was not the practice in time of peace, and the men were thrown into an entirely new way of life which was a stark and violent contrast to the life they had known before the year 1914. Their reactions, therefore, are not tempered by previous military duty and their outlook is, primarily, that of the citizen-soldier who volunteered to defend his country in time of war.

Robert Graves was born July 26, 1895. He was educated in several public schools, finally finishing his pre-college work at Charterhouse in the months just prior to the outbreak of war. Scheduled to go to Oxford in the Autumn of 1914, Graves joined the Royal Welch

Fusiliers a few days after war was declared. He saw action in France with the Fusiliers, serving three tours of duty in the trenches. While still in service Graves married Nancy Nicholson. During the war years Graves published several volumes of poetry. In 1916, he published Goliath and David, the date is not exact, and Over the Brazier. In the following year Fairies and Fusiliers appeared.

Siegfried Sassoon, the oldest of the six men, was born September 8, 1886. He led a leisurely pre-war life and devoted himself to hunting, riding and raising horses and dogs. He received his education at Marlborough and at Clare College, Cambridge. He too joined the Royal Welch, fought with the regiment in France and received the Military Cross. He revolted against the war in 1917 and was sent to a hospital in Scotland. He returned to France via Ireland and Palestine and was wounded before the Armistice and sent home.

Having published poetry, anonymously and privately before the war, Sassoon continued his writing during the War, publishing six volumes of poems from 1915 to 1918. His best known works are The Old Huntsman, 1917, and Counter-Attack, 1918.

Born December 4, 1893, in Yorkshire, Herbert Read was sent to a Spartan-like school in Halifax at the age of nine. He worked as a bank clerk in Leeds and attended

the University of Leeds. Volunteering for the army in 1915, Read was commissioned that same year and saw action in France and Belgium from 1915 to 1918. He was promoted to the rank of captain in 1917.

Read's initial venture into the published field of poetry, Songs of Chaos, appeared in 1915. His other publishing efforts were confined to periodicals which included his poems and prose articles. In 1919 he collected his war poems under the title Naked Warriors.

Edmund Charles Blunden, the youngest of the group, was born on November 1, 1896, at Yalding, on the River medway, in Kent. He was educated at Cleave's Grammar School at Yalding and Christ's Hospital in London. He left the latter place to enter the army in 1916. He served as an officer with the Royal Sussex Regiment in France and Belgium, received the military Cross and was gassed.

In 1914 Blunden's first volume of poems, Poems, 1913 and 1914, was published. In 1916, The Barn, The Harbingers, and Three Poems were published.

Isaac Rosenberg was born on November 25, 1890. His family was not well-to-do and at the age of fourteen he left school to work for a living. He showed talent in art and interested friends sent him to the Slade School. Always a sickly man, Rosenberg was forced to leave school for reasons of poor health. He went to South

Africa in 1914 and returned to join the army in 1915. He was killed in action April 1, 1918.

In 1912, at the age of twenty-two, Rosenberg published his first volume of poetry, Night and Day. Youth, another volume of poems, was brought out in 1915. A play, Moses, appeared the following year.

Charles Hamilton Sorley, another promising poet killed in action, was born in May, 1895. He studied at Marlborough College and University College, Oxford. In 1914, Sorley went to Germany to continue his studies. He returned to England after the declaration of war, was commissioned in the Suffolk Regiment. On October 13, 1915, Captain Sorley was killed leading his company in an attack at Hulluch.

So far as I have been able to learn, Sorley did not live to see any of his poetry in print. His one posthumous collection of poems, Marlborough and Other Poems, was published in 1916. The book reached at least four editions.

The autobiographical records of these men were published in the years that followed World War I. Sorley's record is contained solely in his Letters, edited by his father, Professor W. R. Sorley, and published in 1919.

Read's short prose sketches of his war experiences appeared in 1916 under the title Fables from Flanders.

In 1919 he wrote In Retreat, but the essay was not published until 1925. In 1930 Ambush, another short war piece, was published. These two pieces were included in Read's autobiography The Innocent Eye, published in the United States in 1947 and which had appeared in England, under the title Annals of Innocence and Experience, in 1940.

In 1918 Blunden wrote and had printed a short prose work, autobiographical in nature, called De Bello Germanico. It was re-printed in 1930. Blunden's autobiography, Undertones of War, was published in 1928.

Graves's immensely popular Good-Bye to All That, his autobiography, appeared in England in 1929.

Sassoon has written of his pre-war and war experiences in three volumes. The first volume, Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, published anonymously, appeared in 1928. Two years later Sassoon continued the adventures of George Sherston, his fictional name for himself, in memoirs of an Infantry Officer. In 1936, the trilogy was completed with Sherston's Progress.

Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding edited Rosenberg's letters, added a few prose pieces and his complete poetical output and issued the work in 1937 under the title The Complete Works. Sassoon wrote the foreword.

CHAPTER I: A NEW LIFE

The abrupt change from civilian life to the life of a soldier comes often as a shock to the man who has had little or no previous military experience. Once in the army he must needs adapt himself to the rigors of the new way of life and, more or less, assimilate himself into the new society. As his service career lengthens he comes to realize that other changes in his personality will be brought about both by the military system and the shock of his experiences in combat. Usually he will find, after some months of service life, and, especially, after he has been sent into action, that his former relations with his civilian friends and his family are no more.

In this chapter I will attempt to trace the careers of the six English poets from the day they enlisted, (none of the men were conscripted) the reasons they joined the army, their reactions to early army life and the relations with their fellow soldiers, their reactions to combat and, lastly, after service in the trenches, their reactions to the home front and the near war hysteria that was so prevalent in England throughout the war.

Part 1: Enlistment

In his autobiography, The Innocent Eye, Read reflects on his reasons for joining the Officers' Training Camp before the outbreak of war. Thirty odd years of reflection leads Read to say that few men who joined the O.T.C. in those days were of serious motive. "War," he says, "was considered as a very remote contingency."¹ The O.T.C. was regarded as an "open-air club," and was Read's one physical endeavor in an otherwise sedentary life.

Like Robert Graves, he was of pacifistic leanings. Unlike Graves, as will be seen, Read was somewhat politically sophisticated. He dabbled in both the Conservative and Socialist Parties before the war. He describes himself, politically speaking, as a pacifist, and he regarded the war "as a conflict between rival imperial powers."² He hoped, in vain certainly, that the working classes, working in concerted action, would halt the war.

However politically minded Read may have been, his

1. Read, Herbert, The Innocent Eye, Henry Holt and Company, N. Y., 1947, p. 149.

2. Ibid., p. 150.

conception of war as was to be fought in the first world-wide conflict of the Twentieth Century was indeed naive.

I could not claim to be a pacifist. It must be remembered that in 1914 our conception of war was completely unreal . . . and from a general diffusion of Kiplingesque sentiments, we managed to infuse into war a decided element of adventurous romance. War still appealed to the imagination.³

While Read here appears to be speaking for his generation, one gets the impression he is attempting to condone his personal views and apologize for his subsequent actions. He employs his private opinions in an analysis of the general actions of his fellow countrymen.

Read does, however, particularize his personal decision for enlisting in the army. Admitting his romanticism regarding war, Read at the same time admits his uncertainty about his future. For him, at the University of Leeds, no career was envisioned or marked out. "The war meant a decision," he writes, "a crystallization of vague projects."⁴ As Read points out later, the war was something of a challenge.

Read's statements generally describe the situation and decisions of the six poets to be considered in this

3. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 150

4. Ibid., p. 150

study. All were of an artistic nature, possessed creative abilities. All were, in some degree, interested in some aspect of a literary or cultural life, if not in a career. When war came in the summer their indecisions and procrastinations relating to the future came to a stopping place. The war suddenly offered them a definite opportunity to apply themselves to a specific program. It need hardly be said that the 'program' was completely at odds with what had been their life to date and with their individual personalities. Then, too, the 'program' was to prove fatal to Charles Hamilton Sorley and Isaac Rosenberg.

Certainly these men do not form an isolated example of men going to war, for such was the case of many men in the early days of World War II. The war came to be looked upon as a crystallization of action, a means to an end for a few years. Read's looking at war as a means of reaching a decision, however temporary it might be in duration, plus the somewhat romantic illusions already referred to, can well be applied to anyone who was of an artistic nature, to anyone who cultivated literary ambitions.

Too often, but certainly true, it has been pointed out that the artist is at odds with the modern industrial world. His liking for the humanities, his interest in the arts which somehow seems inevitably to lead to

a consequent indecision as to a life career, does not fit into the modern conception of specialization.

Within six months after the start of the war, Read received a commission in January, 1915. He was posted to a battalion of the Green Howards then stationed and in training in Dorset. He stopped off in London, his first visit to the capital, and made arrangements to have a collection of his poems published. The volume, entitled Songs of Chaos, and totaling thirty-seven pages, was published at his expense in 1915. The sales were low. After six months, twenty-two copies had been sold.

Robert Graves is candid in admitting that the war came at an opportune moment. He was to go down to Oxford in the autumn and, since a short war was expected, he writes, "I thought it might last long enough to delay my going to Oxford . . . which I dreaded."⁵ He waited only a few days before volunteering. He began his army training with the Royal Welch Fusiliers on August 11.

His strong personal feelings against military service seem to have been buried under the pervading, infiltrating war spirit then present in England, a fever pitch so aptly and tellingly described in Alan Monkhouse's

5. Graves, Robert, Good-Bye To All That, Blue Ribbon Books, N. Y., 1930, p. 88. Henceforth this book will be referred to as Good-Bye.

The Conquering Hero. Graves believed the statesmen and newspapers that proclaimed that England was drawn into a war that had not been thought of and for which England was woefully unprepared. He forgot his pacifism for the moment. "I was ready to believe the worst of the Germans."⁶ When the newspapers told of the violation of Belgian neutrality they had a ready-to-believe convert in Graves. It was not possible, he thought, "that newspapers and statesmen could lie."⁷

Siegfried Sassoon, living in the country, never took life too seriously. When he dropped out of Cambridge, no one censured him or suggested he might do better by continuing his education. The idea of a career never seemed to suggest itself to his seemingly contented life.

The mental condition of an active young man who asks nothing more of life than twelve hundred a year . . . is perhaps not easy to defend. It looks rather paltry on paper. That . . . was my own mental condition, and I saw nothing strange in it.⁸

As talk of war became more prevalent and penetrated slowly but surely the ranks of the country gentlemen in the midlands, Sassoon, interested only in sporting activities, refused to take such talk seriously. To him

6. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 88.

7. Ibid., p. 88

8. Sassoon, Siegfried, Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man, The Literary Guild of America, N. Y., 1937, p. 265. Henceforth this book will be referred to as fox-hunting Man.

"war had become an impossibility."⁹

The activities of the Socialists were the lone discordant note in his life at this time. It was not possible that Socialists opposed conscription with a passion equal to that of the fox-hunting squires who "supported the convention of soldiering."¹⁰

Although he doesn't say so specifically, it was in all probability this very 'convention of soldiering' that led Sassoon to enlist almost immediately. As far as he and his particular in-group looked at the situation, enlisting was simply the thing to do and the spirit of adventure should always appeal to the finer sensibilities of a gentleman. Also, it must not be forgotten that the war offered the country gentleman something to do with his life.

So it was that the young country gentleman-poet, at times a much more dutiful member of his class than he cares to admit, began his service life as a trooper in the Yeomanry. After his induction, Sassoon took with him his favorite horse and the animal served as a link with his leisurely past.

Isaac Rosenberg, who stands out in sharp contrast to his fellow soldiers in many respects, but like them

9. Sassoon, Fox-Hunting Man, p. 270.

10. Ibid., p. 270.

in the fact that he too enlisted, was bitter about the condition of the world in general prior to his entrance into the ranks of the British army. In a letter to Edward Marsh dated August 8, 1914, and from Capetown, South Africa, he wrote:

Know that I despise war and hate war, and hope that the Kaiser William will have his bottom smacked . . . Are we going to have Tennyson's 'Battle in the Air', and the nations deluging the nations with blood from the air? Now is the time to go on an exploring expedition to the North Pole.¹¹

In another letter to Marsh, written in 1915, probably in the early summer after his return from South Africa, the somewhat nationalistic feelings of Graves and Read are entirely absent in Rosenberg. Sick, dispirited and bitter with his lot, he briefly explained, "First I think of enlisting and trying to get my head blown off, then of getting some manual labor to do - anything."¹² He thought he was not physically fit to do much of anything.

The service found him fit enough and his indecision was at an end in a few weeks when he became a member of the Bantam Suffolks -- Rosenberg was small in stature. His rank was that of private soldier.

11. Rosenberg, Isaac, Complete Works, edited by Gordon Bottomley and Denys Harding, Chatto and Windus, London, 1937, p. 297. Henceforth this book will be referred to as Works.

12. Ibid., p. 299.

Once in England, after his brief imprisonment by the German government, Charles Hamilton Sorley wasted little time in enlisting. He was keenly aware of the broader aspects of the situation in England as it existed in the month of August. In a letter dated August 10, he declared that "out of twelve million eventual combatants there aren't twelve who really want it."¹³ He complained that guarding telegraph wires in a Territorial Camp was "so unpicturesque and unheroic."¹⁴ He was eager enough for duty that would demand the utmost in him. He berates himself for not having joined the regulars and, to him, at least, there was nothing "poetical" about his present status.

Sorley was sent to an O.T.C. unit engaged in a training program which was to last a month before he was sent on regular duty. After completing his officer's course he was assigned to the Seventh Service Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment.

It is obvious that the war coming to England in August was the deciding factor in the lives of these poets. Edmund Blunden must be excepted from the company for the present, for his autobiography does not cover pre-war life.

13. Sorley, Charles Hamilton, Letters, Cambridge University Press, London, 1919, p. 221.

14. Ibid., p. 221.

Secondly, the comparison of reasons for enlisting in the army, as illustrated above, are only a few of the many and complicated reasons why men, and youthful men, in particular, go off to war.

Part II: In The Army

As a young subaltern in the famed Royal Welch Fusiliers, Graves found it difficult indeed to adjust himself to the rigid training and the sacrosanct military traditions of his regiment. However, the military leaders have a way of imposing their will on the greenest recruit or fledgling officer candidate, and as Graves laconically puts it, "I soon learned to conform."¹⁵ Graves was being ironic but his words express the very core of military philosophy. As a matter of interest to the reader, the Naval Officers Guidebook, an official publication of the United States Navy, pointedly refers the young officer to the inviolable maxim of the regular or reserve service, "One must learn to conform."

Once commissioned a second lieutenant, Graves was assigned the unpopular duty of guarding German prisoners in England. He wanted to be abroad fighting with the

15. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 91

BEF and guarding prisoners "seemed an unheroic part to be playing in the war."¹⁶

Because Graves insisted on not taking seriously many of the military traditions, he was constantly at odds with both his superiors and his fellow officers. The officers decided that he was not a sportsman because he did not mind if he missed the Grand National. He was accused of not being military because his uniform was not from an accepted tailor.

The history and spotless past record of the Fusiliers was too much for the young officer to combat. He rather proudly recounts the record of the Royal Welch and his esprit de corps was equal to that of any spirited officer or man. Such pride and awareness of tradition was carried to extremes in 1914 and Graves and his fellow junior officers were tediously exposed to the discipline of the Welch.

We were warned that while serving with a line battalion we were none of us to expect to be recommended for orders or decorations.¹⁷

Such medals as were awarded by the Royal Army were reserved for the regular officers. Sassoon was one of the very few reserve officers to receive a citation and

16. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 96

17. Ibid., p. 114

a medal while serving as a temporary line officer in the trenches with the Royal Welch.

The life of a trooper in the Yeomanry became boring to Sassoon. He came to look upon home-service as a prison full of discomforts. His morale reached a low ebb. Such a mental state on the part of Sassoon is quite typical of the man who entered the service of his country expecting action and adventure. His "faith and fire" were gone. To bolster his ego and his thoughts concerning the war he took a commission in what he styles the Royal Flintshire Fusiliers. The Flintshires was the semi-fictional name of the Royal Welch.

Graves and Sassoon, for the most part, are concerned mainly with Western front combat and, since they do not make use of personal letters to any great extent, their observations on the initial effect of military service on the personality of the individual soldier are rather brief and little developed.

Sorley, on the other hand, was voluble in his letters home, as are most recruits in wartime, and his views on England and the Army are more plentiful and varied than those of Graves and Sassoon.

When the war was scarcely a week old he was writing to his friend A. H. Hutchinson:

I hope you . . . are still maintaining your equanimity. Mine has gone. I have succumbed. I am almost convinced that war

is right and the tales told of German barbarism are true. . . . Remember that the stud. phil. is now a 2nd Lieut.¹⁸

While he is sarcastic of the individual who surrenders himself to the larger issues at hand, Sorley is correct in his implications of what it means to be an officer. For to be an efficient and valuable officer, one must realize that one must bow to authority and carry out the orders as given. If any of these men disagreed with the system or the situation at the moment, as all did more than once in their service careers, it will be seen that with the exception of Sassoon's lone mutiny, they never embarked on a course different from the one ordered. The citizen-soldier may stage a passive, but vocal, revolt in his letters or in conversation but, for the majority of men in any war, such actions are the limit of any contemplated independent action.

Many of Sorley's early letters reflect this private disagreement. In a letter, dated September 20, 1914, he wrote:

I've resigned all claims to my person. I no longer am my own property. I am not a living creature, but a temporary second lieutenant: i.e., in the eyes of those who I am doomed to live for in the next few months, I am a kind of extemporized being called into life a month ago and fading at the end of the war.¹⁹

18. Sorley, Letters, pp. 224-225.

19. Ibid., p. 226.

By December he was of the opinion that never again would he "exercise any authority over anyone again after this war."²⁰ He came to find his companions "tolerable, even very nice, if one takes the trouble to . . . get to know them."²¹

Six months later, a few days before his draft went overseas to the trenches, Sorley had changed considerably and he wrote to Arthur Watts:

We profess no interest in our work; our going has lost all glamour in adjournment; a weary acceptance of the tyranny of discipline.²²

Herbert Read considers his early provincialism an important factor in his early difficulties with the service. "My incredible naivete . . . was at fault."²³ He was a regular reader of New Age, a liberal political periodical. One day he left a copy in the officers' mess. The senior subaltern found it and demanded to know who left it behind. Read remained silent.

I had learned my lesson, and in the future read the new Age in the privacy of my tent or cubicle.²⁴

20. Sorley, Letters, p. 249.

21. Ibid., p. 250.

22. Ibid., p. 265.

23. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 152.

24. Ibid., p. 152.

Read later explains that as long as he was in England he confined his reading in the mess to the Tatler and the Bystander and similar periodicals "which were the only literary recreations of the majority of His Majesty's officers."²⁵

In his relations with his fellow soldiers Read found "the officers more difficult than the men."²⁶ The officers in the majority were recent graduates from Sandhurst and the public schools and they struck Read as

snobbish and intolerant, and as trying to import into the army the prefectorial spirit which they had acquired at school.²⁷

Under the stress of combat these relations were to change for the better as will be seen later in the thesis. The fact which impressed Read more forcibly than any other was his being "thrown against all sorts and conditions of men."²⁸

A private soldier in the ranks, Rosenberg had even a more difficult time attaining any sort of amiable adjustment and assimilation to service life. Many of his letters are familiar to any officer who has censored mail for any length of time.

25. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 152.

26. Ibid., p. 153.

27. Ibid., p. 153.

28. Ibid., p. 152.

only the very close and cramped life of the barracks-soldier could give one the low opinion of his fellow man that Rosenberg acquired after a few weeks with his regiment. Late in 1915 he wrote to Edward marsh of his new surroundings.

I have just joined the Bantaams and am down here amongst a horrible rabble -- Falstaff's scarecrows were nothing to these. Three out of every four have been scavengers the fourth is a ticket of leave.²⁹

The lot of the enlisted man and his unattractive duties are the subjects of the letters that follow. In an undated letter again in late 1915 he was complaining of sore feet. He apparently did not get along with his officers and calls one in particular "a little impudent schoolboy pup"³⁰ who had taken a dislike to him.

In still another letter written about this same time, Rosenberg complains of the work and the marching.

I think when my hands and feet get better Ill enjoy it. Nobody thinks of helping you -- I mean those who could.³¹

In all fairness to Rosenberg, it must be said that the enlisted man in wartime does have to endure many hardships which officers, because of their rank, avoid. Such a discrepancy is always more apparent in the rear

29. Rosenberg, Works, p. 300.

30. Ibid., p. 301.

31. Ibid., p. 302.

areas or in camps or home bases. Once in combat the life of an officer and the life of an enlisted man is much the same. Then there is the consideration that Rosenberg was almost in constant ill-health and the rugged and strenuous life of the infantryman is at times terribly difficult to bear. Another point to remember, also in his favor, is that he was an artist and poet and the crudities of his companions and the sometimes harsh ways of the military system would tend to rankle a sensitive person.

But, at the same time, one must know that Rosenberg was not alone in finding it difficult to accommodate himself to an entirely new life. Some of Rosenberg's complaints, however justly they may be made, remind the writer of Karl Shapiro's poems written while he was in training and had been in service only a few months. I refer specifically to the poems "Scyros" and "Conscription Camp".³² Both men seem to regard the army an affront to their dignity and their intelligence, which, indeed, it was frequently, and both men seem to ignore the fact that their respective nations were at war and the particular problems of the individual poet or artist were relatively unimportant in the light of four years of constant warfare.

32. Shapiro, Karl Jay, Person Place and Thing, Reynal & Hitchcock, N. Y., 1942, p. 3 and p. 24.

This is not to say that Rosenberg was not a good soldier. He certainly must have possessed a great amount of physical stamina and a tremendous reserve of moral courage to endure two years of trench warfare while suffering from what was apparently a beginning case of tuberculosis.

Rosenberg carried his private revolt and personal revulsion to service life to his friends at home. On March 11, 1916, he wrote to Lascelles Abercrombie:

Believe me the army is the most detestable invention on this earth and nobody but a private in the army knows what it is to be a slave.³³

The poet's bitterness is more apparent than ever in a letter written to Ezra Pound, then in London, and European representative for Poetry magazine.

I think the world has been terribly damaged by certain poets . . . being sacrificed in this stupid business.³⁴

I have not been able to determine whether this letter was written before Rosenberg entered the army or whether it was written after he had been in service for some weeks. The letter is unfinished and bears only the general date "1915".

The peculiarities of the military caste and the difficulties of the non-professional, civilian-soldiers

33. Rosenberg, Works, p. 347

34. Ibid., p. 346.

in adjusting themselves to the discipline and regulations of such a rigid caste are evident in the above discussion. Graves' exuberant personality is at grips with the Royal Welch traditions; Sassoon admitting that his "faith and fire" were gone and that training was dull; Sorley was voluble, sarcastic and progressively more cynical as the time to go overseas approached; Read's modification of his reading habits and his personal difficulties with the snobbish officers; and Rosenberg's utter dislike of the whole process coupled with his physical ills.

As varied as each man's reactions were, they are fundamentally alike in one important respect. That is that the service forced the artist into a terrific readjustment. All of the men are aware of this readjustment and all come to realize that their pre-war conceptions of life and their society have been jolted considerably. The new ideas became more pronounced when the men went into combat.

Part III: Into Combat

It is extremely difficult, when reading the autobiographies, to determine exactly in what battles these men took part. Only occasionally is any specific place mentioned and one must be well versed in the military operations of World War I to form a coherent picture of

the service careers of these men. It can be stated that Graves, Blunden, Read and Sassoon, in particular, were writing of places and events only too familiar to men who had been there and they didn't deem it necessary to carefully trace individual battles and campaigns.

Graves and Sorley arrived in France in the Spring of 1915 and both took part in the Battle of Loos which lasted from September 23 to October 19, 1915. Sorley was killed in a local engagement in this battle on October 1, having seen service in the trenches to the north around Ploegsteert.

Blunden was in France by the Spring of 1916 and had his baptism of fire near Festubert village. He later took part in the battles around Ypres and Passchendaele.

In 1916 the BEF launched their carefully prepared offensive on the Somme. Both Graves and Sassoon were in this battle with the Royal Welch, Graves being wounded in the early days of the offensive. Sassoon was one of the eighty men of his battalion who emerged unscathed.

Graves returned for a brief tour of duty in the trenches in 1917 before he collapsed and was invalided home, never to return to combat. Sassoon, out of the hospital in February, 1917, rejoined his regiment and took part in the Battle of Arras which opened April 9th. Along the Scarpe River Sassoon was wounded and sent home.

Herbert Read was at St. Quentin the morning the German armies launched their offensive in march, 1918. Read, and thousands of his fellow soldiers, were in the retreat of the Fifth Army that month.

The German threat had recalled Sassoon from Palestine in 1913 and by July of that year he was in the lines again. He was wounded for the second time shortly after and went home for the last time.

I was not able to learn anything of Rosenberg's service career other than the fact that he served faithfully, despite illness and a weak constitution, until his death April 1, 1918, a time when the Germans were driving south to Paris and west to the Channel ports.

Sassoon went overseas as a replacement officer to the Royal Welch Fusiliers in mid-1915. Before going into the trenches the replacements were stationed at a rest camp behind the lines. Sassoon comments on his state of mind while awaiting orders for front-line duty:

For anyone who allowed himself to think things over; the only way out of it was to try to feel secretly heroic, and to look back on the old life as pointless and trivial . . . There could be no turning back now; one had to do as one was told. In an emotional mood I could glory in the idea of the supreme sacrifice.³⁵

not until a friend is killed does Sassoon come up to the realities of warfare. "I was angry with the war,"³⁶

35. Sassoon, Fox-Hunting Man, p. 352.

36. Ibid., p. 368

he writes, regarding his first experience with casualties. He expends his anger by constant patrolling and once while out in No Man's Land he is given to thinking about his own fate:

I had more or less made up my mind to die; the idea made things easier . . . There didn't seem to be anything else to be done.³⁷

Sassoon's pessimism is familiar to any infantryman. Such fatalistic feelings are, however, of a peculiar nature. War pessimism, which is almost always mixed with feelings of invincibility, is best described by saying that the fighting man has an overpowering desire to meet come what may and to get the matter over with in the shortest possible time.

Edmund Blunden arrived at the Base Depot at Etaples -- "Eat Apples" to the Tommies -- in 1916 and immediately went through a short training course. An N.C.O. instructor was killed on the grenade course. Wearied with camp life and shocked by the instructor's death, Blunden entertained a "wish to be sent quickly to the lines."³⁸ He admits he came to France fearful of what was in store for him. But like Sassoon, he wanted to get on with the war. Early in his days in France Sassoon

37. Sassoon, Fox-Hunting Man, p. 373.

38. Blunden, Edmund, Undertones of War, Cobden-Sanderson, London, 1930, p. 5. Henceforth this book will be referred to as Undertones.

was complaining of his rear echelon duty. He remarked, "I was seeing the War as a looker-on, it seemed."³⁹

Blunden was one of the first officer replacements to the Royal Sussex Regiment then in the trenches around Festubert village. He was assigned a platoon and his "trench education," as he calls this period, begins.

His lessons were not long in coming. A few days after his arrival he wrote in his diary of the "prevailing sense of the endlessness of the war."⁴⁰ To Blunden it was useless to conceive of an ending.

One must bear in mind that Blunden was merely a platoon commander and a rifle company officer. He was concerned only with his forty-odd men and the short stretch of terrain he occupied. Company officers have little or no conception of the long range planning of the Chiefs of Staff. To the man carrying a pack and a rifle such plans were too far removed to be of practical value. Modern warfare has become so complicated that the individual man has only the haziest idea of the happenings in a battle area. The possibility of endless warfare seemed quite logical to the infantryman. The specific objectives to be attacked, the redoubts, the trenches, the hills, the bunkers, never seemed to diminish

39. Sassoon, Fox-Hunting Man, p. 352.

40. Blunden, Undertones, p. 13.

and the conception of distance narrowed to a matter of yards or even feet.

Blunden seemed, at all times, to be preoccupied with the "wonders of Nature" in the battle sector. The poet's touch is seen in the following description:

. . . on the blue and lulling mist of evening, proper to the nightengale, the sheep-bell and falling waters, the strangest phenomena of fire inflicted themselves.⁴¹

Not alone is Blunden in his awareness of nature and its destruction in battles. Sassoon injects descriptions of natural beauty into his narrative and wonders at the havoc reaped by artillery fire. When behind the lines one day he stopped to look at the scene about him.

. . . there were bluebells and cowslips and anemones, and here and there a wild-cherry tree in blossom.⁴²

The two officers had written poetry before their crossing to France and the devastation of the landscape naturally affected their observing eyes.

Blunden's sector was a quiet one and not long after his battalion was ordered to a more active zone of combat. From the very beginning he berates the staff officers and map-strategists for their ignorance of the problems of the men in the front lines. When a mined area erupts

41. Blunden, Undertones, p. 14.

42. Sassoon, Fox-Hunting Man, p. 374.

and sixty men are lost Blunden says: "I began to understand the drift of the war. Guinchy was a slaughter-yard."⁴³

His interest in Nature is apparent again when he speaks of "the deep red poppies, blue and white corn-flowers . . . [that] thronged the way to destruction."⁴⁴ The overall horror of the sector never relented and "want of sleep soon impressed me."⁴⁵

It is unfortunate for this analysis of the effects of war on these men, that the written records left by Sorley and Rosenberg are their letters written from the camps and from the trenches in France. Such letters were censored and a soldier's thoughts and expressions are curbed to a great degree. One cannot relate the full truth of war when he knows that the censor's shears will be applied to any offending passage. So far was this censorship carried on in the BEF that Rosenberg was forbidden to send any poems home to his family or publisher in London.

Then, too, any perspective on the issues involved while in war, any perspective on the fate of the individual is well-nigh impossible. Although letters or diaries lend a sense of immediacy to the struggle, the

43. Blunden, Undertones, p. 37.

44. Ibid., p. 41.

45. Ibid., p. 18.

over-all picture gained from such documents is likely to be heavily personal and the writer, or recorder, being close to his subject, is likely to become involved in self-pity. The value of a perspective on war will be discussed in the final section of this paper.

The Suffolk Regiment, of which Sorley was a member, joined the 12th Division in the trenches in June, 1915. Before going up to the lines Sorley wrote home:

And in four-score hours we will pull
our braces and fight. . . I shall
march hotly to the firing-line, by
turn critic, actor, hero, coward and
soldier of fortune: perhaps even
for a moment Christian, humble, with
'Thy will be done.'⁴⁶

Sorley's idea of 'Thy will be done' is much in tune with Sassoon's more specific, more realistic "one had to do as one was told." Both men seem to regard themselves as mere cogs in a great machine and regardless of what direction they may wish to gravitate, they are powerless to do so while in the meshes of forces far greater than human striving.

Like many soldiers, aware of the press descriptions of war, the correspondents' fiery versions of combat, Sorley played down his part in trench warfare to an almost incredible degree. However, one must remember

46. Sorley, Letters, p. 270.

that the censor was ever watchful. In a letter dated June 16, 1915, Sorley referred to his lot as "an unromantic sitting still 100 yards from the Boche."⁴⁷ He elaborated:

This is not Hell as I hoped, but Limbo Lake with green growths on the water, full of minnows . . . I began to scent romance in night-patrolling.⁴⁸

Writing to his sister, Miss Jean Sorley, he continued to depreciate his part in the war:

But what I have seen of the War so far is this. A cornfield: you think it an ordinary cornfield till you see a long narrow trench at either end: in front of each trench is barbed wire among the corn . . . you would never guess that both of these trenches were filled with foes.⁴⁹

He complained that "we have taken roots like trees".⁵⁰ The idea of immobility is always prevalent among the trench soldiers. As pointed out above, the limited objectives of a platoon or company made for the thinking that was Sorley's. The Rhine, or even more fantastic, Berlin, as the ultimate objectives of the English troops, seemed so distant that the mere thought of them seemed rather silly.

Sorley refused to excite his mother and he wrote her of his adventures:

During the night a little excitement is provided by patrolling the enemy's wire.

47. Sorley, Letters, p. 274.

48. Ibid., p. 275.

49. Ibid., p. 277.

50. Ibid., p. 280.

Our chief enemy is nettles and mosquitoes.
All patrols -- English and German --
are much adverse to the death and glory
principle.⁵¹

Censorship regulations, as formulated by the BEF, are mentioned, directly or indirectly, by Rosenberg more than once in his letters and one must realize his lacking a good opportunity to express himself regarding trench life and trench warfare. An undated letter, written sometime in 1916, to Marsh says in part:

You know we musn't say very much now
we're over the water but as soon as I
get a chance Ill try and give you some
idea of whats happening to me.⁵²

Probably because of his delicate health, his weakened physical condition, throughout most of the war Rosenberg was concerned with his personal privations and his health. Apparently the bad living conditions of the soldier impressed him far more than did the presence of the enemy.

We've had vile weather, and I've been
wet through for four days and nights.
I lost all my socks . . . I've been
in trouble . . . with bad heels; you
can't have the slightest conception
of what such an apparently trivial
thing means.⁵³

The subject matter of some of Rosenberg's poems written in the trenches reflect his seeming obsession

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51. Sorley, Letters, p. 283.
52. Rosenberg, Works, p. 309.
53. Ibid., p. 370.

with combat living conditions. One such poem sent home before his death was called "The Immortals".

I killed and killed with slaughter mad;
I killed till all my strength was gone.
And still they rose to torture me
For Devils only die for fun.
I used to think the Devil hid
In women's smiles and wine's carouse.
I called him Satan, Balzebub.
But now I call him dirty louse.⁵⁴

The reader might be led to believe that such concern with lice is ludicrous to the extreme. Such is not the case. It is true that the other men in this paper do not seem to mind their lot, other than the lack of sleep. However, Rosenberg, the only enlisted man among them, would naturally turn to what bothered him at the moment, and what concerned the trench soldier, or the infantryman of World War II was his food, his clothes, the weather, while at times the enemy and the shell-fire were of secondary importance.

When marching into the Cambrian trenches in 1915, Graves describes the reactions of the men.

We were all intensely excited at the noise and flashes of the guns in the distance. . . The men . . . began singing . . . they sang Welsh hymns, each man taking a part. The Welsh always sang when they were a bit frightened and pretending that they were not; it kept them steady.⁵⁵

54. Rosenberg, Works, p. 78.

55. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 120.

Graves is matter of fact in his narrative of meeting the trenches for the first time and, like the good officer and soldier that he was, he spends some time detailing the defenses, the trench system, the equipment carried and the fire power of his company. In the midst of this very military talk he observes the men about him and his own state of mind:

We had no picture of what the trenches would be like, and were not far off the state of mind in which one young soldier . . . called out very excitedly . . . "Hie, mate, where's the battler I want to do my bit."⁵⁶

The men, especially the old hands at trench duty, talked of getting a "cushy", a slight wound that would send the soldier to the hospital. Actually such talk is common and usually in deadly seriousness.

After a few weeks in combat Graves has reached the pessimistic stage of the old soldier.

The division will fight all right but without any enthusiasm . . . I am sure no one will mind smashing up over and over again the divisions that are used to being smashed up.⁵⁷

Any member of a first-class fighting organization at times had the idea that his particular outfit was the only one higher headquarters depended on to win the war. As time went on, he became convinced that the staffs were deliberately annihilating his outfit.

56. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 122.

57. Ibid., pp. 140-141.

Read strikes something of a new note in his autobiography, The Innocent Eye, when speaking of his first experiences in combat.

In my own case I was to discover, with a sense of self-confidence wholly new to me, that I could endure the experience of war, even at its worst. This is far from claiming that I was fearless: the first days in the trenches, the first bombardment or attack, was a draining sickness of the spirit.⁵⁸

Read admits what every soldier experiences when first in combat when he speaks of the "draining sickness of the spirit." But after the initial shock, most soldiers are amazed at what the human body can endure and in time he becomes toughened to the arduousness of the life of the infantryman.

What romantic thoughts Read may have entertained as to the fighting of a war were quickly dispelled.

One week in the trenches was sufficient to strip war of its lingering traces of romance: there was nothing, in the Ypres Salient where I first went into the line, but primitive filth, lice, boredom and death. Even the novelty of the experience, in such circumstances, is no palliative.⁵⁹

Once, in a black and bitter mood, while serving in the trenches around Bethune, Graves commented, "There was no

58. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 154.

59. Ibid., p. 155.

excitement left in patrolling, no horror in the continual experience of death."⁶⁰

As tough as Read was after a few weeks in the line, there were many aspects of war which he could not overcome.

What I found most difficult to accustom myself to, even after months at the front, was the sight of human blood, and the stiff horror of a human corpse. That one does eventually get used to such things does not necessarily mean a deadening of the sensibility; but when an experience is repeated often enough, one has to rationalize it -- in other words, make one's philosophy fit the facts.⁶¹

Read, by his use of self-service psychological treatment, managed to retain his sanity, even his sense of perspective. When his reactions are compared with Isaac Rosenberg, one will notice that Rosenberg did not, or at least his letters fail to show any evidence, of making his philosophy "fit the facts." Although skirting close to emotional conclusions, the author is forced to state that Rosenberg seemed to glory more than somewhat in a wallow of self-pity. This is not altogether fair because Rosenberg did not live to rewrite, as it were, his experiences, but the evidence at hand can have no other conclusion.

After his baptism of fire, Sassoon felt as if he were being offered up for sacrifice and had more or less dedicated himself to death. Blunden, openly expressing his

60. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 208.

61. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 154.

apprehensions, wanted to be at the front, not for reasons of glory, but because such duty appealed to him far more than did the dreariness of rear echelon training. Once in combat the war seemed endless and he was distressed with the destruction of the nature scene. Unknown to Blunden at the time, there was in the opposing ranks another writer who was concerned over the destruction of the landscape. He was Ernst Junger. After the Battle of the Somme, Junger wrote at some length describing the utter destruction and carnage wrought by the fighting:

Once seen, the landscape is an unforgettable one . . . There was literally not a bush or a tiniest blade of grass to be seen. Every hand's-breadth of ground had been churned again and again.

And yet the strangest thing of all was not the horror of the landscape in itself, but the fact that these scenes, such as the world had never known before, were fashioned by men who intended them to be a decisive end to the war.⁶²

Sorley felt that he was merely carrying out the command 'They will be done' and he appeared small in the midst of the great movements of modern warfare. In his letters home he tended to minimize his personal dangers and difficulties.

At first, Graves was eager to be at the front, but after his first tour of duty, he was pessimistic about his future and that of his regiment.

62. Junger, Ernst, Storm of Steel, translated by Basil Creighton, Chatto & Windus, London, 1929, pp. 108-9.

Part IV: The Soldier vs. the Home-Front

The phrase "home-front" is indeed ironical when viewed in the light that for the combat veteran, the soldier returning on leave or being shipped to a hospital for recuperation from wounds, the way of life he knew at home, before his entrance into the service, is another front, as surely as were the trenches the fighting front. The soldier finds himself at odds with the people who have remained at home. He finds himself in the position of fighting the people who are his friends, the workers who produce the implements of war and the politicians and national leaders who direct the struggle. The civilian, collectively speaking, may well be sincere in his beliefs that a war is just; that the enemy is a representation of evil and must be destroyed; that the men at the front actually believe the patriotic slogans that are mouthed in speeches and are seen in the placards and posters placed in public places. The returning soldier finds such patriotism, if such a term may be used to describe such emotions on the part of the civilian population, truly idiotic and out of step with the issues involved which seem to him much more important, i. e., the heavy losses, the suffering, the poorly directed campaigns and faulty equipment and arm-chair strategy of non-combatants.

War, as was waged in the struggles known as the World Wars, engulf both civilian populations and the soldier as well. In the last war the non-combatants suffered heavily in air-raids and at times the losses were, in proportion, higher than were suffered on the battle fronts. Such was not the case, as an overall picture, in England in World War I. The German government did, at times, send their zeppelins over London and its environs and even into the midlands. Damage was done and casualties were incurred. But, for the most part, the raids were incidental when placed along side the tremendous losses experienced by the BEF on the Somme.

To the civilian such air raids were magnified into great attacks and they came to be looked upon as equal to the experiences of the soldier in the trenches. In modern war, especially the nations which have not been invaded by the enemy, every citizen wants, to the point of desperation, to have considered himself doing battle with the enemy. He must not allow himself to feel he has been left out of the picture of war. Enlarging upon the actual event, the citizen comes to think he has seen just as much as the combat veteran while, at the same time, he has retained his fervent war spirit. He cannot understand why the returning soldier does not share his enthusiasm for battle.

At first, if the soldier is prone to talk of his experiences, the civilian will listen, if somewhat impatiently. If the soldier is mute, as many are, then the civilian must relate his adventures. The soldier comes to discover that the battle at home, in the mind of the home-front, is much more severe. Emotionally responsive to the hysteria that war instills in the minds of men, the civilians are merely expressing a desire to prove that they will never surrender and that they are capable of bearing up under the most strenuous of circumstances.

The total picture, for the veteran, is one of unreality, a dream-like existence in which all men are shouting for vengeance and singing the hymns of praise to sacrifice to country and honor.

To their way of thinking, the non-combatants find it incredible to believe that the soldier is not solely motivated by heroism when he charges across a stretch of terrain covered by artillery and machine-gun fire. The soldier cannot possibly explain to them that such is not the case. He remains painfully silent.

Sassoon, in a poem called "Remorse," contrasts the feelings of the home-front with the actual experiences of the men at the front and ends by saying

"O hell!"

He thought -- "there's things in war one dare
not tell

poor father sitting safe at home, who
reads
of dying heroes and their deathless deeds."⁶³

As if such thoughts were not enough, the soldier is subjected to the tales of their elders who have sons in service. natural parental pride dictates that the older people share their sons' adventures. Already mute in the face of such blatant talk, the soldier now must listen anew to unbelievable bursts of patriotism. Again Sassoon, bitter to the point of breaking under the strain, talks of these people in his poetry. A short poem, "The Fathers," is poignantly accurate in its describing the men at their club.

Snug at the club two fathers sat,
Gross, goggle-eyed, and full of chat.
One of them said: "My eldest lad
Writes cheery letters from Bagdad.
But Arthur's getting all the fun
At Arras with his nine-inch gun."

"Yes," wheezed the other, "that's the luck!
My boy's quite broken-hearted, stuck
In England training all this year.
Still, if there's truth in what we hear,
The Huns intend to ask for more
Before they bolt across the Rhine."
I watched them toddle through the door--
These impotent old friends of mine.⁶⁴

Coming back to England on sick leave, Sassoon wondered about the situation, the soldier versus the home-front.

63. Sassoon, Siegfried, Counter-Attack, E. P. Dutton & Company, N. Y., 1918, p. 57.

64. Ibid., p. 64.

"People weren't the same or else I had changed."⁶⁵

The statement contains an element of truth for both sides. People at home had changed and were exhibiting the emotions, the anxieties, that only war can bring to the surface. The soldier, once a member of this society, too, had changed. The important difference is that the soldier had changed while in uniform and in combat.

Robert Graves, home after the Loos offensive, in which the BEF suffered 60,400 overall casualties, in 1915, strikes a different note in his observations on the home-front.

London seemed unreal itself . . . The general . . . ignorance about the war was remarkable. . . The universal catchword was "Business as Usual." . . . They knew that I had been in the trenches, but were not interested. They began telling me of the air-raids, of bombs dropped only three streets off.⁶⁶

When Graves attempts to relate his adventures their general observation was "Oh, but that was in France."⁶⁷

Invalided home, Graves reaches the conclusion that England was an entirely different country than he had known.

65. Sassoon, Siegfried, Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, The Literary Guild of America, N. Y., 1937, p. 126. Henceforth this book will be referred to as Infantry Officer.

66. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 176.

67. Ibid., p. 176.

[The soldier] could not understand the war madness that ran about everywhere looking for a pseudo-military outlet. Everyone talked in a foreign language.⁶⁸

more analytical, less bitter, and, as a consequence, more valid in his observations, Read explains the plight of the soldier. At the same time, although he does not say so specifically, he explains the plight of the civilian as well.

but between us was a dark screen or horror and violation: the knowledge of the reality of war. Across that screen I could not communicate. Nor could any of my friends who had had the same experience. We could only stand on one side, like exiles in a strange country.⁶⁹

Living as "exiles in a strange country" is the theme of Ernest Hemingway's "In Another Country." This short story tellingly presents the veterans in their role of exiles but bound together, as a group, by the commonness, or perhaps uncommonness, of their experiences.

Blunden's contacts with the home-front were no more fortunate or pleasant than were those of Graves and Sassoon. He speaks of the "crystallization of dull civilian hatred on the basis of 'the last drop of blood.'"⁷⁰ He was shocked to think that the Londoners entertained the notion that their city was the sole battle-front

68. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 271.

69. Read, Innocent Eye, pp. 161-162.

70. Blunden, Undertones, p. 230.

because of the air-raids and the ration system then being enforced.

It seemed to the battered veteran, weary beyond human endurance, that the non-combatants were determined to go on forever in their insistence that the war never end. Sassoon, after several months at home, was of the opinion, as were his comrades, that "the front line was the only place where one could get away from the war."⁷¹

Both Sorley and Sassoon pointed accusing fingers at the press correspondents and blamed them, pointblank, for pounding the war drums. Their dispatches sent to the newspapers at home, and usually written from a safe distance from the lines, and taken from staff officers' briefs and communiques, presented a distorted picture. The public demanded news and the press obliged. However, to write of the war in such glowing terms and with such disregard for the facts, was considered blasphemous. Sassoon is scathing in his condemnation of such practices in his poem "Fight To A Finish."

The boys came back. Bands played and flags
were flying,
And Yellow-Pressmen thronged the sunlit
street
To cheer the soldiers who'd refrained from
dying,
And hear the music of returning feet.

71. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 243.

"Of all the thrills and ardours War has
brought,
This moment is the finest." (So they
thought.)⁷²

This same spirit is apparent in "Editorial Impressions":

He seemed so certain "all was going well,"
As he discussed the glorious time he'd had
While visiting the trenches.

"One can tell
You've gathered big impressions!" grinned
the lad

Who'd been severely wounded in the back
in some wiped-out impossible Attack.

"Impressions? Yes, most vivid! I am
writing

A little book called Europe on the Rack,
Based on notes made while witnessing the
fighting.

I hope I've caught the feeling of 'the Line,'
And the amazing spirit of the troops.

And through it all I felt that splendour
shine

Which makes us win."

The soldier sipped his wine.

"Ah, yes, but it's the Press that leads the
way!"⁷³

When Rosenberg promised his friend Trevellyan that he
had one or two "shilling shockers" to get off his chest
about the war, he was thinking of the perverted picture
of war the correspondents had written and he meant to
right the misapprehensions. He wanted to publish a
pamphlet of his war poems to "give some new aspects to
people at home."⁷⁴

72. Sassoon, Counter-Attack, p. 29.

73. Ibid., p. 30

74. Rosenberg, Works, p. 358.

The youthful Sorley came to grips with the home-front early in his service life. The ebullient second lieutenant flatly declared his feelings in no uncertain terms.

England -- I am sick of the sound of the word. In training to fight for England, I am training to fight for the deliberate hypocrisy, that terrible middle-class slot of outlook and appalling 'imaginative indolence' that has marked us from generation to generation.⁷⁵

It is of little wonder that the soldiers would come to regard that great bulwark of civilian patriotism, the Church, as a whole, with a certain amount of irreligious fervor. This institution preaches the Tenth Commandment on the one hand and then, in the days of wrath and battle, finds solace in exhorting the men to defend the right. Edmund Blunden, in the frontispiece of Undertones of War, quotes from the Articles of the Church of England a passage stating that, "It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars."⁷⁶ The irony is self-explanatory and the gentle Blunden offers no other comment.

Graves had renounced all ties with the Church at the age of sixteen. He was a confirmed atheist while still in the public schools. As a consequence his views on the value of prayer and the teachings of the Bible are not in accordance with the general view of the civilian

75. Sorley, Letters, p. 240.

76. Blunden, Undertones, frontispiece.

population who seem to think that the men in the lines crave the word of God. Many men, it is true, do remain conventionally religious. However, the slogan so popular in World War II, "There are no atheists in foxholes," is not borne out by the evidence at hand. Graves maintains that perhaps one man in a hundred displayed any "religious feeling of even the crudest kind."⁷⁷ He flays the chaplains attached to the BEF, particularly of the Anglican faith, but he does admire, no little bit, the Catholic chaplains who betook themselves to places of danger and thereby gained the respect of the troops.

Read elaborates on the faith of the men in the lines by saying that faith was of many kinds. He admits that sometimes the faith was Christian. He qualifies:

. . . more often it was just fatalistic, and by fatalism I mean a resolve to live in peace of mind, in possession of mind, despite any physical environment. Such was the faith, or philosophy, that belonged to a great body of men, and was held in very different degrees of intellectuality and passion. In some -- they were the majority -- it was a reversion to a primitive state of belief. Every bullet has its billet. What's the use of worryin'?"⁷⁸

Employing something of the same ironical techniques as Blunden, Sassoon takes a swing at the Church of England who insisted that the men were defending the sacredness

77. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 230.

78. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 170.

of that institution. In the poem "They" Sassoon assumes his bisophric robes and says,

The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back
"They will not be the same; for they'll have
fought
"In a just cause: they lead the last attack
"On Anti-Christ; their comrade's blood has
bought
"New right to breed an honourable race . . ."79

Although Graves may accuse the chaplains of being inactive in the trenches, apparently the men of the Church were indefatigable in their efforts to bolster morale in hospitals and convalescent homes. Sassoon comments that any man who claimed that he had killed one of the enemy soldiers in the battle of the Somme "would have been patted on the back by a bishop in a hospital ward."80

The inspirational sermons on patriotism, the glorification of the will to do battle, was not looked upon with a too favorable eye by the men in the BEF. Graves pungently states that any talk of patriotism was "rejected as fit only for civilians."81 The green replacement who talked glibly of doing his share "would soon be told to cut it out."82

79. Sassoon, Siegfried, The Old Huntsman, E. P. Dutton & Company, N. Y., 1918, p. 35. Henceforth this book will be referred to as Huntsman.

80. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 92.

81. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 229

82. Ibid., p. 230.

Removed from the actual fields of battle, it is completely understandable that the civilians in England should, under the onslaught of patriotic slogans, mass meetings, speeches, letters to the editor in which mothers proclaimed their willingness to sacrifice their only son, sermons, correspondents' dispatches minus the dateline, retain an entirely and unrealistic understanding of what the soldier experienced and more important, a misunderstanding of his motives and his outlook on the war. As Sorley explained to his mother, in a letter dated 10 July 1915:

I hate the growing tendency to think that every man drops overboard his individuality between Folkstone and Boulogne, and becomes on landing either 'Tommy' with a character like a nice big fighting pet bear and an incurable yearning and whining for mouth-organs and cheap cigarettes: or the Young Officer with a face like a hero and a silly habit of giggling in the face of death.⁸³

The civilian population could very likely, and did, encourage such myths. Their communication lines were broken. A party-line system between the civilian, the soldier and the information bureau, as represented by the press and government, was desperately needed. Lacking this three-way exchange, the non-combatant took at face value what he read in the newspapers and listened to in speeches and sermons. Surfeited with war, he could, for

83. Sorley, Letters, p. 284.

the most part, choose to ignore any promptings by the veterans. He could only express boredom and disinterest when confronted with the facts. One's ideas on an issue as all-engrossing as war can become cannot be changed in a trice by mere words.

Buffeted about on the waters of such emotions, the veteran, in turn, became dispirited and bitter. He saw only too well that his words of caution and debunking were of no effect. Sassoon sums up the situation of the soldier versus the home-front when he says:

I began to feel that it was my privilege to be bitter about my war experiences; and my attitude toward civilians implied that they couldn't understand and that it was no earthly use trying to explain things to them.⁸⁴

84. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 236.

CHAPTER II: "REACTION SETS IN"

The poets have now been in the army for sometime, have experienced action in France or Belgium and have had their sensitive perceptions and keen observing eye and minds somewhat battered and dulled by what they have seen. For men who are not military by nature, not trained to battle, it is only a question of time before a definite reaction and revulsion sets in. It is the purpose of this chapter to point to the definite reactions of these men, both of a psychological nature and of a literary nature, exemplified by a slackening of the creative impulse. The final section is devoted to Sassoon's lone mutiny against the war, a mutiny that was in the nature of compensation for what he felt to be wrong and a situation that demanded an independent action on his part. Sassoon's mutiny is a special case in the sense that few men openly revolt and, at the same time, a typical case in that few soldiers do not express their revulsion, their reaction to the violence and destruction of war, in some form or other.

Part I: Revulsion

Rather than continue to trace the line of action these men were to see and experience, it is suffice to say that after a few weeks, or perhaps months in some cases, a definite anti-war reaction set in. The continued onslaught of war, the hammering away at the mind and brain, the wounding and the death, the shelling, the seeming uselessness and endlessness of it all, combined to change whatever opinions or ideas each man may have possessed regarding the war. Every particle of romanticism, of eagerness, of a sense of newness, was battered and the man himself began to question the war and following the question came the reaction, the ultimate deflating of war, the condemnation and the denouncement of slaughter and death on such a scale as to be impossible to conceive. The Second World War, with its rapidly moving campaigns, its almost complete lack of stalemate, necessarily did not produce as complete denial of war as was germinated in the minds of the men who fought in the trenches of the war from 1914 to 1918.

At Mesnil, after some weeks in France, Blunden, looked about him, noted the scene and wrote:

The foolish persistence of ruins that
ought to have fallen but stood grimacing,
and the dark day, chilled my spirit.
Let us stop this war, and walk along to

Beaucourt before the leaves fall. I
smell autumn again.¹

Again, later, in the Ypres Salient, along the Yser Canal, the terrible truth comes home to Blunden. A British soldier shoots himself and Blunden commented, "Perhaps he divined the devilish truth beyond this peaceful veil."²

Hating war, now, with a consuming but still gentle passion, Blunden poetically took refuge in the natural surroundings and wrote the lines, while in the Salient,

Triumph! How strange, how strong had
triumph come
On weary hate of foul and endless war
When from its grey graveclothes awoke anew
The summer day. Among the tumbled wreck
Of fascinated lines and mounds the light
was peering,
Half-smiling upon us, and our new found
pride.³

On December 31, 1917, at precisely midnight, as the new year approached, Blunden stood on a point overlooking the Ypres battlefield.

It was bitterly cold and the deep snow all round lay frozen. We drank healths, and stared out across the snowy miles to the line of casual flares . . . Their writing on the night was as the earliest scribbling of children, meaningless; they answered none of the questions with

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1. Blunden, Undertones, p. 91.
 2. Ibid., p. 164.
 3. Ibid., from the poem "Third Ypres", page not numbered.

which a watcher's eyes were painfully wide.⁴

Veteran that he was, Blunden admits to naivete when considering the utter depths of horror war can bring about. In the final chapter of Undertones of War he takes leave of his battalion and returns to England. His thoughts were with the men left behind in the trenches.

I might have known the war by this time, but I was still too young to know its depth of ironic cruelty . . . No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier's coat.⁵

The sector Blunden departed from was to be engulfed in the German offensive in the Spring of 1918.

Herbert Read comments to some length on the reaction to continued warfare. It is worth quoting in its entirety:

But after weeks, and then months, and finally years of such a life, with no moral sanction to support the spirit, no fervor or enthusiasm, no hatred of the enemy, the whole business became fantastically unreal, a monstrous nightmare from which one could not awake. It should be remembered that a modern army is largely made up of young civilians without political experience, and the propaganda which is designed to inspire them (and perhaps does inspire them for a time) soon wears thin against the crude realities of war. If only, I used to think, we poor bloody soldiers could walk out, walk home, and leave the politicians

4. Blunden, Undertones, p. 263.

5. Ibid., p. 273.

to make the best of a quarrel which we did not understand and which had no interest for us! But though these were the sentiments of nine men out of ten, there was no possibility of proceeding to action.⁶

Read goes further in his reaction than does Blunden, Considering his total war experiences, his total reaction, Read bitterly writes, "We had acquired only one new quality: exhaustion."⁷ To his way of thinking the civilian-soldiers emerged from the war as they had entered it, dazed and indifferent but now exhausted. The Innocent Eye does not bear this statement out. Read admits that he was changed and considerably so. He seems to be involved in the political unawareness of the civilian-soldier when he speaks as he does above.

With the possible exception of his friend, Wilfred Owen, no one writer-soldier was more volatile and fiery in his denunciation and reaction to war, than was Siegfried Sassoon. But the young poet sought solace in the midst of his disgust.

I was losing my belief in the War, and I longed for mental acquiescence -- to be like young Patterson . . . steadfastly believing that he was in the Field Artillery to make the world a better place. I had believed like that, once upon a time, but now the only prayer which seemed worth uttering was

6. Read, Innocent Eye, pp. 155-156.

7. Ibid., p. 161.

Omar khayyam's:

For all the Sin wherewith the
face of Man
is blackened -- man's forgiveness
give -- and take.⁸

Sassoon, before his lone mutiny, before he tossed his military Cross into the River Mersey, worried over his losing his "belief in the War." Previous to Sassoon's finding solace in khayyam's lines, he had lived with Graves at a depot in England. The two men, both back home after trench duty, naturally discussed their life in France. Sassoon admits that regarding the war he "wanted to have fine feelings about it."⁹ When Sassoon first joined the Royal Welch he met Graves, then something of an old soldier with combat duty behind him. Graves showed his friend some poems he had written about the war and Sassoon commented that "war should not written about in a realistic way."¹⁰

Sassoon was to change, however, although he remained somewhat confused.

. . . my mind was in a muddle; the War
was too big an event for one man to
stand alone in. All I knew was that
I'd lost my faith in it . . .¹¹

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8. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 169.
 9. Ibid., p. 148.
 10. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 213.
 11. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 195.

His disenchantment, as it were, gained momentum in the trenches and after his company had relieved troops at night he wrote:

I . . . was entering once again the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon. And I saw it then, as I see it now -- a dreadful place, a place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented.¹²

Sassoon's reaction to the idea of death and destruction was now almost complete. There remained his mutiny but, as we shall see, he could not withstand the forces at play in the world and in the end he surrendered and returned to the fray.

Charles Sorley, killed early in the war, had little chance, really, to reach a mature realization of what war can do to the individual. This is not to say that Sorley was mute. Quite the contrary. Voluble, as only young soldiers can be (he was twenty years old when he was killed) after a few weeks or months in service, Sorley expressed himself freely on war. In his letters, written while still in the first stages of training, when the soldier is jocular, whether he be genuinely jocular or not, Sorley referred to the war as "the best joke of the century"¹³. The killing, as he later

12. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 209.

13. Sorley, Letters, p. 225.

explained to his friend, A. E. Hutchinson, was not the joke but "both sides" equally ridiculous alliances with I.H.S."¹⁴

Sorley's forced and somewhat cynical hardness is typical, I think, of the soldier who, although he is really enmeshed in the war, exhibits an altogether different front to those whom he thinks will be interested in his well-being. Such antics are nothing more than an attention-getting device.

The thoughtful, although youthful, subaltern in His Majesty's Service lost his humor and by December, 1914, he could write home:

The war is a chasm in time. I do wish that all journalists etc., who say that war is an ennobling purge etc., etc., could be muzzled. . . All the illusions about the splendor of war will, I hope, be gone after the war.¹⁵

While training at Aldershot in March, 1915, he angrily wrote his mother that he wished people would stop referring to the war as a just war. "There is no such thing," he wrote, "as a just war. What we are doing is casting out Satan by Satan."¹⁶

The work and hardships of the soldier at the front did not prohibit Rosenberg from keeping in touch with literary

14. Sorley, Letters, p. 225.

15. Ibid., p. 253.

16. Ibid., pp. 261-2.

events in England and writing to fellow poets and playwrights. It is through the medium of one of his letters to R. C. Trevelyan that we catch a glimpse of his feelings about the war.

I rec you play and Annual. . . The play is gorgeous . . . and for this I thank you indeed. The ideas are exactly what we all think out here -- and the court martial of the kaiser and kings etc might have been copied from one of ours.¹⁷

In one of his last letters written on March 8, 1918, Rosenberg told of plans for a play that had been in his mind for over a year.

If I am lucky, and come off undamaged, I mean to put all my innermost experiences into the 'Unicorn'. I want it to symbolize the war and all the devastating forces let loose by an ambitious and unscrupulous will.¹⁸

Good-Bye To All That, Graves's record of his war, strangely enough, contains few, if indeed any, specific condemnations, any reactions against war. Not that the work is pro-war. Such an idea is ludicrous. The entire work is a condemnation, but single references are lacking.

Turning to Graves's poetry that was published in the war, we find that the situation is much different. In the volume called Fairies and Fusiliers, dedicated to The Royal Welch Fusiliers, every poem dealing with the

17. Rosenberg, Works, pp. 355-356.

18. Ibid., p. 379.

war is anti-war in spirit and bitingly humorous in its tale of degradation.

In a poem called "The Next War" Graves is speaking to the children who will play at war in the fields and haylofts.

Another War soon gets begun,
A dirtier, more glorious one;
Then, boys, you'll have to play, all in;
It's the cruellest team will win.
So hold your nose against the stink
And never stop too long to think.
Wars don't change except in name;
The next one must go just the same,
And new foul tricks unguessed before
Will win and justify this War.
Kaisers and Czars will strut the stage
Once more with pomp and greed and rage;
Courtly ministers will stop
At home and fight to the last drop;
By the million men will die
In some new horrible agony;¹⁹

In this same volume, in the poem, "To Lucasta On Going To The Wars -- For The Fourth Time", Graves continues in this same vein of bitterness. But here is revealed, as it is in Good-Bye To All That, Graves's qualities that made him, actually, the soldier that he was. never losing a marvelous sense of humor, Graves, disgusted as he was, never once quite "stooped" to the levels of vitriolic denunciation as did, say, his great friend, Sassoon.

19. Graves, Robert, Fairies and Fusiliers, William Heinemann, London, 1917, pp. 51-2. Henceforth this book will be referred to as Fairies.

In part, the lines are:

It doesn't matter what's the cause,
What wrong they say we're righting,
A curse for treaties, bonds and laws,
When we're to do the fighting!
And since we lads are proud and true,
What else remains to do?

Let statesmen bluster, bark and bray
And so decide who started
This bloody war, and who's to pay.
But he must be stout-hearted,
Must sit and stake with quiet breath,
Playing at cards with Death.

It is not anger, no, nor fear--
Lucasta he's a Fusilier,
And his pride keeps him here.²⁰

It was perhaps only natural that these men, with little or no conception of what lay ahead of them, with no idea of the complete and total ruthlessness of modern war, should react in terms of bitterness. Most men in the early days of the First World War still thought of warfare in terms of the Boer War or in terms of chivalric combat. When they came to learn the bitter truth, war came to be looked upon with greater or lesser degrees of horror, depending upon the personality of the individual. Eventually each man came to question the very existence of the war and asked why they were in the trenches engaged in killing and involved in large-scale destruction.

There was Blunden with his mute questioning on New Year's Eve, 1917; Read thought of walking out and going

20. Graves, Fairies, pp. 5-6.

home, escaping from this "monstrous nightmare"; Sassoon lost his faith in the war, although admitting that he wanted to have fine feelings about it; to the youthful, voluble Sorley there was little that was ennobling about the slaughter in the trenches; Rosenberg contemplated a court-martial of the heads of states and Graves, cognizant of the helplessness of the individual, said that only pride kept him in the line.

Part II: The Creative Impulse Slackens

Before the outbreak of war in August, 1914, these men were all interested in creative activity, particularly poetry. It is no wonder then that each man should be distressed at the effects of the war on his creative abilities. Despite the struggles involved the men had published poems and, in Read's case, articles of a political nature while Rosenberg had a short play printed.

It was not only the reading habits of these men that suffered. Any creative activity was hampered by lack of time, proper facilities and surroundings, and unsympathetic regard by their fellow soldiers. Many times, in order to write a poem or jot down a few lines, the individual man must needs slip away and write on the sly, as it were. Is it any wonder, then, the poets complain of shrinking vocabularies, loss of interest? Is it any wonder that

many of the poems published by Graves and Sassoon should seem to be lacking in depth and perspective? No poet, no writer-artist, can write at his best with the realization that the odds favor condemnation of his efforts. Should any creative impulse triumph over the difficulties, is it not all the more incredible that some of the poems written at this time should reach a very high literary level?

Blunden was thinking of the future when he wrote:

. . . they lift from their lips of their
extremest age a terrible complaint and
courage, in phrases sounding to the
bystanders like 'the drums and trappings'
of a mad dream.²¹

After a transfer from the front-line battalion to brigade headquarters Blunden complains that his memory "relaxes and chronology withers away."²²

Sorley, who was the student of the group, a young man who, in ordinary times, might well have been something of a brilliant Ph.D., complained in a letter to Hutchinsohn, written from the training camp at Shorncliffe, that he felt the lack "of any of my usual interests pretty sharply."²³ He claimed there was nothing to read all day and one did his thinking on the sly.

21. Blunden, Undertones, p. 46.

22. Ibid., p. 188.

23. Sorley, Letters, p. 229.

. . . and as for writing poetry in the officers' mess -- it's almost as bold a thing as that act of God's writing those naughty words over the wall at Belshazzar's Feast.²⁴

He did pick up his reading habits again in the Spring and discovered D. H. Lawrence "who knows how to write."²⁵

In half-seriousness Sorley proposed that the nations of the world go back to the days of Wellington and the professional soldiers and let them do the fighting while the scholar and student remain at home in order that they "might not let out the torch of learning."²⁶

From Shorncliffe Sorley sent a poem to a friend. It was entitled "Whom Therefore We Ignorantly Worship."

He wrote:

Enclosed the poem . . . I think it should get a prize for being the first poem written since August 4th that isn't patriotic.²⁷

Read, while on his way to join his regiment in January, 1915, had stopped off at London and made arrangements to have published a volume of his poems, Songs of Chaos. In this book of verse, as in his other poems, he wrote in the imagist style. The impact of the war modified his

24. Sorley, Letters, p. 229.

25. Ibid., p. 255.

26. Ibid., p. 257.

27. Sorley, Charles Hamilton, Marlborough and Other Poems, 4th Edition, Cambridge University Press, 1919, edited by Professor W. R. Sorley, pp. 130-131.

writing and it was described by Read, himself, as "sentimental realism."²⁸ "My experience," he wrote, "that is to say, was modifying my literary values, and not altogether for the good."²⁹

Graves never mentions the effect of the war on his creative ability or impulses per se. However, in the meeting with Sassoon already recounted, Graves looked with sardonic amusement upon Sassoon's idealistic poems. Graves believes that war should be written about in a realistic manner. He explains the condition of Sassoon:

This was before Siegfried had been in the trenches. I told him in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style.³⁰

In one instance in his autobiography Graves is explaining the effect of trench-warfare on the individual. While he is presenting the physiological and psychological factors involved, Graves expounds a valid analysis of the slackening of the creative abilities of the writer-artists who were in the combat-zones and who underwent almost identical experiences.

I had been in the trenches for five months and was getting past my prime. For the first three weeks an officer was not much good . . . he did not know his way about . . . between three weeks and four months he was at his

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28. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 158.
29. Ibid., pp. 158-59.
30. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 214.

best . . . Then he began gradually to decline in usefulness as neurasthenia developed in him. At six months he was still more or less all right; but by nine or ten months, unless he had a few weeks' rest . . . he began to be a drag on the other members of the company. After a year or fifteen months he was often worse than useless. Officers had a less laborious but a more nervous time than the men. There were proportionately twice as many neurasthenic cases among officers as among men . . . The unfortunates were the officers who had two years or more continuous trench service. In many cases they became dipsomaniacs.³¹

Few men could be expected to write under such conditions. And still fewer could turn out work that was accepted by both the critics and the individuals themselves. Again it should be remembered that, with the exception of Rosenberg, the men studied here were officers and in all cases, at one time or another, company commanders which placed them in a position to be personally responsible for something like two hundred men and officers.

A man suffering from what Graves terms neurasthenia is not apt to extricate himself for some time from the emotional strains and situations excited by combat duty.

If a man does write, even under the conditions described previously, he must find a sympathetic ear and companionship from one who labors under much the same difficulties. Ideas of another and criticisms from another serve to

31. Graves, Good-Bye, pp. 209-210.

stir one into answering and counter-criticism. This give-and-take exchange of concepts and ideas is the fertile ground in which literary pieces germinate and are born. Looking back on the years 1914-1918, it was indeed fortunate that Graves and Sassoon met, talked and wrote together. For, undoubtedly, it was this meeting of minds and mating of interests that saved both men from possible literary suicide.

Before he met Graves Sassoon had written of his mental health.

Trench life was an existence saturated by the external senses; and although our actions were domineered over by military discipline, our animal instincts were always uppermost.³²

And later, after some months in France, he wrote:

Ever since my existence became precarious I had realized how little I'd used my brain in peace time, and now I was always trying to keep my mind from stagnation. But it wasn't easy to think one's own thoughts while on active service.³³

Sassoon acknowledges the great value attached to his knowing and living with Graves. Such a fortunate meeting was probably even more invaluable than he realized then or later.

my encounter with David Cromlech . . . had reawakened my relish for liveliness and originality . . . Was it a mistake, I wondered, to try and keep intelligence

32. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 46.

33. Ibid., p. 108.

alive when I could no longer call my
life my own:34

Cromlech, Sassoon's name for Graves, was described
by his friend as "an ideal companion, although his
opinions were often disconcerting."35

Rosenberg was often concerned with his difficulties
in writing poetry. As an enlisted man he had less time
to himself but, as Graves was careful to state, he was
freer from nervous strain. Rosenberg had formulated
plans for several long poems, along with his dramas,
but he published very little during the war. At his
own expense he managed to have published two pamphlets,
Youth, printed by I. Narodiczky in London and 18 pages
in length and Moses, a play, printed by the Paragon
Printing Works in London and 26 pages in length.

Poetry, the American "little" magazine devoted to
work by new poets, published a poem called "Break of
day in the trenches" and a short piece "Marching",
reprinted from Moses, in December, 1916, under the
general title "Trench Poems."36

Rosenberg wrote to Edward Marsh, on April 2, 1918,
saying that he had seen no poetry for some time and
that his vocabulary was "impoverished and bare."37

34. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 108.

35. Ibid., p. 106.

36. Rosenberg, Works, p. 385.

37. Ibid., p. 322.

Earlier he had sent two poems to Lascelles Abercrombie, an elder poet he much admired, and attached the postscript explaining he had written the poems in "the utmost distress of mind, or perhaps because of it."³⁸

He was more loquacious with his sister, Sonia Cohen:

If I was taciturn in England I am 10 times so here; our struggle to express ourselves is a fearful joke. However our wants are simple, our cash is scarce, and our time is precious.³⁹

The purpose of this section is to show that the poets were jousting, and desperately so, with forces greater than themselves, forces that tended to slacken or gag entirely their literary output. Perhaps the significant fact here is that, despite the odds against them, every one of the men managed, at one time or another, to have published, either in book form, in periodicals, or in newspapers, some of their poems. In so many words, Sassoon, Graves, Blunden, Read, Rosenberg and Sorley kept at their craft in spite of themselves and in defiance of the tremendous handicaps restricting the soldier-artist in war.

But, obviously, their output was meager indeed. Of the six men, possibly only Sassoon's war poems and one

38. Rosenberg, Works, p. 347.

39. Ibid., p. 352.

or two of Graves' will survive the ravages of time and the critics. Rosenberg and Sorley, both of great promise, showed little more than that very promise in the few poems they had published during their lifetimes and posthumously. Read, Blunden, Graves and Sassoon matured, as poets, during post-World War I years, later to be looked upon as between-the-wars' years.

Of significance equal to their strivings during the war is the fact that their autobiographical writings, that is, writings of those who survived, did not appear until the late 'twenties or even later. A clearing of the air, a standing away from the actual carnage and looking at it with an observing but more analytical eye was absolutely necessary if their work was to be of value, if their work was to gain validity. The field-glasses must be turned about and the figures focused in small images. The images would remain as sharp as were they in the years of war but the view would be simplified by the absence of much of the emotional background and the setting would be stripped of superfluous furniture.

A perspective that extended beyond the combat man's limited vision and range was now theirs. Without such a perspective, any work is, perhaps, of interest but of extremely limited value.

For Blunden the perspective was to extend for ten years and it was not until 1928 that Undertones of War appeared. Graves and Sassoon brought out their memoirs in 1930. Read did not publish The Innocent Eye under one cover until 1940 although Retreat, a section of the autobiography, and one of the chapters devoted to his war experiences, appeared in 1925 under the imprint of the Hogarth Press in London.

These Englishmen were not alone in waiting to publish their war works. In the middle and late 'twenties and early 'thirties, a whole host of plays, novels and memoirs appeared having as their general theme and subject World War I. Only Henri Barbusse's L'Enfer, or Under Fire, as it is known in translation, has survived and is still admired. It was written while its author was still in service.

If a writer experienced difficulties, as did many, in writing poetry or prose during hostilities, it is logical that an armistice would not suddenly divorce the writer from his dilemma and allow him to immediately see through the haze of war and death and write as he had never before written. The handicaps known in war will linger for sometime afterwards and if the writer is faithful to his craft he comes to be aware of the fact that they are not so easily disposed of.

There is a period of waiting and this waiting is both painful and exasperating but, if the work to come is to be valuable and worthy of the term literature, the exasperations and the pains must be borne. The glib and facile accounts that tumble from the presses during a war and immediately afterwards are doomed to obscurity. To take a case in point with regards to World War II writing, it is unlikely that such novels as Shore Leave, They Dream of Home, A Walk in The Sun, The Brick Foxhole, The Monastery, The Dim View, and Casualty, although moving and stirring in part and containing some powerful passages, will survive beyond the decade. The same holds true for many of the war poems of Karl Jay Shapiro and Randall Jarrell.

Perspective, that important ingredient, is either lacking or little in evidence.

Part III: A Lone Mutiny

Earlier in this thesis I pointed out that, although many soldiers, citizen-soldiers in particular, contemplate independent actions against military authority and discipline, few men actually carry out their designs. The most celebrated case of a man revolting against serving further in the British Army was that of Siegfried Sassoon.

Sassoon was in London in the Spring of 1917 convalescing from his trench-duty. Shattered by his experiences, he found that he could not get away from the war. He lived in a kind of Limbo and he writes, "I wasn't sure whether I was awake or asleep."⁴⁰ He was troubled by his inability to get along with the civilians. On the verge of a complete nervous collapse, Sassoon goes down to the country for a rest. Living under such a strain, keenly feeling the continued loss of friends and companions in France, Sassoon became "critical and inquiring about the war."⁴¹

It is relevant to include an account of Sassoon's independent actions because of their close relationship to the civilian population, especially the pacifists, in England. It illustrates the course a soldier, such as Sassoon was at the time, might well take if influenced and guided by men who are definitely anti-militaristic in their beliefs and actions. For one of a sensitive nature, such as Sassoon possessed, the terrible toll of the war was inevitably to react upon his mind in such a way that, for him at least, revolt or mutiny was the only course open to pursue to the end.

40. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p.240.

41. Ibid., p. 241.

Sassoon had luncheon with the editor of The Unconservative Weekly, the fictional name for the Cambridge magazine. This periodical was a pacifist journal then being published in England and to which Sassoon had contributed several of his anti-war poems. The young officer regards himself as a mouthpiece for the troops in France. "It's only when one gets away from it," he wrote, "that one begins to realize how stupid and wasteful it all is."⁴²

After expressing his desire to publish a statement regarding the War, the editor sent Sassoon to a philosopher named Tyrrell, who, doubtlessly, is Bertrand Russell. The latter proposes that the poet-soldier publish the statement to the effect that the War was being unnecessarily prolonged by the Allies' refusal to state clearly and specifically their War Aims.

"I am not a CO." Sassoon carefully explained. "I am a soldier who believes that he is acting on behalf of soldiers."⁴³ The statement was published in the last week of July, 1917.⁴⁴

Graves was in England at the time. He had just been discharged from a rest-home on the Isle of Wight and was

42. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 267.

43. Ibid., p. 277.

44. The text of Sassoon's statement appears in the appendix.

in no way in the peak of mental and physical health. After reading Sassoon's statement in a newspaper clipping, he decided to intervene. Graves claims that the pacifists had urged Sassoon to publish "something red not in the style of Barbusse's Under Fire but he couldn't do it."⁴⁵ Graves was bitter about the pacifists urging his friend to such lengths.

I felt that, not being soldiers, they could not understand what it cost Siegfried emotionally.⁴⁶

Pulling a few strings, writing letters, Graves managed to persuade the military authorities to order Sassoon to appear before a medical board. He had to persuade Sassoon, in turn, to appear.

In the toils of a great mental struggle, he is asked by his colonel to dismiss the entire matter from his mind at once. Sassoon refuses. He goes to Liverpool to await developments. He receives the order to appear before a Special Medical Board. He tears up the order and goes for a walk along the banks of the Mersey River. On an impulse, more than anything else, he hurls his Military Cross into the river, the same award of which he once wrote "nobody knew how much a decoration was worth except the man who received it."⁴⁷

45. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 307.

46. Ibid., p. 309.

47. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 64.

After the medal had disappeared below the surface of the waters Sassoon describes his reactions:

Watching a big boat which was steaming along the horizon, I realized that protesting against the prolongation of the War was about as much use as shouting at the people on board that ship.⁴⁸

After the Mersey River incident, Graves visits him in Liverpool and argues his position. Agreeing with him in theory, Graves told him that it was "hopeless to offer rightness of theory to the insane,"⁴⁹ i.e., the civilian population and military authorities combined.

The two men appear before the board.

Graves had told him, according to Sassoon's version of the story, that if he refused to drop the anti-war 'business' he would be 'medically-boarded', that is sent to a hospital, and not court-martialled. Astounded at the news, for he had hoped that he would be court-martialled -- his war record was unimpeachable and the idea of an officer being put on trial would lend strength to his argument -- Sassoon agreed to appear as ordered.

After Graves had argued that Sassoon was not sane, "the irony of having to argue to these mad old men,"⁵⁰ Graves commented later, Sassoon is declared to be a

48. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 315.

49. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 311.

50. Graves, Good-bye, p. 312.

victim of shell-shock. He was sent to a convalescent home for neurasthenics at Craiglockhart, near Edinburgh. To the amusement of both, Graves was detailed as his escort.

At the same hospital, under the supervision of W.H.R. Rivers, the psychologist, was Wilfred Owen, "a quiet, round-faced little man."⁵¹

Sassoon was greatly relieved to be out of the picture of prominence. He had attempted to right things by his own methods and had failed. His actions were courageous, especially at a time when the war had reached such a critical stage. However, his convictions, however honestly arrived at, were not powerful enough to bear the counter-attack of public opinion and governmental and military authority. Graves, always the realist, had well realized that Sassoon's gesture was futile to the point of absurdity. And when he had appealed to him on his soldierly pride, a strong argument to a man who had fought in the war with such remarkable tenacity as had Sassoon, the latter found that his beliefs were shaken. Once a man had become involved, indeed immersed, in the giant and inescapable tentacles of War, he did not so easily dismiss it or escape it by a mere announcement in the daily press. Such actions were not

51. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 314.

in accord with the general opinion of the war. True, a man could, and many did, desert his post. Once apprehended, his fate was in the hands of the military courts.

One of Sassoon's temperament, one who saw beyond the daily grind of the war, one who, because of a sense of duty inherent in him, could never desert. He must needs gesture with the talents that were his. Sassoon attempted to interpret, for himself and his fellow-soldiers, the War and its waste as he saw it. Doubtlessly the mental sufferings Sassoon had endured for the months previous to his actions were responsible for his publishing the statement. As he, himself, said: "My brain was screwed up tight . . . I couldn't be free of the war."⁵² At the point of desperation, he turned to anything that would relieve his mind. He was being honest with himself. At heart he knew that he would fail.

He could not possibly hope to conquer "the callous complacence with which the majority at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share."⁵³

The hospital at Craiglockhart was not the place for a neurasthenic warrior to get away from the war. Here

52. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 240.

53. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 309.

Sassoon saw only more horror, more suffering, the equal of which the civilian populace could not imagine. The backwash of war, as these men were, is even more repulsive and harrowing than are the bombs, the barrages and the wiring parties in the trenches in Belgium and France.

After a few months at the hospital, Sassoon published "Survivors", a short poem written in October, 1917. His mounting and ever-increasing bitterness is clearly evident in the following lines:

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock
and strain
Have caused their stammering, disconnected
talk.
Of course they're "longing to go out again,"--
These boys with old, scared faces, learning
to walk,
They'll soon forget their haunted nights;
their cowed
subjection to ghosts of friends who died,--
their dreams that drip with murder; and
they'll be proud
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their
pride. . .
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken
and mad.⁵⁴

The 'survivors' were a small group, in numbers at least, who now seemed to have no ties, belonged to no group and lived alone within the civilization and society they had fought to maintain. They found it impossible to assimilate themselves into that society. Mutiny, the last resort, had proved to be a futile gesture.

54. Sassoon, Counter-Attack, p. 55.

CHAPTER III: NEW IDEAS

Perhaps the strongest impressions, or concepts, that are to be gained from war experiences, and those that are destined to last longest, are the concepts of death, comradeship and the attitude toward the enemy. In this chapter I will trace the impressions of death these men came to form after years spent in service, impressions of a form of death unknown to all before their entrance into the army, a death that came from violence. Secondly, the comradeship that is welded and formed by common experiences will be discussed and lastly, the attitudes of the Englishmen toward their designated enemy, the Germans who fought for Kaiser Wilhelm. It might be said that the English soldier, as typified by these poets, felt a closer kinship to the soldier in the German army than he did to his fellow countryman who remained at home and who accepted the stories of the atrocities committed by "The Hun." The almost unbreakable comradeship of the English soldier for one of his own kind at times was extended to include a feeling of comradeship for all soldiers, despite their fighting on opposite sides. Death, the common denominator in peace and war, was the constant companion of the soldier, whether he be German, Austrian, French or English.

Part I: Death

To date the external experiences, and the reaction to war that had set in, have been discussed and analyzed. In the preceding discussion very little, but that little bit was important, was spoken of what might be termed the intangibles of war. Concrete experiences such as these men and millions of other soldiers the world over have shared in the past thirty-odd years are common every-day events in the unfolding of a war. From these specific experiences and the reactions of the men themselves comes then the somewhat more intangible concepts, concepts which are justly pointed to as more important than say, one's reactions to combat for the first time.

Death is the soldier's constant companion. Many men in war come to vest this intangible, but very inevitable, state of affairs with human and personal qualities. In ordinary times, that is the times when war is not about the earth, men adjust themselves to the inevitability of death on a purely personal basis. Religion, personal philosophical theories and man's living of his life aid and eventually shape one's acceptance that all men must die. How one accepts the end is the result of a lifetime of awaiting the final day. In war, however, the situation assumes an entirely different guise. For modern war, especially, introduces violence into the picture.

Violence, in turn, produces death in various forms inconceivable to the imagination. The man in war, now in uniform, and lacking the leisure and time so necessary to adapt himself to the thought of death, is thrown into the struggle unprepared for the onslaught of violent death.

One's years are crowded into a few weeks or months at best and death, ever present, hovers over the battle. Living at such a high pitch is not conducive to philosophical discussions, monologues and self-analyses concerning man's end on the earth. Instead of death being pushed into the deepest corners of men's minds as something that will call upon them some time in the distant future, death becomes the mold of one's life and the commissioner of one's fate. The soldier looks to death rather than looking to the future. For a man in battle lives in the very immediate present and his "past regrets and future fears" have no place in the scheme of things. Living in the immediate present one had as his companion, as it were, death, for death, to the man in the trench or shellhole, is the present.

Read points to the philosophy that would become the man living in such a state of being. He writes:

When I became a soldier on active service, death was no longer an abstract and relatively distant prospect, but an imminent possibility . . . The terrible fragility of life was made evident to

me; I saw that individuality and intelligence and all the unique make of a man could seep into the ground with a trickle of warm blood. But still I did not fear death, strongly as I wanted to live. The philosophy which was forced on me by this experience was simply fatalistic - it was not resigned enough to be called stoical. It had in it an element of bitterness or resentment which we find in the 'tragic view of life,' and fatalism is perhaps the best word to describe my permanent attitude to this problem.¹

This sense of immediacy may well change a man from one of leisurely pursuits to one of desperate striving after every aspect of living that can be crowded into his days. His sense of time, his sense of proportion, his memory is partially or totally destroyed. These poets, at one time or another, complain of what Blunden called "a black and lethal abyss"² where memory failed.

Memory failed and senses were dulled simply because men looked to and thought about death with a consuming obsession. If one were suddenly released from this inhuman and pent-up existence for a few days by a rest in rear areas then did the body and the mind collapse from a sense of terrible relief. To even think about the essentials of life - such as food or drink - was an overwhelmingly difficult task. The man had escaped

1. Read, Innocent Eye, pp. 114-5.

2. Blunden, Undertones, p. 224.

for a moment and he assumed an automaton's role and moved about as in a dream.

Only death and the thought of death lurked at his side.

At times men may be laconic and matter-of-fact when speaking of death. The matter-of-factness, however, is not without its bitterness. Early in his term in the trenches Blunden, after an attack, speaks:

So the attack on Boar's Head closed,
and so closed the admirable youth or
maturity of many a Sussex and Hampshire
worthy.³

Or there is Sorley writing to the Master of Marlborough and describing the friendships broken off by death. When one or two men drop off, says Sorley, "one wonders why."⁴ After one has watched many more than one or two men dropping from the picture then does one change his outlook on death. He becomes hardened. Hardened to the mishaps that may befall individuals, for if one dwells on each specific casualty then one's mind will snap. Hardened though the soldier with sensitivity may become, and all these men possessed sensitivity on a higher plane due to their talents in the creation of literature, the soldier does not forget to remark upon the overall picture of death and destruction of individuals.

3. Blunden, Undertones, p. 57.

4. Sorley, Letters, p. 292.

In a sonnet found in his kit after his death Sorley speaks of the death of his companions. The poet is the toughened person he was after a tour of trench duty in 1915 but his grief is apparent in the following lines:

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.⁵

One must not for a moment think that a man, regardless of his sensitivity, cannot become hardened to an incredible degree. Here is Sorley speaking of a dead comrade, Sorley who prior to the war was a student of philosophy.

. . . One struggles in the dark for moral
victory over the enemy patrol: the wail
of the exploded bomb and the animal cries
of wounded men. Then death and the
horrible thankfulness when one sees that

5. Sorley, Charles Hamilton, Marlborough, p. 78.

the next man is dead: 'We won't have to carry him in under fire, thank God; dragging will do': hauling in of the great resistless body in the dark, the smashed head rattling: the relief, the relief that the thing has ceased to groan: that the bullet or bomb that made the man an animal has now made the animal a corpse. One is hardened by now: purged of all false pity: perhaps more selfish than before.⁶

These words were written by a 'man' three months past his twentieth birthday and soon to be promoted to captain and in command of a company.

Appalling as Sorley's hardness may be to the reader, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that such an attitude was an absolute necessity if one were to maintain his sanity. Training and maneuvers such as all soldiers undergo trains one to fight and defend himself. However, all the training and tactics does not equip one to face and accept death in war. As Sorley once wrote, " We go there with our eyes shut."⁷

Once a man's eyes are opened to the realities of the situation and he realizes that death will pick its victim almost at random then he becomes aware of a second necessity when living in the realm of death - that of not talking or discussing those men who have been killed. Blunden's battalion attacked the Beaucourt ridge on

6. Sorley, Letters, pp. 305-306.

7. Ibid., p. 245

2 September 1916. In the attack many of Blunden's friends were killed. He wrote later:

Not much was said, then or afterwards,
about those who never again would pass
that hated target.⁸

Like Sorley, Blunden noticed his increasing loss of sensibility. A year later he came back to the trenches from leave and learned of more friends being killed.

These losses I felt, but with a sensibility blurred by the general grossness of war. . . These views brought on a mood of selfishness. We should all die, presumably, round Ypres.⁹

This "mood of selfishness" was the result of living with death for months on end for as Blunden described it, "the shadow of death lay over the dial."¹⁰ Using different words Rosenberg spoke of the all-pervading death in a letter to Gordon Bottomley written in March, 1918. "If only this war were over," he said, "our eyes would not be on death so much: it seems to underlie our underthoughts."¹¹

'The shadow of death' in which the soldier shades himself prompted Sassoon to mention his crowding his life into the space of a few weeks. When he was marching with his

8. Blunden, Undertones, p. 104.

9. Ibid., pp. 234-5.

10. Ibid., p. 241.

11. Rosenberg, Works, p. 379.

company to the front-line trenches, Sassoon ruminated:

For me, the idea of death made everything
seem vivid and valuable. The war could
be like that to a man, until it drove him
to drink and suffocated his finer
apprehensions.¹²

Written early in Sassoon's career as soldier, he could view the experiences as "vivid and valuable." The sense of newness of the experience and the sense of newness of death as seen in war would impress the poet. The men were living at breakneck speed. Robert Graves, in his poem "The Bough of Nonsense," transcribes a dialogue between Sassoon and himself as the two men come back from the Somme. Sassoon tells his friend, "Robert, I've lived three thousand years/ This Summer, and I'm nine parts dead."¹³

Then Sassoon was to succumb to the harshness of war and the sureness of death, and his "finer apprehensions" became blurred and he echoes Blunden when he says:

And the dead were the dead; this was no
time to be pitying them or asking silly
questions about their outraged lives.
Such sights must be taken for granted,
I thought.¹⁴

When the "shadow of death," so apt a phrase, moved over Graves, the tough soldier, the veteran of months of combat, shrugged his shoulders and as we have seen, commented

12. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 192.

13. Graves, Fairies, p. 65.

14. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 215.

that there was "no horror in the continual experience of death."

Herbert Read, unlike Graves, at last did find horror in the death of his youngest brother who was killed in the last days of the war. His brother was struck down by a stray bullet in one of those freak accidents that dot the record books of fatalities. Read, although he had served in France for almost three years, broke down. He was in England when he heard the news and he fled his garrison and sought seclusion. The thought that one of his own family could be so easily taken by death overcame the muteness of the soldier when discussing the death of comrades and Read says "for the first and only time I sought to expel my emotions by actualizing them in verse."¹⁵

Catharsis through literary means served to release the poet of his pent-up emotions. One is capable of only so much silence in the face of death. Sooner or later this silence must be broken and the soldier must talk to someone of a sympathetic leaning. As will be seen later in this chapter such sympathy was not forthcoming from the civilians who remained at home. Combat men seek solace in men who have seen much the same in battle. The release of emotions is ideally suited to literature, with literature acting as a channel or canal to handle the

15. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 162.

flood of memories. Needless to say such literature will not be regarded with too favorable an eye in the years to come because of the overwhelming personal nature of the work. Sassoon, upon hearing of the death of Graves, later proved to be a false report, wrote a short poem called "To His Dead Body." Sassoon, feeling acutely the loss of a comrade and a man closely allied to his bent in life could do no more. He had to speak. The lines following tell of his burning sense of grief:

When roaring gloom surged inward and you
cried,
Groping for friendly hands, and clutched,
and died.
Like racing smoke, swift from your lolling
head
Phantoms of thoughts and memory thinned
and fled.

Yet, though my dreams that throng the
darkened stair
can bring me no report of how you fare,
Safe quit of wars, I speed you on your way
Up lonely, glimmering fields to find new
day,
Slow-rising, saintless, confident and
kind--
Dear, red-faced father God who lit your
mind.¹⁶

Death, inevitable in war, must be faced up to and these men did not turn their backs and deny its existence. No one in war could ignore a so all-powerful force. Laconic, at first, then hardened to the thought of men being carried away by so violent an end, the poet-soldiers came

16. Sassoon, nuntsman, p. 33.

to the cross-roads in their lives when they were forced to speak their feelings, their thoughts. The intangibility of death came to be replaced, after a time, with a tangibility that, as Rosenberg said, seemed to underlie their "underthoughts." It is understandable that the men could become case-hardened. They had escaped the clutches of death and had survived. It is significant that Graves uses the title "Escape" for the poem recounting his experiences when he was wounded and reported as killed in action.

If a man did not escape death, he was looked upon as having gone to another country where he was to live "safe quit of wars." As Read has pointed out, he wanted very much to live in this life. He was certainly not alone. But this thought is usually early expressed. After months and years of duty in combat, in the trenches, the soldier may at times, come to look upon this life as a living death. Shattered physically, morally and mentally, his sufferings produce in him the feeling that there is a peacefulness and final goal in death. "The dead have done with pain," wrote Sassoon in a short poem, "The Effect."¹⁷

17. Sassoon, Counter-Attack, pp. 21-22.

Part II: Comradeship

At odds with the civilian elements in England, the serviceman turned to the comradeship and the intense camaraderie that existed among the soldiers. In the surroundings of the battalion or company or even platoon, the soldier discovered an existence that was both conducive to a sense of belonging and one that offered him security from the alien sentiments of civilians. Bound together by their common lot, the soldiers found nourishment in the pride and spirit of his organization. One's attitudes and interests were aligned with fellow-soldiers. Outsiders, i. e., the civilians, were repulsed and resented. There was no place for the stranger in this tightly knit in-group. If the soldier could not find peace of mind and acceptance in the walks of life that had once been his, he could always turn to the service and there he was accepted as "one of us."

In the days before his revolt, Sassoon, resting in the hospitals in England, felt this lure of common experience.

I was rewarded by an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of the human spirit -- that spirit which could stand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all the

failures. Against the background of the War and its brutal stupidity those men had stood glorified by the thing which sought to destroy them.¹⁸

After adjusting himself to the ways of his fellow officers, and accepting them, Read became very impressed with the comradeship of men at war.

As the war developed, I found in my fellow officers a rough equivalent of the society of a university, but more diverse, and deepened and concentrated by the common sharing of dangerous purposes. I had such friends then as I had never had before or since -- friends with whom one lived in a complete communal bond of thoughts as well as goods.¹⁹

But it was not only with the officers that Read, and many another officer in wartime, felt a bond of friendship. The relations between officer and man, says Read, "was like that of a priest to his parish."²⁰ As Read points out, only the social snob and misfit was incapable of developing this feeling of mutual trust and intimacy.

Having experienced the rigors of combat, having watched men die under the most extreme of circumstances, having participated in a vast program of violence and destruction, a soldier is apt to think that the society he knows is disintegrating at a rapidly increasing rate. The world is falling apart at the seams and there are

18. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 251.

19. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 159.

20. Ibid., p. 160.

no Humpty Dumpties available for repairs. The more intense and shocking were the sufferings, the warmer was the fraternity and understanding among the soldiers. To avoid becoming a complete misfit in all groups of his society, the soldier clung to the bond that was nurtured in the ranks and the cadres of the officers and men of the BEF. Especially was this true of the men who were in the field, or of the men who had just emerged from a particularly severe battle or raid. The soldier, who rather foolishly wished to go home, was loath to take his leave from his company. In 1917, shortly after his twenty-first birthday in November, Blunden was sent to a signaling course in the training areas behind the lines. Appealing as such a chance seemed, Blunden said, "I saw once again the distasteful process of separation from the battalion."²¹ Blunden knew very well that "to be with one's battalion, or part of it, alone nourished the infantryman's spirit."²²

Sorley wrote of such friendships a few months before his death:

They are extraordinarily close, really, these friendships of circumstance, distinct as they remain from friendship of choice.²³

21. Blunden, Undertones, p. 259.

22. Ibid., p. 231.

23. Sorley, Letters, p. 292.

The colossal movements of war, its great campaigns and its great toll of losses, the expenditure of men and the expenditure of energy, however misguided and misdirected, tend to dwarf the individual. He feels himself to be a small and almost comically insignificant creature who vainly struggles to maintain for himself a sense of individuality and one whose bootless cries concerning his plight are lost in the uproar of modern war. The remaining solution to his problems is to acknowledge the value of service-connected friendships and the value of intimate relationships as only can be fostered by war.

Sorley likened his role in the war to that of the king's Pawn "who so proudly initiates the game of chess."²⁴

'Tis sweet, this pawn-being: there are no cares, no doubts: wherefore no regrets. The burden which I am sure is the parent of ill-temper ... to wit, the making up of one's own mind ... is lifted from our shoulders.²⁵

In an offensive or push in which hundreds of thousands of men, thousands of artillery pieces and inconceivable amounts of materiel are involved, the individual soldier is, like as not, to be of the opinion that he is indeed the "king's Pawn" in this huge chess game. Blunden

24. Sorley, Letters, p. 304.

25. Ibid., p. 310.

commented once that the soldier in the trenches "had little time or taste for studying the probable effect upon us of events beyond the skyline of immediate orders."²⁶

Read, who is usually of a dispassionate and analytical mind when his brother poets and soldiers are bitter or of no mind to explain a situation beyond a concise and pungent sentence or two, remarked on the position of the Tommy:

A soldier is part of a machine: once the machine is in movement, he functions as part of that machine, or simply gets killed. There is very little scope for individual initiative, for non-cooperation.²⁷

The army, or the general services, provided man's every wants. It housed him, fed him, clothed him and, as Sorley has said, did most of his thinking. The service offered security of a sort that civilian life, when brought in for a comparison, did not provide for. The service did not, however, offer immunity from death and wounds. But, in the years of the actual war, the service was the home that so many men sought and felt secure within its confines. This new way of life, after the "newness" has worn away, became an established way of life. The old life, the life of a civilian, was both strange and incompatible with a soldier's new outlook and concepts. Although powerless to stand up against war's destruction

26. Blunden, Undertones, p. 212.

27. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 156.

and death, the soldier did, if he were given the chance, come to discover that there existed within himself an "invincible resistance of an animal or an insect, and an endurance he might, in after days, forget or disbelieve."²⁸

Therefore, the soldier who saw that he could not adjust himself to the ways of the civilian mores, who felt a security in the service and a sense of comradeship, was to be attracted to the products of modern warfare, namely violence, destruction and combat. However repulsive were these states of being, the veteran of combat tours of duty experienced an irresistible lure. It was a strange magnetism for on the one hand the soldier would curse and damn his lot while on the other hand he was expressing a desire to be returned to the scenes of battle. It might well be said that once a man does taste of violence and destruction he never again will forget its insidious attractions. When he was based at Rouen, in February, 1917, Sassoon once asked himself, "Why should I feel elated at the prospect of battle, I wondered."²⁹

Later, when he is hospitalized at Craiglockhart, he wrote that "going back to the War as soon as possible was my only chance of peace."³⁰

28. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 209.

29. Ibid., p. 194.

30. Sassoon, Siegfried, Sherston's Progress, The Literary Guild of America, N. Y., 1937, p. 44.

Sassoon was referring to the war as fought in the front-line trenches and not a few hundred yards or a few miles behind the lines. To be even removed that short distance from the scene, was for Blunden, no simple task.

It is not so easy ... to leave the front line for battalion headquarters; it has magnetized the mind; and for a moment one leans, delaying, looking out over the scene of war.³¹

Graves and Sassoon sharing the hut at the training center in England and discussing the war in all its aspects, agreed that "the best place for [them] was back in France away from the more shameful madness of home service."³² Like the moth who will fly to the candle-flame, these men went back again and again to the trenches.

Part III: The Enemy

One cannot point to a hatred of the enemy as the driving force behind these men. Nowhere in the writings is there expressed any hatred of their German foes. Indeed, it would seem these men disliked and, at times, hated their fellow-countrymen much more, and actively expressed their dislike. The men who were called their enemies, the men in the field-grey uniforms, underwent the same experiences, suffered casualties as high

31. Blunden, Undertones, p. 176.

32. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 278.

in number or higher, fought under much the same conditions as did the men in the British Expeditionary forces. The word hatred, and the emotions that the word arouses in men at war, were to be found in the propaganda outlets of the Allies and, for the most part, such emotions were displayed only by the civilians in England. Since these men did not share the enthusiasms for war and carnage that the civilians so vehemently expressed, did not approve of the slogans, there was no chance whatever that they should cultivate an active hatred for the enemy.

Blunden was once asked by a general, after he had publicly denounced the war as useless and inhuman, why he wasn't fighting for the Germans, and he replied that "it was only due to [his] having been born in England, not Germany."³³

Graves's lineage was a mixture of Irish, on his father's side, and German, on his mother's side, with the German strains the dominant in the young man. His German grandfather, Heinrich von Ranke, was a doctor of some note. Graves's middle name was von Ranke. His grandfather exerted no little influence on him as a child. Indeed, Graves writes:

My history from the age of fourteen, when
I went to Charterhouse, to just before

33. Blunden, Undertones, pp. 204-205.

the end of the war, when I began to realize things better, was a forced rejection of the German in me.³⁴

His German forebears made for difficulties with his fellow officers during the war. Once a German spy, giving the name of Karl Graves, was captured in England and authorities vainly attempted to prove that the spy was Graves's brother. His nickname while serving with the Royal Welch was "von Runicke."

Sorley often expressed his views on the German people. His schooling in Germany just prior to the outbreak of the war probably gave him a sense of justification in passing judgment on the peoples of the German Reich. He judged Germany's only fault to be "a lack of real insight and sympathy with those who differ from her."³⁵ He called Germany a "bigot."³⁶ Sorley realized the closeness of cultural ties with the Teuton nation - he was a great admirer of Goethe - and he pictured the struggle between the two nations

...as one between sisters, between Martha and Mary, the efficient and intolerant against the casual and sympathetic. Each side has a virtue for which it is fighting, and each that virtue's supplementary vice.³⁷

34. Graves, Good-Bye, p. 39.

35. Sorley, The Letters, p. 231.

36. Ibid., 231.

37. Ibid., p. 232.

Hatred of the "Hun" fired the hearts of many a stalwart Englishman but few, if any, hearts of the fighting men. Graves very pointedly refers to this glorification of war and the nurturing of hatred in a poem entitled "A Dead Boche."

To you who'd read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
"War's Hell!" and if you doubt the same,
To-day I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.³⁸

Rosenberg was moved to say that Germany would bring Chaos to the world, "Germany's gift -- all earth they would give thee, Chaos."³⁹

There was little chance that the men fighting the war, and far removed from their fellow-countrymen by virtue of their experiences, would go along with the prevalent propagandistic slogans and turn with a fiery hatred upon their enemies. Experiences shared by the English soldier and the German were grounds for an understanding that could have been realized but was destined not to be in the years following World War I.

38. Graves, Fairies, p. 33.

39. Rosenberg, Works, p. 71.

These men under surveillance in this paper are only six examples of the hundred of thousands of English soldiers who found, after a few months in the services, that they were no longer a part of a life they had once known. Their experiences with death and destruction, their living in a realm far removed from Trafalgar Square or Cambridge University, made for a comradeship and a bond of feeling that was strong indeed during the war-years. Life as they were living it was an entity in itself, a life, a society within a society. The gulf created by war was widened as the war dragged on into its third and fourth years. The soldiers no longer entertained any ideas of glory and patriotism. War came to be everything for them. It invaded their private lives, their thoughts and their writings. They simply could not escape. It was an useless and heartbreaking task to attempt to picture war as it was really fought. Few listened and fewer cared to know the true picture. Each side retired from the other. The civilian found solace in a certain bloodthirstiness and the soldier found solace in comradeship, a comradeship held together, in many respects, by the very retreat from the war as the civilians thought it should be fought.

The serviceman lived with death and lived in war. The civilian lived in peace and with most of the luxuries of pre-war living. Hating war, knowing its terrible

destructive potentialities, the serviceman nevertheless found a certain pride in the fact that he had accepted his duty and, whenever humanly possible, had carried out that duty to the utmost of his abilities. Most of his pre-war beliefs and concepts having been shattered, there was little to cling to.

There were some soldiers, on both sides, who envisioned a time when the veterans would organize an international order and do away with war forever. They felt that this plan would be entirely possible and feasible. Herbert Read had such post-war expectations.

During the war I used to feel that this comradeship which had developed among us would lead to some new social order when peace came. I used to imagine an international party of ex-combatants, united by their common suffering, who would turn against the politicians and the profiteers in every country, and create a society based on the respect for the individual human being. But no such party came into existence. The war ended in despair in Germany, in silly jubilation in England, and in an ineffective spirit of retribution in France. The societies of ex-combatants that were formed in England devoted themselves either to jingo heartiness or to the organization of charitable benefits.⁴⁰

The failure of the veterans to weld themselves into political groups was the final defeat of the men who had

40. Read, Innocent Eye, p. 161. There is evidence of this same internationalism in Ernst Toller's I Was A German, W. Morrow and Co., N. Y., 1934 and Rainer Maria Rilke's War-time Letters, W. W. Norton & Co., N. Y., 1940.

answered the call to duty in 1914. They had gone then to the wars as a part, and as individual members, of the society which had fostered their growth and development. They returned from the wars as strangers in their own house.

CHAPTER IV: RESIDUES

This final chapter is concerned with an evaluation of the respective autobiographical works of the six English poets and their individual attitudes toward the war. Secondly, the extent to which the subject of war occupies the attention of the writer is considered. Part II points to the influence, if any, of previous writing about war and the influence of contemporary writing, particularly the works of other writers of other nations, upon the Englishmen who are the subject of this thesis. Finally, there is a short section that attempts to answer the question how much of the writings is literature and how much is record.

Part I: The Overview of War

Since much of the literature concerning the first World War was in the form of autobiographies and the fact that the works herein examined are in the same genre, it is necessary to point out the type of self-record each of these six English writers produced and the relation of the work to the war in general.

Rosenberg and Sorley, because of their deaths in combat, did not have the opportunity to create more polished and more literary records of their lives. Both works are collections of letters written by the men while at the front and in service at home. The form is necessarily limited to the various subjects that men write of in letters to their families and friends who remain behind. The reader of the letters of Rosenberg and Sorley is struck by a sense of immediacy. The men are close to their subject and their feelings and emotions of the moment are reflected in their letters. The editors of both collections have arranged the letters in chronological order and some sense of the change in conceptions and feelings about the war can be gained from reading the works. Since the two men had little time to examine to any depth the events taking place about them, there is little perspective, little of the more poised and collected thinking that is to be found in the

autobiographies of Sassoon, Graves, Blunden and Read.

This is not to say that the letters of Rosenberg and Sorley that have survived are not of value. To the contrary, such personal records are of extreme value when attempting an analysis of war through the medium of literature. Both Sorley and Rosenberg were aware that they could convey little of the total picture of their experiences through letters or the few poems they managed to write before their deaths. They wrote poetry intermittently and Rosenberg was often mentioning plans for larger works and poems about the war. They were of the opinion that, although what they said and wrote might not be of first class quality, it was nevertheless worth while and of a definite value. Rosenberg mentioned writing during wartime to his friend Marsh in a letter written August 6, 1916:

You know how earnestly one must wait on ideas, (you cannot coax real ones to you) and let as it were a skin grow naturally round and through them. If you are not free, you can only, when the ideas come hot, sieze them with the skin in tatters raw, crude, in some parts beautiful in other monstrous. Why print it then? Because these rare parts must not be lost.¹

Had the two men survived the war, undoubtedly they would have written personal records as did so many other veterans and they would have, no doubt, come to use their

1. Rosenberg, works, pp. 310-311.

letters and poems written in the heat of the battle to survive.

These two collections contain some letters written before the outbreak of hostilities and one can form some idea of the personality and the development of the two men in matters literary and military. The war, as subject of their letters and poems, occupied most of their attention although both men expressed interest in contemporary writing, particularly poetry. Rosenberg was in contact with Marsh, Trevelyan and Abercrombie throughout the war.

The total structure of the war writings of Sassoon, Graves, Blunden and Read is another matter.

Undertones of War, Edmund Blunden's autobiographical account of his experiences, appeared in the latter part of 1928. The first edition went through seven printings, up to September, 1929. The second edition was published, with a few revisions, in June, 1930, and a third edition appeared in November of the same year. The work is concerned entirely with the war. In the main it is prose with a collection of thirty-two poems attached which Blunden calls "A Supplement of Poetical Interpretations and Variations." The poems occupy some fifty-seven pages of the text. Blunden explained that the poems "serve as further explanation of the action of the autobiography."²

2. Blunden, Undertones, preliminary.

It is not Blunden's purpose to trace his life from birth, through school, into the war and thence post-war life. He begins the story abruptly when he is being shipped to France in 1916. The time extends from the early summer of 1916 to New Year's Day, 1918, roughly about eighteen months. In "The Preliminary" to Undertones of War, Blunden says that he will attempt an image and horror of his experiences. "I know that the experience to be sketched in it is very local, limited, incoherent."³ Blunden knew his writing when he wrote this and such is the overall picture. Unless one is versed in the military history of World War I he will have great difficulty sorting out the battlefields, the places and the events to which Blunden alludes. But such preciseness of history is hardly necessary in a work of this kind. The effect on the reader is one of confusion, violence, death, destruction and personal suffering. Always there is the war and the war shaped and moulded men's actions and thoughts. He was never able to disengage himself for any great length of time. The very word "Undertones" used in the title implies that Blunden has forgotten much of the factual details and what emerges is, in the main, images and pictures of the eighteen months he was at the front. Despite his sufferings and disillusionment,

3. Blunden, undertones, preliminary.

Blunden is gentle in his bitterness, ironic when the occasion demands and his subjective approach is never obtrusive for Blunden is too much the scholar not to realize the value of a certain amount of objectivity when writing of a subject, an event, in which objectivity is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to attain. But if the man involved, here Blunden, can recall only incoherently the events in which he participated, then it is best to collect them and present them in such a manner. Blunden, possibly realizing that the "undertones" he presents might well be too incoherent, decided to include the poems that form a kind of appendix to the volume.

One reviewer condemned Undertones of War and called it a series of sketches "typical of the English attitude of superficial casualness toward the war."⁴ I think that the reviewer missed entirely the purpose of Blunden's book. It was not Blunden's intention, as he implies in the introduction, to present a detailed account of the war. Robert Graves, reviewing the book for The Nation and Athenaeum, praised Blunden for being "the first man I have read who has realized that the problem of writing about trench-warfare lies in the 'peculiar difficulty of

4. Wharton, James B., "War From the Front," The Nation, July 17, 1929, vol. CXXIX, No. 5341, p. 69.

selecting the sights, faces, words, incidents which characterized the time."⁵

Robert Graves's Good-Bye to All That was published about a year later than Blunden's autobiography. It was a popular book, in no small way due to the so-called "shocking" revelations of suicides in the trenches, army brothels and military executions. But Graves, I think meant to shock the English reading public and to show, in all honesty, that war was a horror to the men who fought in it. He spares the reader little in talking about the seamier sides of an event which can bring only repulsion to a man of sensitivity. Graves had accused Blunden of being too much a gentleman. "Loyalty," he wrote, "keeps him from heaping the shames on the horrors."⁶ Graves, in turn, was both praised and criticised for talking too much.

The title of Graves's autobiography affords a clue to his purposes in writing the book. It is the story of a public schoolboy who goes to war, is battered about, and then struggles to regain his mental peace in the post-war years always with the realization that what has

5. Graves, Robert, "Trench History," The Nation and Athenaeum, December 15, 1928, vol. XLIV, No. 11, p. 420.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 420.

passed, the days of his youth and, in a way, the days that were England, are gone forever. About sixty per cent of the book is concerned with war experiences. Graves, in a somewhat cynical tone, but yet, ingenuous, writes of the purpose of his book:

The objects of this autobiography ... are simple enough: an opportunity for a formal good-bye to you, and to you and to you and to me and to all that.⁷

And at the end of the work he says, "This is a story of what I was, not what I am."⁸

Graves's story of himself and his war experiences is essentially a despairing one. His story tells of the hopelessness, meaninglessness and horror that is modern war. What befalls him, personally, is essentially what befell the artist who went to war in 1914. Although Graves feels that his memory fails him, his book is far more detailed and more in a military nature than is Blunden's account. This fact can be accounted for, in my opinion, in that Graves was very much a soldier and a man who knew what he is about in the trenches and when handling military materiel and accouterments. Consequently there is much technical information in Good-Bye to All That. War dominates the book and dominated Graves. Graves

7. Graves, Good-bye, p. 1.

8. Ibid., p. 427.

emerges as a hardened man who has seen much and will not back down in the face of public opinion. Graves does not probe into the psychological state of men at war as deeply as does Sassoon, but he is well aware of what has taken place in himself and in so many of his fellow-soldiers. He is ironical, but he uses a sharper blade than Blunden. He is blunt, and little is omitted from the total picture. Less bitter than his great friend, Sassoon, but nevertheless bitter, Graves is lacking in active hate. He hated the war but he does not say so in specific terms. The reader comes to realize this without additional aid from Graves himself.

Graves's grim humor and a resilient spirit which never broke throughout four years of war makes for an almost cold analysis of war and the effects on the individual, particularly the artist. Graves is not passionate in his anger, in his disgust with war but, rather, he is straightforward and carries out his analysis to the end, despite the consequences. Graves's outlet for his passions was in the action that the war provided and then, later, a cold and rather detailed analysis, when his memory is undamaged by the passing years, of that action.

Sassoon's story of his war-career is told in three volumes. He assumes the fictional name of Lieutenant George Sherston and gives to other men, some well-known

and others obscure, fictional names also, like Read, Sassoon tells of his early life in The memoirs of a Fox-hunting man. The action of this first volume of the autobiographical trilogy ends when Sassoon is in the trenches in France. The impression of a farewell to all that had gone before is gained from Sassoon's first volume. It is a death-knell for the England of the late Victorian days and the days of King Edward VII. Reared in easy circumstances, Sassoon recounts the leisurely life of a gentleman who was destined to go to war with the first of the volunteers. The final chapters, although concerned with the war, harken back to the old days. The book was awarded the Hawthornden Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1929.

The second volume, The Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, is almost strictly of war. In this work Sassoon's obsession over the war becomes apparent. Writing poetry during the years of war, and then his autobiographies in the years that followed, Sassoon makes the reader aware of his fiery hatred of the destruction and forces on the loose in the years from 1914 to 1918. His revulsion is far greater than was Graves's reaction to the same events. Since he cannot, or at least does not, write with the detachment of Graves, his passionate hatred makes for a better analysis of the individual at war and the effects of war on that individual. He

fills page after page with highly personalized observations and psychological probings that Graves or Read or Blunden do not attempt. Perhaps Sassoon thought too much about the war. His unsuccessful attempts to "get away from it all" when on leave in England failed miserably. He is too deeply entangled to merely walk out. Then, too, he realizes more keenly, as the years go by, that he is being separated from his class and his former station in life.

Ever since my existence became precarious I had realized how little I'd used my brain in peace time, and now I was always trying to keep my mind from stagnation. But it wasn't easy to think one's thoughts while on active service.⁹

Sassoon hated the war and yet, in the second volume, and particularly the third volume, Sherston's Progress, much space is given to his battle to stay away from the front. His self-styled mutiny had failed because the military authorities had refused to make a martyr of him. He loathed the war as only a man possessed of the keen sensitivity of a poet could hate senseless death and misery. But the fact remained that Sassoon was a member of the upper-classes of England. The sense of duty, the loyalty to one's family and friends, his adherence to a code and caste, and more important, his self-respect as an individual, conquered his loathing

9. Sassoon, Infantry Officer, p. 108.

and he was back in action by the early summer of 1918. He was wounded and sent home and the war for him was over. In Sherston's Progress Sassoon, with the help of his diary, tellingly exposes himself as a creature of doubts and, as a pacifist, his struggle with himself and the war he had denounced so bitterly in both prose and poetry. Mr. John Sparrow sums up Sherston's Progress by saying that its "chief value lies in the living contrast which it presents between the pacifism which consists in a refusal to fight and the pacifism which consists in a hatred of war."¹⁰

Perhaps Herbert Read, as poet, captures that elusive detachment that so many men seek when writing of war. His The Innocent Eye has two war-sections, "The Raid" and "In Retreat," both published previously under separate covers. The two pieces are masterpieces of the clipped, stripped, objective style of prose-writing. Read has said that war is a subject, when written about, which needs no embroidery. His training as poet and his interest in the imagist style were the guideposts that pointed the way when he wrote these two chapters of his autobiography. Read, in these sections, makes no allusions to person. He is the small being caught in the web of

10. Sparrow, John, "War and Pacifism," The Spectator, September 4, 1936, No. 5,645, p. 386.

events. Yet, Read is a paradox. In other references to the war he delves deeply, yet concisely, into the psychological states of mind that are the combat man's personal problems.

The Innocent Eye, first published in London in 1940 under the title Annals of Innocence and Experience, is not wholly given over to the war. The first section, "The Innocent Eye," and originally published under that title in 1935, recaptures his childhood on the Yorkshire farm where he lived until he was nine years old. Later he advances his theories of art and culture. However, it is the shadow of the war that darkens much of what is recorded in this book.

With Wordsworthian overtones, Read regards the child's eye as seeing the truth because it is innocent. He had experienced a war for four and one-half years. His reactions had warped his outlook and his sensitivity. As an artist it is his goal to seek and find again the innocence he had once known as a child in Yorkshire. When the innocence is regained, or rediscovered, he has, once again, a vision of truth. What he writes about the war is written with the "innocent eye" and a child sees little embroidery.

Part II: Final Vision

The men who entered the first World War were destined to fight a war of unparalleled violence. They marched into the trenches with varying expectations of patriotism and a sense of glory to defend their country and protect the flag. They had little idea of what war was and what war could do to the individual. As Read has said, they still had kiplingesque ideas of fighting.

There is little wonder that they reacted so strongly toward the war. They were not prepared for their initiation. The little amount of literature that could be termed "anti-war" in tone either was unheard of or never read. Each man, of artistic leanings, was to be suddenly overwhelmed by what he saw and what he experienced. Their individual and collective conditioning was not affected by what had gone before. The men who fought in the Second World War had the benefit of reading many novels, poems, plays and essays that condemned and damned war. Anti-war sentiment was present throughout the 1920's and 1930's and pacifistic groups were a common occurrence on the college campuses throughout the country. The World War II men went into the struggle conditioned to war as no men have ever before in history. Consequently the reactions are not of the violent and abrupt sort to be found in the autobiographies of these English poets.

Possibly the single literary influence on these poets was Henri Barbusse's Under Fire. These men would naturally turn to the work that was to initiate the long and almost unending stream of anti-war works that continued up to the outbreak of World War II. Graves, Sassoon and Blunden mention Under Fire and all attest as to its truthfulness. Blunden, at one time, does mention "Sassoon's splendid war on the war"¹¹ alluding to the latter's war poems.

Rupert Brooke whose early poems on the war had attracted attention failed to impress either Sorley or Rosenberg. Sorley wrote his mother that Brooks "is too far obsessed with his own sacrifice"¹² and Rosenberg informed his sister that he "did not like Rupert Brooke's begloried sonnets."¹³ Rosenberg preferred Walt Whitman and he said that the American poet "in 'Beat, drums, beat' has said the noblest thing on war."¹⁴

It would require a far more complete study that I have attempted here to determine accurately the extent of the influence of other war-writers on the Englishmen examined in this paper. It would seem that if one writer was particularly impressed or influenced by

11. Blunden, Undertones, p. 217.

12. Sorley, Letters, p. 263.

13. Rosenberg, Works, p. 348.

14. Ibid., p. 348.

another he would have mentioned him or shown the influence in his own writings. Any evidence of influences, as far as I have been able to learn, is negligible.

Barbusse's influence was one of prompting the men to go ahead. The green light was flashed on and the poets who had been in France and Belgium, who had seen destruction and violence, answered the signal.

There may arise the question as to how much of these writings is literature and how much record. Sorley's and Rosenberg's collections of letters are, necessarily, more record than literature. The two men had no idea that their letters would be published and, consequently, unlike Rilke, there is little embellishment of a literary nature. But both men were poets, poets of promise if not achievement, and their letters do contain insights and conceptions that are of value in the field of literature. The two men interpret the events, although the interpretation is on a personal plane. The writings of Sassoon, Graves, Blunden and Read are literature with personal records as the basis. The men, with the advantage of years of perspective and a certain amount of "recollection in tranquility," record their impressions of the war-years in literary style. Records will live but always with a limited appeal and value. It is the interpretations of these records and the valid concepts drawn from the records that makes for literature and for long-life. One's

thoughts of the moment are interesting but, usually, rather painful to read in their nudity years later. It is when the writer, in this case, a poet and artist, examines the words of the moment and asks himself certain questions which bring out the reasons that such was said at such a time, that the term literature is justly applied.

These men, in the years during and after the war, had many of their assumptions about war pitilessly torn from them. Their specific reaction was one of revulsion to war. The longer term reactions are of revulsion but this state of mind is tempered by a fuller realization of what had transpired. As Sassoon said, "it wasn't easy to think one's thoughts while on active service." In the days that followed the Armistice the poet, although it was a terrible struggle for some, did have the leisure to think his own thoughts and to think in perspective.

APPENDIX

Sassoon's Statement Regarding the War:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of limitary authority, because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacence with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.¹

July 1917.

S. SASSOON

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