**Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)**

Born into a wealthy Jewish-Catholic family, Siegfried Loraine Sassoon became a poet, memoirist, novelist, and WWI soldier. In his pre-war poetry, he was heavily influenced by Edward Marsh and the Georgian poets (especially *fin de siècle* rhetoric, nature imagery, and sport and hunting themes). *The Daffodil Murderer* (1913), a parody of John Masefield’s *Everlasting Mercy*, was Sassoon’s first literary success. Yet his pre-war poetry was often criticized for derivative thought and emotional ambiguity—an ambiguity explained, in part, by Sassoon’s sexual inexperience and his reticence to make his own homosexuality a subject of his writing (Moeyes 24-6).

In 1914, Sassoon enlisted as a trooper in the Sussex Yeomanry, desiring to be one of the enlisted men rather than assume an officer position. However, less than a year later, he earned his commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Before arriving at the Western Front, Sassoon received news that his younger brother Hamo had died at the front in Gallipoli. As an idealistic company commander, Sassoon was awarded the Military Cross in 1916 for “conspicuous gallantry during a raid on the enemy trenches.” He fought in the Battle of the Somme (1916) and was later wounded in the Battle of Arras (1917). During his convalescence, Sassoon began developing objections to the war.

Witnessing staff ruthlessness and ineptitude, home front naivety, and the “sacrifice of innocents” (Egremont xi)—and spurred on by the death of his friend David Cuthbert Thomas—he sent *Finished with the War: A Soldier’s Declaration* to his commanding officer; it was also read in Parliament. His declaration was influenced by the pacifism of Bertrand Russell, Lady Morell, and others. Sassoon was transferred to Craiglockhart War Hospital for neurasthenia (shell shock) treatment. There, he befriended the soldier-poet Wilfred Owen and the anthropologist and psychologist W. H. R. Rivers. His writing at this time (such as his poem “Banishment”) reflects a strong war protest tempered primarily by the feeling that he has betrayed his fellow soldiers.

Just as war and protest gave Sassoon’s life purpose, they also improved the satirical power and emotional unity of his poetry, evident in collections such as *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918). He is best known, though, for his fictionalized autobiography of George Sherston (*Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* [1928], *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* [1930], and *Sherston’s Progress* [1936]). Between 1938-46, Sassoon reworked the Sherston narrative into a “real” autobiographical trilogy, which also includes his reflections on WWII, his crumbling marriage to wife Hester, his literary output and status, a recantation of his war protest (Egremont 523), and his doubt and faith in God. In August 1957, he converted to Roman Catholicism. He died on September 1st, 1967, of abdominal cancer, and was buried at St. Andrews Church in Mells, England.

References and Further Reading

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