

## Voices from World War I

The original spark that set off what proved to be the bloodiest and most widespread war that had yet been fought was the murder of the Archduke Ferdinand of Austria in the Balkan state of Serbia on June 28, 1914. Austria, supported by Germany, used the murder as a reason for declaring war on Serbia, which in turn was supported by its fellow-Slav country Russia. Because Russia was bound by a treaty obligation to both France and Britain, Russia and France were soon at war with Germany and Austria. The most effective way for Germany to attack France was to go through Belgium, though all the powers had guaranteed Belgian neutrality. The attack on Belgium impelled Britain to declare war on Germany on August 4, but rival imperialisms, an international armaments race, France's desire to regain Alsace-Lorraine, which it had lost to Germany in 1870, and German and Austrian ambitions in the Balkans were some of the many other factors that brought about the four-year struggle, a struggle that shook the world. Turkey sided with Germany and Austria in October 1914, and Bulgaria allied itself with them the following year. Britain and France were joined by Japan late in August 1914, by Italy (although Italy had in 1882 joined the "Triple Alliance" with Germany and Austria directed against France and Russia) in May 1915, and by the United States in April 1917.

Before the collapse of Germany followed by the armistice of November 11, 1918, some 8,700,000 lives had been lost (including 780,000 British—virtually a whole generation of young men) and the prolonged horrors of trench warfare had seared themselves into the minds of the survivors. For three years the battle line, "the Western Front," was stabilized between northwest France and Switzerland, with both sides dug in and making repeated, costly, and generally useless attempts to advance. The German use of poison gas at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, the massive German attack at Verdun in 1916, and the British introduction of tanks on



(Left) British soldiers cross no-man's-land. The terrain has been scorched and laid waste by battle. (Right) Allied soldiers follow the lead of an officer out of a trench, April 7, 1918. German shells burst around them during the Arras and Cambrai offensive on the Western Front in France. The phrase "going over the top" was used to describe infantry rising up out of their trench to attack the enemy. Soldiers were at grave risk as they came into the open and crossed into no-man's-land.

the Somme in the same year failed to produce the breakthrough each side desired. Desolate, war-scarred landscapes with blasted trees and mud everywhere, trenches half-filled with water and infested with rats, miles of protective barbed wire requiring individual “volunteers” to crawl through machine-gun fire and cut it so an advance could begin, long-continued massive bombardments by heavy artillery, and a sense of stalemate that suggested to the soldiers involved that this living hell could go on forever—all this was long kept from the knowledge of the civilians at home, who continued to use the old patriotic slogans and write in old-fashioned romantic terms about glorious cavalry charges and the noble pursuit of heroic ideals. But those poets who were involved on the front, however romantically they may have felt about the cause when they joined up, soon realized the full horror of war, and this realization affected both their imaginations and their poetic techniques. They had to find a way of expressing the terrible truths they had experienced, and even when they did not express them directly, the underlying knowledge affected the way they wrote.

The poetry that was in vogue when war broke out, and that some poets continued to write for some years afterward, was named “Georgian” in honor of King George V, who had succeeded Edward VII in 1910. The term was first used of poets when Edward Marsh brought out in 1912 the first of a series of five anthologies called *Georgian Poetry*. The work therein represented an attempt to wall in the garden of English poetry against the disruptive forces of modern civilization. Cultured meditations of the English countryside (“I love the mossy quietness / That grows upon the great stone flags”) alternated with self-conscious exercises in the exotic (“When I was but thirteen or so / I went into a golden land, / Chimporazo, Cotopaxi / Took me by the hand”). Sometimes the magical note was authentic, as in many of Walter de la Mare’s poems, and sometimes the meditative strain was original and impressive, as in Edward Thomas’s poetry. But as World War I went on, with more and more poets killed and the survivors increasingly disillusioned, the whole world on which the Georgian imagination rested came to appear unreal. A patriotic poem such as Rupert Brooke’s “The Soldier” became a ridiculous anachronism in the face of the realities of trench warfare, and the even more blatantly patriotic note sounded by other Georgian poems (as in John Freeman’s “Happy Is England Now,” which claimed that “there’s not a nobleness of heart, hand, brain / But shines the purer; happiest is England now / In those that fight”) seemed obscene. The savage ironies of Siegfried Sassoon’s war poems and the combination of pity and irony in Wilfred Owen’s work portrayed a world undreamed of in the golden years from 1910 to 1914.



“Women of Britain Say—‘Go!’” The women in this British recruiting poster from 1915 are represented as having sent off their men to fight for the domestic harmony of home and the idyllic beauty of a countryside glimpsed through the open window.



**Returning to the Trenches**, 1916, by C. R. W. Nevinson. This English artist (1889–1946) served in the Royal Army Medical Corps. In his drawings and paintings, he brought the Italian futurist emphasis on movement and machines to his experience of the battlefield. Here the soldiers bend forward in synchrony, their bodies seemingly propelled by an unstoppable force, their feet blurred by the rapidity of the march. A woodcut version of the image appeared in the second (and final) issue of the avant-garde journal *Blast* in 1915.

World War I left throughout Europe a sense that the bases of civilization had been destroyed, that all traditional values had been wiped out. We see this sense reflected in the years immediately after the war in different ways in, for example, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Aldous Huxley's early fiction. But the poets who wrote during the war most directly reflected the impact of the war experience.

For more documents, images, and contexts related to this subject, see "Representing the Great War" in the supplemental ebook.

## RUPERT BROOKE

Rupert Brooke (1887–1915) was educated at Rugby School and at King's College, Cambridge. When World War I began he was commissioned as an officer into the Royal Naval Division and took part in its brief and abortive expedition to Antwerp. On leave in December 1914 he wrote the "war sonnets" that were to make him famous; five months later he died of dysentery and blood poisoning on a troopship destined for Gallipoli.

Brooke was the most popular of the Georgians, pastoral poets who infused nature with nationalist feeling. His early death symbolized the death of a whole generation of patriotic Englishmen. Shortly before then the dean of St. Paul's read

"The Soldier" in a sermon from the Cathedral pulpit, and in a 1915 valediction in the *London Times*, Winston Churchill sounded a note that swelled over the following months and years: "Joyous, fearless, versatile, deeply instructed, with classic symmetry of mind and body, he was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and the most precious is that which is most freely proffered." Brooke's *1914 and Other Poems* was published in June 1915, and during the next decade this and his *Collected Poems* sold three hundred thousand copies.

## The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England. There shall be  
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

- 5 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
A body of England's, breathing English air,  
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

- And think, this heart, all evil shed away,  
10 A pulse in the Eternal mind, no less  
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given,  
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;  
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,  
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

1914

1915

## EDWARD THOMAS

Edward Thomas (1878–1917) was born of Welsh parents in London and was educated there and at Lincoln College, Oxford, which he left with a wife, a baby, and high literary ambitions. Despite his chronic depression, which became more marked over the difficult years that followed, he reviewed up to fifteen books a week, published thirty books between 1897 and 1917, and during those twenty years edited sixteen anthologies and editions. His great gifts as a literary critic appeared to best advantage in his reviewing of poetry, and he was the first to salute new stars in the literary firmament such as Robert Frost and Ezra Pound.

Although he had long been conscientiously reviewing poetry, which he regarded as the highest form of literature, he apparently made no serious attempt to write poems until the autumn of 1914. Then, as he faced the stress of deciding whether to enlist, poems began to pour out of him: five between December 3 and 7, and ten more before the end of the month. His friend Frost offered to find him work in the United States, but feelings of patriotism, and the attraction of a salary that would support his growing family, led him to enlist in July 1915. His awareness of the natural

## WILFRED OWEN

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) was brought up in the backstreets of Birkenhead and Shrewsbury, and on leaving school he took up a post as lay assistant to a country vicar. Removed from the influence of a devout mother, he became increasingly critical of the Church's role in society. His letters and poems of this period show an emerging awareness of the poor's sufferings and the first stirrings of the compassion that was to characterize his later poems about the Western Front. In 1913 he broke with the vicar and went to teach English in France.

For more than a year after the outbreak of war, Owen could not decide whether he ought to enlist. Finally he did, and from January to May 1917 he fought as an officer in the Battle of the Somme. Then, suffering from shell shock, he was sent to a hospital near Edinburgh, where he had the good fortune to meet Siegfried Sassoon, whose first fiercely realistic war poems had just appeared. The influence of Sassoon's satiric realism was a useful tonic to Owen's lush, Keatsian Romanticism. Throughout his months in the hospital, Owen suffered from the horrendous nightmares symptomatic of shell shock. The experience of battle, banished from his waking mind, erupted into his dreams and then into poems haunted with obsessive images of blinded eyes ("Dulce et Decorum Est") and the mouth of hell ("Miners" and "Strange Meeting"). The distinctive music of such later poems owes much of its power to Owen's mastery of alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, half-rhyme, and the pararhyme that he pioneered. This last technique, the rhyming of two words with identical or similar consonants but differing, stressed vowels (such as *groined* / *groaned*, *killed* / *cold*, *hall* / *hell*), of which the second is usually the lower in pitch, produces effects of dissonance, failure, and unfulfillment that subtly reinforce his themes.

Echoing Dante, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, and the Bible, Owen puts literary and religious language into jarring new relationships with the absurdities of modern war experience. He recuperates but distorts the conventions of pastoral elegy, relocating them to scenes of terror, extreme pain, and irredeemable mass death.

In the year of life left to him after leaving the hospital in November 1917, Owen matured rapidly. Success as a soldier, marked by the award of the Military Cross, and as a poet, which had won him the recognition of his peers, gave him a new confidence. He wrote eloquently of the tragedy of young men killed in battle. In his later elegies a disciplined sensuality and a passionate intelligence find their fullest, most moving, and most memorable expression.

Owen was killed in action a week before the war ended.

### Anthem for Doomed Youth

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.<sup>o</sup>

*prayers*

5 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.<sup>o</sup>

*counties*

30 The centuries will burn rich loads  
 With which we groaned,  
 Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,  
 While songs are crooned;  
 But they will not dream of us poor lads,  
 Left in the ground.

Jan. 1918

1931

### Dulce Et Decorum Est<sup>1</sup>

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
 5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines<sup>2</sup> that dropped behind.  
  
 Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 10 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .  
 Dim, through the misty panes<sup>3</sup> and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
  
 15 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.  
  
 If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 20 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
 25 My friend,<sup>4</sup> you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori.

Oct. 1917–Mar. 1918

1920

1. The famous Latin tag [from Horace, *Odes* 3.2.13] means, of course, *It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous!* [Owen's Oct. 16, 1917, letter to his mother].

2. I.e., 5.9-caliber shells.

3. Of the gas mask's celluloid window.

4. Jessie Pope, to whom the poem was originally to have been dedicated, published jingoistic war poems urging young men to enlist. See her poems in "Representing the Great War" in the supplemental ebook.