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The War-Poetry of Soldier Poets

By Vero W. Garratt

Soldier poets are the true historians of the war. Unlike the host of professional versifiers who sat up day and night on Parnassus, pouring out their patriotic zeal in allegorical rhymes of battles and batteries with more than Æsopian facility, the soldier poets have given to life and literature a genuine interpretation of warfare stripped bare of artificiality.

And here I would suggest at the outset that, apart from literary considerations, these poets have done an immense service to humanity in "breaking forth light and truth" on the mist of deceit and misrepresentation that was thrown up between the public's mind and the experience of men in the trenches. The pity is that the mist is so thick that it is almost impossible to penetrate it.

As the majority of people know little of warfare in its real sense, the poetry of soldier poets may be thought to lack the appeal, or, by its absolute downrightness, to be somewhat misunderstood.

But if it fulfils the function of poetry by presenting an aspect of life in accordance with metrical composition neither of those conditions should stand. If it does lack the appeal, it is more because of the truths it unfolds than of any inherent failure to instruct or give pleasure. If it is misunderstood, all that is signified is that the emotions and experience it portrays are too abnormal and severe for easy appreciation, and requires a "stepping out" of the ordinary current of life.

And in so far as this is true the poetry is not likely to live. Indeed it would be thwarting the intentions of Mars and his host to allow these bards to steal a little more fire from heaven, for the sake of the world's peace. They want another age of Kaspars to follow on the present, and therefore Peterkin must not be answered in terms of unofficial poetry.

And this gives the clue to the negative qualities of the work. It is poetry that is not ultra-patriotic. It is not saturated with red, white and blue, nor blatant with extravagant national pride.

Whitehall is never mentioned. The word "patriot" does not occur once in the whole anthology I have before me.* But this does not imply the absence of real intensive patriotism of the poets concerned. There are indeed many poems that reveal an exquisite tenderness for all national ties, but it is not the provocative patriotism let loose in the world like a wild beast that respects only its own craving. Rather is it the patriotism of one who loving all departs

> A little sadly, strangely, fearfully,
> As one who goes to try a mystery;

or as Ivor Gurney thought of his beloved England,

> Now these are memories only, and your skies and rushy sky-pools,
> Fragile mirrors easily broken by moving airs;
> But deep in my heart for ever goes on your daily being
> And uses consecrate.

There is also an entire absence of hate. That the most malicious feelings should have been cultivated by the people least directly concerned with the enemy, sheds an instructive light on war-time psychology. If civilian poets could not write a Hymn of Hate, they were less inclined to write a Hymn of Love, and it is indeed refreshing to remember that at a time when the gospel of hate was being preached at its highest, Hamilton Sorley was addressing Germany as early as 1915 in the following strain:—

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* "The Muse in Arms." By E. B. Osborn. John Murray. 7s. 6d. net.

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War-Poetry

You are blind like us. Your hurt no man designed,
And no man claimed the conquest of your land.
But, gropers both through fields of thought confined,
We stumble and we do not understand.
You only saw your future bigly planned,
And we, the tapering paths of our own mind,
And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.
When it is peace, then we may view again
With new-won eyes each other's truer form,
And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm,
We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,
When it is peace. But, until peace, the storm,
The darkness, and the thunder and the rain.

Truly a genuine reminder that the Peace Treaty did not come from the stuff of which poets are born.

The truth is that soldier poets were too intimate with the thoughts and feelings of fighting men to represent them as crimson-eyed and hectic, with the divine fury of a Fleet Street office.

Neither is this poetry aflame with the so-called glory of warfare. The sentiment that fixed an aureole around every young fellow's head so long as he had enough strength to pull a trigger or stab a body, gains little support from writers who knew the reality of having to do these things. The mantle of Sidney might be pleasant to wear in a comfortable plush armchair, but it lost much of its traditional romance in the trenches. To imagine, as so many people have done, that young men full of the joy and the glory of life plunged into the horrors of battle with the zest of one taking a rose-water bath, is to miss the almost pathetic note of a poem like "Love of Life," written by John Street before going into action :—

Reach out thy hands, thy spirit's hands, to me
And pluck the youth, the magic from my heart—
Magic of dreams whose sensibility
Is plumèd like the light; visions that start
Mad pressure in the blood: desire that thrills
The soul with mad delight: to yearning wed
All slothfulness of life; draw from its bed
The soul of dawn across the twilight hills.
Reach out thy hands, O spirit, till I feel
That I am fully thine; for I shall live
In the proud consciousness that thou dost give,
And if thy twilight fingers round me steal
And draw me unto death—thy votary
Am I, O life; reach out thy hands to me.

The Raemaekers of poetic literature, Siegfried Sassoon, may be too realistic for many tastes, but nevertheless anyone who has had the

sweat of horror in his hair,

and

Climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step,

will realise the force of his compositions in carrying out what Wordsworth might have done had he been in khaki in Flanders.

The marvel is that the Muse was able to keep its head erect amid the devastation and unholy contradictions of true poetic impulse. The trenches scarcely invited that "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" in the finest sense, but happily such poems as "The Rainbow," by Leslie Coulson, show how weak the circumstances could be to the spirit.

I watch the white dawn gleam,
To the thunder of hidden guns.
I hear the hot shells scream
Through skies as sweet as a dream,
Where the silver dawn-break runs.
And stabbing of light
Scorches the virginal white.
But I feel in my being the old high sanctified thrill,
And I thank the gods that the dawn is beautiful still.

But one could quote indefinitely. The "ghostly company" of brilliant young writers whose "silence is now a menace" in the fashioning of a better world, has passed on the soul of the trenches in all its nakedness. That this will be unrecognised by those who see a more desirable method of perpetuating the spirit of the war through the popular-

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ising of barren communiqués and "worked-up" documents is a sound reason why people should protect soldier war-poetry, and make it an influence in moulding the future. In it we have truth combined with beauty of expression; a dignified restraint; an heroic "standing by" the refinements of human nature, and a frank denial of all assumptions that represent war as anything less than a hideous, despoiling monster.

If we return will England be
Just England still to you and me?
The place where we must earn our bread?
We who have walked among the dead,
And watched the smile of Agony,
And seen the price of liberty
Which we have taken carelessly
From other hands. Nay, we shall dread,
If we return,

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