Poetry, soldiers and war

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30 July 1998

Regeneration, a film directed by Gillies Mackinnon
Based on the Regeneration trilogy by Pat Barker
Penguin Books, London.
Regeneration ISBN 0-670-82876-9
The Eye in the Door ISBN 0-670-84414-4
The Ghost Road ISBN 0-14-023628-7

Gillies Mackinnon's *Regeneration* has recently been released on video after failing at the British box office earlier in the year. The three novels by Pat Barker on which the film is based were all widely acclaimed, with *The Ghost Road* winning the 1995 Booker Prize.

The story is a fictionalised account of events that took place during the First World War. It concerns dysfunctional and traumatised soldiers, and is understandably disturbing.

The year is 1917. Soldiers suffering from "war neurosis," due to their experiences in the trenches, have been sent for rehabilitation at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. *Regeneration* focuses on the meeting of two great poets, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, brought together by chance. Its other central character is the respected psychiatrist, Dr William Rivers (Jonathan Pryce), who is charged with restoring these men to a fit state to return to the front.

Siegfried Sassoon[1] (played by James Wilby) is a renowned poet and recently decorated battalion commander. He has just made a public declaration against the continuation of the war and thrown his Military Cross medal for bravery into the River Mersey in Liverpool. In his written declaration, Sassoon wrote, "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 have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be 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."

Faced with such high-profile opposition, the authorities must either court-martial Sassoon or prove him mentally unsound. He is sent to Craiglockhart for this reason.

The film contains a running dialogue between Sassoon and Rivers, sometimes genial, at other times confrontational, about how they should respond to the war. This exchange leaves a deep impression on both men.

There are many horrific cases at Craiglockhart. An army doctor, Anderson, has become traumatised and can no longer bear the slightest sight of blood without experiencing convulsions. Second Lieutenant Billy Prior (Jonny Lee Miller), had to pick up the remains of his fallen comrade, killed by an enemy shell. The experience has rendered him mute. And there is the case of young Captain Burns who has experienced something so vile that he is unable to eat and spends much of his time as a quivering mass on the floor. He was caught by a shell explosion, which threw him through the air and knocked him out. When he regained consciousness he found himself lying with his face embedded in the corpse of a German soldier.

Nightmares and hallucinations haunt the men. As Rivers begins to win Sassoon's trust, the latter describes his visions of dying soldiers to the doctor, as "the nightmares that go on after waking."

Also at Craiglockhart is an aspiring young poet and soldier named Wilfred Owen[2] (played by Stuart Bunce). Owen has often been presented as a man reconciled to the war, but the matter is more complex. On this count *Regeneration* makes an important contribution to historical clarification.

The shy, reserved Owen introduces himself to the celebrated and self-confident Sassoon, to whom he looks up as a hero. Sassoon reads some of Owen's early work, which avoids the subject of war, because he sees the spirit of poetry as incompatible with warfare's destructive character. Sassoon urges Owen to write on the war and the two begin to shape what will become some of Owen's most famous poems.

Owen's confidence grows as he develops his own unique style, to the point where he begins to throw back at Sassoon unresolved ideas in his own work. Through Owen, the older and more experienced Sassoon begins to perceive the full tragedy of the war and his own part in it.

Both men, thrown together by chance, are appalled that a generation of young men is being senselessly sacrificed. Both feel powerless to stop the slaughter. Owen tells Sassoon, "Sometimes when you're alone in the trenches, I mean, at night you get the feeling of something *ancient*. As if the trenches had always been there. You know one trench we held, it had skulls in the side.... And do you know it was actually easier to believe they were men from Marlborough's army than to think they'd been alive two years ago. It's as if all other wars had somehow distilled themselves into this war, and that makes it something

you almost can't challenge. It's like a very deep voice saying, 'Run along, little man. Be thankful if you survive.'"

Neither Owen nor Sassoon considers himself a pacifist. Sassoon is at times consumed with guilt at having the "luxury" of a respite from the fighting on the front. Rivers exploits this in order to get Sassoon to co-operate. Sassoon eventually despairs at the utter uselessness of his protest in the face of the "indifference" shown towards the suffering of his fellow solders and is declared fit to return to active service.

Rivers harbours no illusions about the terrible effects the war is having on its combatants, and is privately distressed by the cases. But he has learnt to see active service as a commitment on the part of the soldier. Those who don an army uniform, he believes, must accept the consequences. As events unfold, however, Rivers is forced to question his views.

Through the use of flashbacks, the film vividly captures the horrors of trench warfare. Many of the scenes are uncompromising in their depiction of the brutality and tragic waste. The connection between the experience of the trenches and the state of mind of the soldier-patients at Craiglockhart is developed through a series of dream-like images.

The film depicts the increasing tensions and uncertainties that were developing in the army. The orchestrated calm of the hospital breakfast table is regularly disrupted by news from the front. At one point Sassoon reads out the casualty figures from the morning newspaper, and points out the name of a young soldier he knew. There is a bewildered and uncomfortable silence around the table. Sassoon is enraged at what he perceives as a general lack of sympathy. Rivers in turn is angered at Sassoon for disrupting his patients' "recovery".

Rivers is far more attuned to the sensibilities of the ordinary army soldier than most of those in his profession. While on forced leave, due to exhaustion, he travels to London to visit an old friend and fellow neurologist, Dr Yealland. Like Rivers, Yealland is now involved in treating those psychologically damaged by the war, but he employs rather different methods. Rivers is sickened when his friend straps a patient suffering from mutism into a chair and electrically tortures him into speaking. Yelland boasts afterwards that his department has a 100 percent success rate. Rivers begins to question the morality of a process whereby he certifies men as sane only to send them back to the very situation that initially robbed them of their sanity.

Gillies Mackinnon (who also directed *Small Faces*) does an admirable job in bringing a fascinating story to the screen. There are a number of impressive performances, particularly those of Pryce and Miller. One of the strengths of the original story is the power of the dialogue between the main characters. This is faithfully conveyed in the film.

Regeneration was poorly promoted and only played at selected cinemas. It would be an unjust fate for this well-acted and brilliantly shot film to remain relatively unknown. I hope its video release will enable it to reach the wider audience it deserves. It should also encourage a reading of Pat Barker's trilogy, which provides a compelling study of real-life figures, as well as fictitious characters, to illustrate the human tragedy of the war.

Notes

1. Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). Sassoon expressed his reactions to the brutalities and waste of war while still an officer in a number of works, *The Old Huntsman* (1917), *The Counter-Attack and Other poems* (1918), as well as in a series of semi-autobiographical novels after the war. Sassoon's anti-war poetry is characterised by a grim style, permeated with resentfulness and anger.

2. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918). The First World War produced one of the greatest concentrations of poetic talent in English literary history, including Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Herbert Read and Isaac Rosenberg. But for generations the memory of "The Great War" has been refracted through the words of Wilfred Owen. His *Dulce Et Decorum Est* is probably the most powerful statement of anti-patriotism put to verse, while *Anthem for Doomed Youth* evokes the immoral waste of a whole generation ("What passing-bells for those who die as cattle? Only the monstrous anger of the guns").

After enlisting in the army, Owen fought as an officer in the Battle of the Somme. He was hospitalised for shell shock in May 1917. His chance meeting with Sassoon provided not simply a stylistic influence but an all-important direction for Owen's work. Owen sums this up best in a sadly prophetic letter to Sassoon written as he returned to the front: "And you have fixed my life--however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze." Owen returned to the front in November 1917 and was killed in action just one week before the Armistice was announced.