The war poet Wilfred Owen 80 years on

Harvey Thompson
2 December 1998

This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the end of the First World War. The few remaining veterans now average 100 years old. Throughout Britain, in workplaces, schools and at city centre gatherings, the traditional two-minute silence was observed on November 11 at 11 a.m. Public ceremonies took place throughout Europe attended by large crowds composed of veterans and their relatives, young people and children.

One man's name that was mentioned more often than most was the poet and soldier Wilfred Owen. He was killed in action just days before the war ended. A recent edition of over a hundred of his poems sold tens of thousands of copies. In his hometown of Shrewsbury there were four days of tributes. When the Queen visited Ieper in Belgium (the heart of the bloody battlefield of Ypres), she saw a copy of his poem, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, displayed in the museum near the Menin Gate memorial to 54,000 missing soldiers. In the small northern French village of Ors, mourners laid flowers on his grave and remembered his life and legacy.

Wilfred Owen was a remarkable young man. When he died he was just 25 years old, but his poetry has proved enduring and influential and is among the best known in the English language. He left behind a unique testament to the horrific impact of the First World War on an entire generation of young soldiers.

For many, his poems epitomise the experience of the 'Great War'. However, the official canonisation of Owen--which began after the Second World War--has done much to distort the complexity of his work.

Wilfred Edward Salter Owen was born at Plas Wilmot, Oswestry, Shropshire on March 18, 1893 into a family of fairly comfortable means. At the time Wilfred's parents lived with his grandfather, but when the old man died in 1897 they moved to Birkenhead near Liverpool. There they spent 10 years in poor districts, constantly struggling against financial difficulties. Wilfred was the oldest of four children in a very close-knit family. He was most devoted to his mother. Although his father was a compassionate man he was somewhat intolerant and had little in common with the young Wilfred.

In 1907 the Owens moved to Shrewsbury. These were happy times for Wilfred. Surrounded by open country, from his attic window he could see the Shropshire hills, and the Roman ruins of Uriconium were only a bike ride away. It was here, as he walked through the meadows, that images came to him that would later appear in his poems.

As he was the eldest in the family, Wilfred's parents expected a lot of him and always gave his education the highest priority. On occasion, Mr. Owen would become impatient with his son's 'bookishness' and lack of more 'boyish' activities, but Wilfred's mother would be quick to come to his defence and win out against her husband. This early conflict in his family seemed to have an enduring impact on Owen, and later resolved itself into the struggle between passive contemplation and the call to action that is evident in much of his work.

On leaving school--where he did well, but not brilliantly--Wilfred took a job as a junior teacher in an elementary school. In October 1911 he sat a qualifying exam for London University, which he barely passed. This presented his parents with a problem, as they were unable to afford the necessary fees. So if Wilfred were to enter university he would have to become a scholarship student. His mother, who was a deeply religious woman of the Calvinist evangelical tradition, had harboured hopes of Wilfred entering the church. Partly out of sympathy for his mother's wishes and partly out of necessity, Wilfred accepted an unpaid post as lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden, Oxfordshire, in return for board, lodgings and tuition.

It was while living in the parish of Dunsden that Wilfred began to write poetry, although the first poems that can be dated with any certainty were written a few years later when he was 17. A wide range of subjects interested Wilfred including archaeology, botany, astronomy and geology, but he was most attracted to the arts. Owen suggested to a cousin who was staying with him that they write sonnets on given subjects. Some friends joined in. Owen began to impose a necessary self-discipline and refinement to his writing. The poems *Happiness*, *Music*, *The End* and *My Shy Hand* originate from this period.

His work in Dunsden left a profound and lasting impression on Owen. On visiting the rural slums scattered over the Oxfordshire parish, he was brought face to face with a level of social misery he had not previously encountered. The poverty, squalor and sickness weighed heavily on his mind and forced him, for the first time, to turn his normally introspective vision onto the wider world. C. Day Lewis noted that the powerful 'indignant compassion' for suffering humanity that permeated many of his greatest poems could be traced, not to his experiences on the Western Front but to the slums of Dunsden.

Throughout his adult life, Owen wrote often about his experiences. In one of his earliest letters home on March 23, 1912 Owen described one of his daily encounters:

'... a gentle little girl of five, fast sinking under Consumption--contracted after chicken-pox. Isn't it pitiable ... the Father is permanently out of work, and the Mother I fancy half starving for the sake of four children. This, I suppose, is only a typical case: one of many Cases! O hard word! How it savours of rigid, frigid professionalism! How it suggests smooth and polished, formal, labelled, mechanical callousness!'

These experiences, coupled with what Owen saw as the indifference of the Church to the wretchedness all around, led him to leave his post and Dunsden. In a letter to his mother on January 4, 1913 Owen wrote, 'I have murdered my false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it. If not, adieu to the still falser creeds that hold the hearts of nearly all my fellow men.'

By mid-September Owen was in Bordeaux working as a teacher of English in the Berlitz School of Languages. Owen had an affection for France since visiting Brittany with his father during his childhood. Being employed by the famous Berlitz School meant working very long hours for an absurdly low wage. In the summer of 1914 Owen met for the first time a published poet, Laurent Tailhade. Owen was very much encouraged by Tailhade's favourable criticism of his early works, but still he was undecided as to the path he should choose in life.

Then, in August 1914, war erupted in Europe. Owen's attitude to the outbreak of war was largely indifferent. In France he would not have witnessed the same level of enthusiasm for the war that he would have seen in England. Owen had, by this time, developed a disregard and even a suspicion of government propaganda. The French government had moved to Bordeaux while he was still working there and this brought him

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into contact with many influential people. It is not clear how much this influenced his attitude to the war, but he certainly never exhibited any antipathy towards Germany and was in no hurry to enlist in the army. It is interesting to contrast Owen's views with those of another famous war poet, Rupert Brooke, who saw the fighting as a release from the pettiness of everyday life.

Throughout the next year Owen went through several jobs. He visited a Bordeaux hospital where casualties had started arriving from the front. The hospital was grossly ill-equipped to deal with such an emergency, and Owen witnessed operations being performed without anaesthetic. Confronted by the realities of war for the first time, his deep sense of shock was evident in his letters home. He felt he could no longer stand aloof from what was happening around him.

At the same, time he was putting more serious consideration into his development as a poet. In a letter written in March, he wrote, 'The fullest life liveable [is] that of a Poet.' But just as he started to consider what becoming a serious poet would entail, his poetic energy all but dried up. In justifying his decision to enlist in October 1915, he quoted a remark by the French romantic writer Vigny in a letter, 'If any man despairs of becoming a Poet, let him carry his pack and march in the ranks.'

For the next 14 months Owen was involved in military training in various parts of England. During a period of leave, he visited a London poetry bookshop run by the poet Harold Monro. Monro was 'very struck' by Owen's sonnets and went over them in great detail. Like Tailhade, Monro had written poems that decried the war. He was one of several influential writers with whom Owen came into contact, who either had reservations about the war or opposed it outright.

The year 1916 was a very busy one for Owen. He was commissioned into the Manchester Regiment in the summer, and by the end of the year the delicate schoolteacher had been transformed into a toughened, capable officer. His pale complexion was now more tanned and he had grown in physical stature.

It was during the worst winter of the war that Owen was drafted to France. The task of his detachment was to retain positions in no-man's land in the Beaumont Hamel area. These experiences were later set down in *Exposure* and *The Sentry*. The landscape of the Western Front was an uncompromisingly desolate one. Every sector was virtually the same, a patchwork of trenches, barbed wire, craters and ruined buildings littered with corpses. In a letter home on February 4, 1917, Owen described 'the universal pervasion of Ugliness. Hideous landscapes, vile noises, foul language ... everything unnatural, broken, blasted; the distortion of the dead, whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth. In poetry we call them the most glorious.'

In April 1917 Owen took part in a successful attack on the village of Fayet. He was in continuous action for 12 days without relief. During this time he was caught in a shell explosion which blew him through the air. He was forced to spend the next few days sheltering in a hole near the dismembered remains of a fellow soldier. He escaped largely unhurt, but was diagnosed as suffering from shell shock. Owen was invalided and eventually ended up in Craiglockhart War Hospital, near Edinburgh, Scotland.

The four-month stay at Craiglockhart was a crucial turning point for Owen. He began to write vast amounts of poetry. He discovered that writing had a therapeutic value for him. Although he did not write directly about his recent experiences, it served to release the build-up of tension in his mind. Craiglockhart was a fairly unorthodox institution for the time and was viewed with suspicion by the military authorities. One of the staff, Dr. Brock, put Owen in touch with literary circles in Edinburgh and involved him in elements of what would now be termed 'social work'. By the end of July Owen had become editor and chief contributor to the hospital magazine, *The Hydra*. He also acted in a play and had planned to write one himself. At the same time he kept up his correspondence.

In the middle of August 1917 the well-known poet and celebrated army officer, Siegfried Sassoon, arrived at Craiglockhart. It was never established if Sassoon was actually suffering from shell shock or not, but it was a convenient way for the army to silence him without drawing too much attention to his case. Sassoon had begun to agitate against the war, which he declared had become a war of 'aggression and conquest'. This created no small headache for the military authorities, as Sassoon was widely known for his bravery at the front.

Owen introduced himself to Sassoon in the manner of an aspiring young poet meeting with a literary giant and hero. Years later, Sassoon admitted that even as he read through Owen's poems he had not realised what 'order of talent' he had encountered. Sassoon praised what he thought stood out in Owen's work, but he was also very blunt about what he disliked. Most importantly, Sassoon encouraged Owen to write about the war.

It may seem strange that a soldier fresh from the war trenches could find any other subject than the war to write about, but it was not such a simple matter. Each night from the rooms of Craiglockhart would come the tormented cries of men having the most horrific nightmares about their experiences on the front. Many had seen their comrades horribly maimed or killed. Some could not escape these ghastly visions even when they awoke, suffering hallucinations. Owen also suffered from this terrible side effect of war, so to write about what had happened to him was a courageous thing to attempt.

For a short time, Owen imitated Sassoon's style, but he soon outgrew this and went on to develop his own. After leaving Craiglockhart, he went to London where, through Sassoon, he met H.G. Wells and Robert Ross, Oscar Wilde's literary executor. For a brief period he became known as a minor literary figure, even though many had still never seen his works. In January, following a colliery disaster, Owen wrote *Miners* which was published in *The Nation*. Around this time, Owen became acquainted with another noted poet, Osbert Sitwell, who did so much afterwards to promote Owen's works. In June 1918 Owen was graded fit for general service and the following month returned to the front for the final time.

In the summer of 1917 the war had reached a stalemate, but there were strong indications that things could very quickly go terribly wrong for the Allied powers. Several mutinies occurred throughout the French army and they even spread to the ranks of the usually well-disciplined British troops. In Russia, there was a second revolution, this time led by the Bolshevik Party, bringing to power a government of workers and soldiers. By January 1918 Russia had withdrawn from the war. This had disastrous consequences for the Allied armies. Germany launched a successful offensive on the Somme--an area which, just 16 months earlier, had witnessed a series of battles with over a million casualties on both sides without any significant military gains made. The German army rapidly reached Marne for the second time in the war, and by June was advancing towards Paris.

The unfavourable international situation, coupled with industrial strikes at home, had meanwhile created a curious type of war-hysteria in Britain. There was a plot uncovered to assassinate the prime minister. Rumours were circulating in the press of a secret list of 47,000 potential spies in influential positions of British society who were being blackmailed by the German government. Anyone who criticised the war was labelled a 'conchie' (conscientious objector) and accused of aiding the Kaiser to defeat Britain.

Owen was redrafted to France by the end of August, just as the Allied forces were preparing the counteroffensive. His letters of this time are all written in a very solemn tone. The record left by his brother makes clear that Owen did not expect to return from France. His final message to his mother contained a quote from Tagore's *Gitanjali*: 'When I go from here, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.'

The Allied forces breached the Hindenburg line on September 26. Owen

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was fighting on the Beaurevoir-Fonsomme line, where he was awarded the Military Cross for 'conspicuous gallantry'. He went into the line for the last time on October 29 and was killed five days later on November 4 while crossing the Oise-Sambre Canal, near Or. Hostilities finally ceased at 11.00 a.m. November 11, 1918. The telegram with the news of Owen's death reached his parents in Shrewsbury just as the town bells rang out to announce the Armistice.

The artistic trends out of which Owen developed his own poetic personality were amongst the richest of nineteenth century literature. Very early on, Owen came under the influence of artists and critics of the 'Aesthetic' school, which maintained that it did not matter fundamentally what a poem was about. According to this school, the essentials were things such as mood, form, rhythm, inner harmony, or simply its 'music'. Owen avidly imitated these late Victorian poets such as Tennyson, Swinburne and Wilde, and their influence can most clearly be seen in his earliest poetry, such as the ode on *Uriconium*. But it was from the Romantic poets that Owen drew his deepest and most enduring inspiration, especially Keats and Shelley.

Owen was so fascinated with Keats that he sometimes modelled his private life on certain aspects of his idol. Shelley, whom Owen called 'the brightest genius of his time', remained a strong influence throughout his life. Many critics have noted that, to some extent, Owen led a revival of the language of the Romantics, which had been disfigured beyond recognition by the beginning of the twentieth century. In this way Owen's work can be seen as a bridge between the last and present centuries; the old and the modern age.

The First World War produced an extraordinary flowering of truly great poetry. Amongst those who expressed their feelings in poetry were; Thomas Hardy, Rupert Brooke, Robert Graves, Rudyard Kipling, Herbert Read, Harold Monro, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Ford Madox Ford, Georg Trakl, Anton Schnak, Yvan Goll, Charles Vildrac and Rene Arcos. But with the possible exception of Rosenberg--who was also killed in action--no other 'war poet' attained the same intensity of feeling as did Owen. Like all his fellow soldier-poets, Owen experienced a deep horror and disgust at the reality of war, but had to reconcile this with his sense of duty to fight along with his generation. He shared with his peers the feeling of frustration and anger at the outright indifference of the 'men in power' to the suffering in the trenches, and the perceived ignorance amongst the 'civilians'. He also echoed the common sentiment on the front that a whole generation of young men were being senselessly slaughtered by an older layer of politicians and generals--and that the latter were worthy of far more contempt than any German soldier.

But unlike Sassoon, Owen avoided a bitter or sarcastic approach and never wrote in a cynical tone. He was not interested in the momentary feelings of shock at the war, which was the usual response of the often quite brilliant satirical or sardonic pieces of his contemporaries. Owen strove for something more permanent.

Owen's work leaves one with an enduring sense of the tragedy of war. He used his strong sense of indignation to create a feeling of compassion for the soldier. He would attempt to fix the scenery of the war firmly in the mind of the reader and in this way more poignantly stress the tremendous suffering that constitutes 'the pity of war'.

Just as radical as the approach to his subject matter are the sounds, the 'music', in Owen's poetry. By the beginning of the century, many poets were dissatisfied with the limitations of conventional full-rhyme poetry. Some had broken away from full-rhyme poetry, such as Jules Romain in France and the American writer Emily Dickinson. But Owen, through experimentation, may have independently arrived at half-rhyme and para-rhyme. (The former appears in ancient Icelandic poetry, and the latter can be found in Old Welsh poems. It is uncertain whether Owen was acquainted with either.)

A full-rhyme occurs where two words are the same in sound from the last stressed vowel onwards, providing that the first consonants are different; e.g. rain/pain, mud/blood. In a half-rhyme, the words are identical only in their final consonant sounds; e.g. call/hill, eyes/close. The term para-rhyme seems to have been coined by another First World War poet, Edmund Blunden. In his authoritative *Memoir* of Owen he refers to a pair of words that are identical in consonant sounds before and after different stressed vowel sounds; e.g., bees/boys, leaves/lives. When describing incidents in the war Owen often used half- or para-rhyme to create a dissonant effect--as the reader expects the rhyme to be completed but it is not--and by making the second word lower in pitch than the first, feelings of melancholy, failure and despair are conveyed.

One of Owen's most effective methods was to end a poem in an unexpected way, creating a feeling of disorientation. In *The Parable of the Old man and the Young*, Owen takes the story of Abraham and his son Isaac from the Old Testament to illustrate the sacrifice of a whole generation.

' ... Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And then builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
... offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.'

Owen's ability to evoke disturbing and complex conditions in a commonplace factual language was motivated in part by his desire to keep within the comprehension of 'the ordinary soldier'. *The Next War* explores the sense of impending death in everyday speech, making the allusions all the more emotive:

'Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland, --
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath, --
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He spat at us with bullets and he's coughed Shrapnel
... We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars; when each proud fighter brags,
He wars on Death -- for lives; not men -- for flags.'

There was no glory in war for Owen. A strong bleak vision permeates his work. *Futility* is typical of this. In poems such as *Mental Cases*, *Conscious* and *Disabled* Owen focuses on the human consequences of the war, including serious disfigurement and madness. Probably Owen's three most well-known poems are *Apologia pro Poemate Meo*, the remarkable *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, and the great anti-patriotic verse *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. But perhaps Owen's finest work is the haunting *Strange Meeting*, which tells the tale of two soldiers, from opposite sides of the war, who are both killed and meet again in hell. The first soldier seeks to console the other, but he answers:

'... whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something had been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.'

This, almost certainly auto-biographical poem, which was inspired by

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Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*, ends with the moving lines:

'... I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned.
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now ...'

See Also:

Poetry, soldiers and war

Regeneration, a film directed by Gillies Mackinnon

[30 July 1998]

Oxford University: *The Hydra* was the magazine produced by the patients resident at Craiglockhart Military Hospital during the First World War.

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Sources used for this article include:

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