

Terence Davies' *Benediction*: The mostly tortured life of poet Siegfried Sassoon

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15 June 2022

Written and directed by Terence Davies

The gifted British filmmaker Terence Davies (*The Long Day Closes*, *House of Mirth*, *Of Time and the City*, *The Deep Blue Sea*) has a new, complex film, *Benediction*, about the mostly tortured life of poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967), best known for his anti-war poems and stance during World War I. *Benediction* opened in the US in early June. (Sassoon had no German ancestry; his mother named him Siegfried out of a love of Richard Wagner's operas!)

Sassoon (played as a young man by Jack Lowden) is decorated for bravery on the Western Front during the imperialist slaughter of 1914–18 but develops a deep hatred of the conflict and those conducting it.

In July 1917, he issues his "Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration," which reads in part, "I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that the 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 sufferings of the troops and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust."

For his courageous act, Sassoon is shipped off to a mental hospital in Scotland where he is treated by a psychiatrist for shell shock. At the hospital, he encounters and influences fellow anti-war poet Wilfred Owen (Matthew Tennyson). Owen dies in northern France only one week before the signing of the armistice in November 1918.

Following the war, Sassoon, somewhat at loose ends, enters into and exits a series of mostly unhappy relationships with men. His most unfortunate partner is actor, composer and "wit," Ivor Novello, played by

Jeremy Irvine as a dreadful, thoroughly selfish swine. Seeking sexual and societal "normalcy" and desiring to be a father, Sassoon marries Hester Gatty (Kate Phillips), and they know a few presumably short-lived moments of happiness.

Late in life, Sassoon (now the talented Peter Capaldi), bitter and sullen, cut off from almost everyone, converts to Roman Catholicism in his desperation for salvation or contentment. He struggles to have a relationship with his son (Richard Goulding). He has by now made his unfortunate wife (now Gemma Jones) utterly miserable.

Davies has commented that Sassoon "was always searching for redemption. None of us can find redemption in other people or in other things. You have to find it yourself. At the end of his life, I think he was actually quite unfulfilled. That touched me enormously. ... I think he wanted to feel worthy. Worthy of what, I don't know."

Sassoon was only one of a number of 20th-century British (and Anglo-American) poets troubled by feelings of social and moral insecurity who sought to find "stability" in the bosom of one Church or another. (The apparently irresistible progress toward religion of later, erstwhile left-wing writers led poet Adrian Mitchell, in *The Oxford Hysteria of English Poetry*, to note mockingly that there hadn't "been much time / For poetry since the 'twenties / What with leaving the Communist Church / To join the Catholic Party / And explaining why in the *C.I.A. Monthly*.")

As for Sassoon's writing, Davies commented, "I think the war poetry endures. Some of that later poetry is heartbreaking and deals with loneliness and very often it's conveyed in just two stanzas. They're wonderful because they're diluted down to the bare essentials."

Davies was evidently intrigued by these two most prominent features of Sassoon's life: his passionate opposition to the world war and, later, his determined

effort to suppress his sexuality, which, sadly, was largely successful.

Benediction is certainly worth seeing, and a more successful portrait of an artist than Davies' previous effort in regard to 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson, *A Quiet Passion* (2016).

At a time of renewed global warfare, with the great powers once again tobogganing toward disaster, pretending all the while that the military life is glorious and heroic (unless it's Russian or Chinese!), it is worthwhile recalling Sassoon's horror at the horrors of war.

In his volume *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (1918), the writer savagely and mournfully portrayed the conditions in the trenches. In *Prelude: The Troops*, Sassoon wrote

Dim, gradual thinning of the shapeless gloom
Shudders to drizzling daybreak that reveals
Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky
Haggard and hopeless. They, who have beaten
down
The stale despair of night, must now renew
Their desolation in the truce of dawn,
Murdering the livid hours that grope for peace.

In the title poem ...

An officer came blundering down the trench:
"Stand-to and man the fire step!" On he went ...
Gasping and bawling, "Fire-step ... counter-
attack!"
Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right
Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;
And stumbling figures looming out in front.
"O Christ, they're coming at us!" Bullets spat,
And he remembered his rifle ... rapid fire ...
And started blazing wildly ... then a bang
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him
out
To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he
choked
And fought the flapping veils of smothering
gloom,
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans ...

Down, and down, and down, he sank and
drowned,
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

This is the entirety of Sassoon's poem *Attack*

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that
shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to, meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

In *Glory of Women*, Sassoon lit into the patriotic females at home who "love us when we're heroes, home on leave,/ Or wounded in a mentionable place." The same women cannot "believe that British troops 'retire' / When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,/ Trampling the terrible corpses—blind with blood."

As with all great anti-war writers, Sassoon was not only aware of the sufferings of his "own side." In the same poem, he concludes by paying tribute to "the enemy," writing

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud.



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