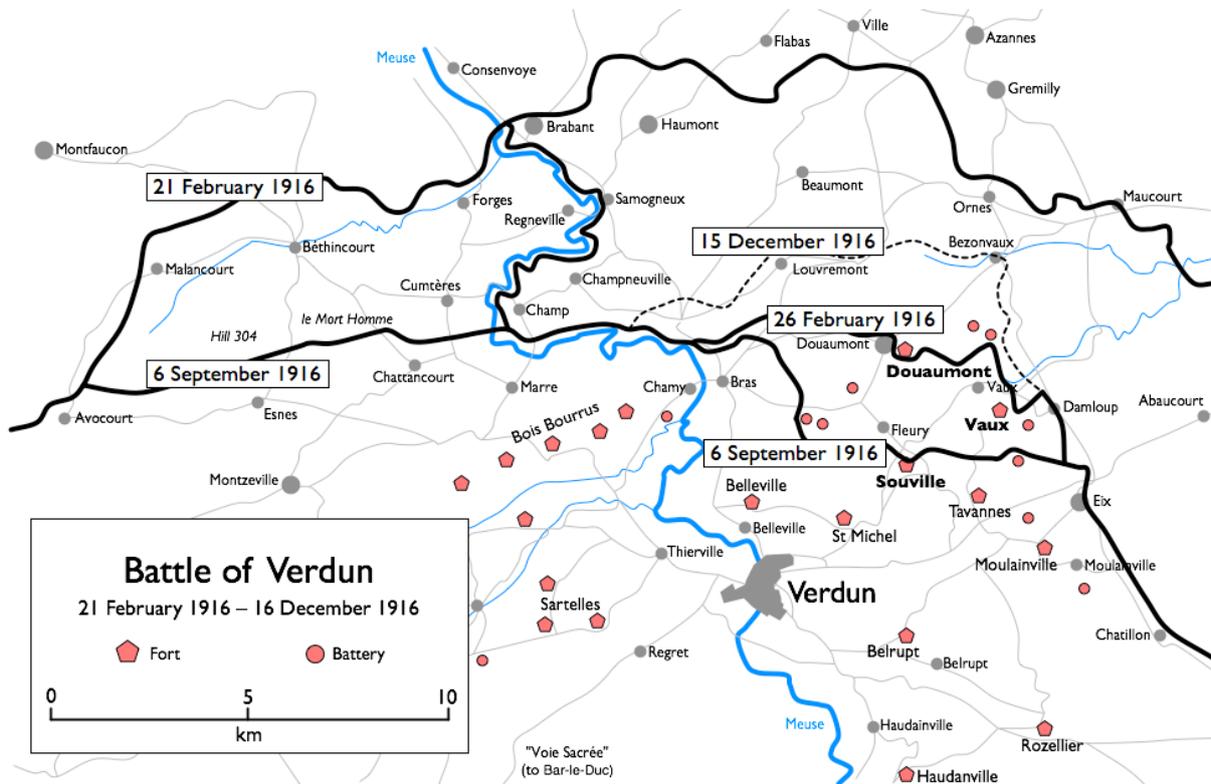


Verdun, France

11th November 2022



This book is not about heroes. English Poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

WAR, n. A by-product of the arts of peace. The most menacing political condition is a period of international amity. ... War loves to come like a thief in the night; professions of eternal amity provide the night.

Ambrose Bierce (1842-c. 1914), *The Devil's Dictionary* (1906)

Stephen Crane

(1871-1900)

'War Is Kind'

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,
Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom—
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Swift, blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

(1899)

Rupert Brooke

(1887-1915)

‘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;
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,
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)¹

¹ Rupert Brooke was a wellborn, gifted and handsome youth. When World War I broke out in August 1914, Rupert Brooke was among the many to welcome the war. The general belief at the early stages of the conflict was that no sacrifice but the most precious was acceptable. He was commissioned as an officer into the Royal Naval Division and took part in a brief and disastrous expedition to Antwerp. He died of dysentery and blood poisoning on a troopship destined for Gallipoli – the scene of determined Turkish resistance to the Allied forces during the Dardanelles campaign – in April 1915. He was buried on the Greek island of Skyros. His early death in the Great War did not have him see the horrors of the trench warfare on the Western Front.

‘The Soldier’ is a sonnet, i.e. a fourteen-line poem with a fixed rhyming scheme and structure, usually a favourite vehicle of love poets.

John McCrae

(1872-1918)

'In Flanders Fields'

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

(May 1915)

Wilfred Wilson Gibson

(1878-1962)

'The Messages'

"I cannot quite remember.... There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench – and three
Whispered their dying messages to me...."

Back from the trenches, more dead than alive,
Stone-deaf and dazed, and with a broken knee,
He hobbled slowly, muttering vacantly:

"I cannot quite remember.... There were five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench, and three
Whispered their dying messages to me...."

"Their friends are waiting, wondering how they thrive –
Waiting a word in silence patiently....
But what they said, or who their friends may be

"I cannot quite remember.... There where five
Dropt dead beside me in the trench – and three
Whispered their dying messages to me...."

(1916)

Siegfried Sassoon

(1886-1967)

'The General'

"Good-morning; good-morning!" the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
"He's a cheery old card²," grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

• • •

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

(April 1917)³

² an eccentric person; a character

³ Arras is a city in northern France, in the front line throughout much of the war. The British assault on the Western Front that began on 9th April 1917 was known as the Battle of Arras. The British suffered casualties of 84,000 troops, inflicted casualties of 75,000 on the Germans, and took 13,000 prisoners. The offensive began well enough for the attackers, thanks to much-improved artillery methods and to a new poison gas shell that paralysed the hostile artillery. Vimy Ridge, at the northern end of the 15-mile battlefield, fell to the Canadian Corps, but the exploitation of this success was frustrated by the congestion of traffic in the British rear. Though the attack was continued until 5th May, stiffer German resistance prevented exploitation of the advances made in the first five days. However, Vimy Ridge proved an invaluable defensive position against the German offensive of March 1918.

Wilfred Owen

(1893-1918)

‘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.
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.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls’ brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

(August 1917)⁴

⁴ Owen is noted for his anger at the cruelty and waste of war and his pity for its victims. In 1915 Owen enlisted in the Artists’ Rifles. The experience of trench warfare brought him to rapid maturity; the poems written after January 1917 are full of anger at war’s brutality, an elegiac pity for “those who die as cattle,” and a rare descriptive power. In June 1917 he was invalided home because of shell shock, and while in a hospital near Edinburgh met Siegfried Sassoon, who shared his feelings about the war and who became interested in his work. Despite the plans of well-wishers to find him a staff job, he returned to France in August 1918 as a company commander. He was awarded the Military Cross in October and was killed a week before Armistice Day, 11th November.

Wilfred Owen

(1893-1918)

'Strange Meeting'

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,—
By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

With a thousand pains that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said that other, 'save the undone years,
The hopelessness. 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.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled,
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress.
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery,
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery:
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels,
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.

'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 ...'

(March 1918)

Wilfred Owen

(1893-1918)

'Futility'

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
–O what made fatuous⁵ sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

(May 1918)

⁵ complacently or inanely foolish

John Donne

(1572-1631)

Meditation 17: Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends's or of thine own were.

Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

(1624)



'Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red' by artist Paul Cummins, made up of 888,246 ceramic poppies fills the moat of the Tower of London, to commemorate the First World War in London