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Wilfred Owen and the Great War Centenary

Abstract: This article sets out to examine and summarise Wilfred Owen's rise from relative obscurity in the 1920s to the immense popularity and critical acclaim that he enjoys today. The first section focuses on the first editions of Owen's poetry arranged in the 20s and 30s by his earliest champions: Siegfried Sassoon, Edith Sitwell and Edmund Blunden, as well as on W.B. Yeats's notorious exclusion of Owen from his influential *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936. Section two describes the various factors that contributed to the major boost in popularity that Owen's output experienced in the 1960s. Around that time appeared the first full-blown critical studies of his poetry together with first biographies, which raised questions about Owen's sexuality. The next part assesses Owen's status in contemporary criticism, providing examples of the poet's noted advocates and detractors; also, it attempts to account for his popularity with the current British readership. The final section relates the ongoing debate on Owen's place in the canon, which was ignited by David Cameron's Education Secretary's highly publicised remarks about the skewed perception of Britain's role in the Great War and by a series of centenary publications about Owen and the First World War. The article concludes with an attempt to predict the ways in which the centenary is likely to affect Owen's critical status in the future.

Keywords: Great War poetry, Great War Centenary, Wilfred Owen

The year of the much anticipated centenary of the Great War began with a blast. On 2nd January David Cameron's Education Secretary Michael Gove wrote an angry feature in the *Daily Mail* entitled "Why does the Left insist on belittling true British heroes?" (Gove 2014). The politician announced that the aim of his centenary politics would be to promote "a proper rounded understanding of our country's past," which "has never been needed more." Britain's collective perception of the war, he argued, "has been overlaid by misunderstandings and misrepresentations which reflect ... at worst, an unhappy compulsion on the part of some to denigrate virtues such as patriotism, honour and courage." The most pervasive, and the most dangerous, of such misconceptions is the notion that the Great War was "a misbegotten shambles — a series of catastrophic mistakes perpetrated by an out-of-touch elite." Gove attributed its popularity to fictional representations of the war in films such

as the *Blackadder* series, which — with the help of left-wing academics — seem to have fossilised the pointless-war narrative. Education Secretary bemoaned the fact that this skewed perspective resists the impact of historical research, which — in his view — rehabilitates some of the most controversial commanders, challenges the conception of the battle of the Somme as a “futility” and redefines the conflict as a “just war.”

Gove’s wording here is quite revealing — the word “futility” is the title of one of Wilfred Owen’s most popular war poems and an expression that, in the eyes of many British people exposed to only several of his war lyrics at school, encapsulates his response to the war. Although Gove does not explicitly mention Owen, his attack on the received denial of the Great War’s nobility actually targets an attitude that could be ascribed to the dominance of Owen’s poetry in shaping the collective memory of the First World War in Britain.¹ This article will outline Owen’s passage from his relative obscurity at the time of his death to the status of the supreme British war poet, which he enjoys today. I shall illustrate the rising popularity of his verse by referring to consecutive editions of his collected poems, the most influential critical assessments of his work as well as to selected biographies and recent fictional representations of Owen. My article will conclude with an attempt to determine the way that the ongoing centenary debates and re-evaluations are likely to affect Owen’s critical status in Britain.

1. Owen’s reputation in the interwar years

In the introduction to *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, George Walter draws a clear dividing line between two radically different poetic responses to the Great War: the idealistically-heroic — epitomised by Rupert Brooke, and the disillusioned — represented by Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Brooke saw the war as a chance for Britain to shake off its decadence and atone for its sins. The fervent patriotism of his poetry combined with the circumstances of his untimely death contributed to the poet’s swift mythologisation and to the exponential rise of his popularity (the collection of Brooke’s verse being reprinted every two months for three consecutive years) (Walter 2006: xv–xvi). Walter locates the waning of Brooke’s supremacy at the end of 1916 and sees it as a consequence of the development of the conflict. In tune with the historian A.J.P. Taylor’s oft-cited remark that “Idealism perished on the Somme,” the poetry that began to take over expressed a growing disillusionment with the continuing war effort and its ethos (Walter, xx). In retrospect, this shift could be said to have paved the way for the appreciation of

¹ What Gove implied but did not say was verbalised by others. In an ironic rebuttal, the *Guardian*’s Jonathan Jones wrote, “Wilfred Owen and Blackadder have apparently conned us into thinking the great war was futile, when in reality it was a ‘just’ war provoked by German aggression” (Jones 2014).

Owen's poetry, which, however, did not become known to a wider audience until after the end of the war. At the moment of his death on the frontline, only one week before the Armistice, Owen had only published five poems. The rest of his output remained known only to his mother and to a narrow circle of literary friends, which included Sassoon and Robert Graves.

It was Sassoon who introduced Owen's poems to Edith Sitwell, one of the iconic figures of English modernism, who edited the first collection of his poetry (consisting of only 23 lyrics) in 1920. Although the book failed to arouse a considerable public interest in Owen, it received rather positive reviews (with John Middleton Murry even hailing him as "the greatest poet of the war") (Walter, xxvi). Walter attributes the lack of a broader interest in Owen to the general unpopularity in the 1920s of any literature concerned with relieving the national trauma of the Great War. It seemed that the explosion of war poetry ended as abruptly as it had begun several years earlier.² The unspoken taboo against writing about the war was broken only towards the end of the decade with the advent of the so called War Book Controversy, triggered by the publication of a series of texts openly questioning the notion of the Great War as a noble and necessary cause: Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* and Sassoon's *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man*. As a result of the distinctly anti-war overtone of the ensuing debate, Brooke's literary reputation suffered a final blow, from which it has not to this day recovered (Walter, xxii–xxv).

Interestingly, it was once again Sassoon who informally commissioned the second edition of Owen's poems — this time selected by poet and war veteran Edmund Blunden. His extended 1931 edition contained 35 previously unknown poems alongside the ones chosen by Sitwell. This time it worked. Jon Stallworthy notes that the collection "helped to consolidate Owen's reputation and elevate him to the iconic status he was to hold ... in the 30s and after" (Stallworthy 2014: 298). That may have been partly due to Blunden's decision to draw attention to Owen's personality by incorporating his letters, most of which were addressed to the poet's closest confidante — his mother. The first poetic responses to his work began to appear: from W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender to the arguably most gifted of the Second World War poets, Keith Douglas (Stallworthy 2014: 290–292). The critical acclaim was close to unanimous: H.J.M. Milne praised his "masterly use of assonance" (1934: 20), Stanley J. Kunitz — his "sublimity," which he deemed "the rarest virtue in English poetry" (1932: 162). David Daiches, in turn, conceded that the reader cannot escape the feeling that "Owen the man was greater than the poet"; nonetheless, he declared that his "rich contribution to English literature" was indisputable (1936: 61). Owen's status as a national poet was sealed by the symbolic act of the purchase of his manuscripts by the British Museum in 1934.

² In the BBC series *Blackadder Goes Forth* one character remarks on the outpouring of war-inspired lyrics, "I'm sick of this damn war — the blood, the noise, the endless poetry."

The steady growth of Owen's literary reputation was famously challenged by W.B. Yeats's controversial exclusion of his work from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936. In the introduction, Yeats justified this omission without, however, invoking Owen's name:

I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war ... I have rejected these poems ... [because] passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies ... If war is necessary ... it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell... (Stallworthy 1969: 199–200)

In the light of the ensuing uproar, Yeats elaborated on the reasons for his decision in a private letter addressed to poet and literary editor Dorothy Wellesley:

When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution, and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum — however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick ... There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him. (Stallworthy 1969: 205)

In his article devoted to this notorious exclusion, Stallworthy argues that Yeats, remaining under the influence of Matthew Arnold,³ scorned any “unheroic” responses to war and therefore saw Owen's verse as demeaning to literature. In conclusion, he states, “Yeats, the poet of distance, past and future, failed to recognize the poet of the foreground, the here and now” (Stallworthy 1969: 214). However, he notes that, paradoxically, the omission of Owen's poems “probably benefited — rather than harmed — his reputation” by drawing greater attention to his name than Blunden's edition was capable of doing (Stallworthy 2014: 291, 299).

2. The postwar boost in popularity — Owen in the 1950s and 60s

Two decades later, in 1954, Dylan Thomas forcefully asserted Owen's continued relevance to contemporary readers by placing his poetry in the new context of the atomic age. Seen in this light, Owen's poems speak with “terrible new significance and strength,” proving that their author is “a poet of all times, all places, and all wars” (Thomas 1954: 26). The validity of Thomas's announcement was to be confirmed a decade later, when a mounting opposition to the Vietnam war encouraged many readers to turn to Owen's poetic expressions of the futility of warfare (Butts

³ The following passage from Arnold's “Poetry and the Classics” may serve as an encapsulation of his understanding of the relationship between tragedy and art: “In presence of the most tragic circumstances, represented in a work of Art, the feeling of enjoyment, as is well known, may still subsist: the representation of the most utter calamity, of the liveliest anguish, is not sufficient to destroy it: the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment” (Arnold 1855).

2012: 218). It was, incidentally, in the 1960s that Owen's popularity experienced another surge, the main reason for which was not so much any current military conflict as the series of commemorative events and initiatives occasioned by the four consecutive years abounding in the round anniversaries of the most significant battles of the Great War. Walter enumerates the profusion of historical books, plays, musicals (most notably, *Oh What a Lovely War*), TV productions and films, as well as four new anthologies of war poetry — the same number as over the previous four decades (Walter, xxviii). In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War, a new edition of Owen's verse was also commissioned. Its author, the renowned critic and Poet Laureate-to-be, Cecil Day-Lewis added nineteen previously unpublished poems and wrote an introduction, which hailed Owen as the "finest" English poet of the First World War and the author of "probably the greatest poems about war in our literature," which, he added, "radically changed our attitude towards war" (Day-Lewis 1963: 11–12). Day-Lewis's edition turned out to be a major success — critically as well as commercially (being reprinted eleven times in the course of the next decade) (Walter, xxix). Besides the string of anniversaries, yet another reason for the resurgence of interest in Owen in the 1960s was the international triumph of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*, in which the English composer used nine of Owen's poems (including some of the currently most famous: "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "Strange Meeting" and "Futility"). Stallworthy points out that it was thanks to Britten that Owen's poetry crossed borders of Britain and America and travelled to non-English speaking countries for the very first time (2014: 299).

The 1960s also saw the appearance of first critical monographs devoted to Owen's work: Dennis Welland's pioneering *Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study* (1960) and Gertrude M. White's *Wilfred Owen* (1969). Among the book-length academic analyses of his poetry that appeared in the subsequent decades, it is worth noting Dominic Hibberd's *Owen the Poet* (1986) and Merryn Williams's *Wilfred Owen* (1994). Yet the book of criticism which has exerted the biggest and most lasting impact on Owen's literary reputation was Paul Fussell's seminal study *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975). The American scholar claimed that the First World War had determined the shape of modern culture to a greater extent than was assumed. He was also among the first critics to undertake a comprehensive examination of the questions of gender and sexuality in the context of the Great War. In a section entitled "The Homoerotic Sensuousness of Wilfred Owen," Fussell argues that in Owen's poetry one can glean a transfiguration and sublimation of the intersecting "impulses of Victorian and early-twentieth-century homoerotics." "With a most tender intimacy," he notes, "[Owen] contemplates — 'adores' would perhaps not be too strong a word — physical details like eyes, hair, hands, limbs, sides, brows, faces, teeth, heads, smiles, breasts, fingers, backs, tongues. Loving these things, he arrives by disciplined sublimation at a state of profound pity for those who for such a brief moment possess them" (Fussell 1975: 286, 291). Ever since

Fussell's study, the question of Owen's homoeroticism (or homosexuality) have featured prominently in most critical studies and — particularly — in his biographies. The author of *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography*, Dominic Hibberd goes so far as to announce that "he was unquestionably gay" (Hibberd 2005). Stallworthy in his biography, revised and published in 2014, adopts a more restrained position: "in the absence of any evidence of sexual activity on Owen's part, agnosticism seems the most logical position to adopt" (303).

3. Owen in contemporary criticism

As regards the critical assessment of Owen's poetry today, there appears to be a prevailing consensus that he remains Britain's most important war poet, although some would dispute that his current status is attributable solely to his literary merit. Among Owen's severest contemporary critics have been English poets Donald Davie and Craig Raine. Davie labels Owen (as well as Isaac Rosenberg) as in many ways "an incompetent poet," who died too early to "achieve technical mastery." For that reason, he should not belong in the history of literature but rather in the history of "the poet's relations with his audience" (Davie 1989: 195–196). Raine, in turn, argues that "Owen's tiny corpus is perhaps the most overrated poetry in the twentieth century" and the reason why it stands out from other Great War poems is because they are so mediocre. The paucity of critical attacks on Owen's output, he argues, is rooted in the embarrassment about denouncing a poet with such a tragically curtailed biography: Owen's "life and death as a soldier make literary criticism seem pedantic and invalid" (Raine 1990: 158). However, as Tim Kendall notes in *Modern English War Poetry*, "Owen's champions ... far outnumber his detractors" (Kendall 2006: 140). The poets who have praised and acknowledged their debt to him include Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy, who has recently written a poem in response to Owen's "The Send-Off" as part of the *Guardian's* initiative to mark the approaching centenary. Duffy has described Owen as "a presiding spirit of our poetry" (Duffy 2013). As if in response to Davie's charge of immaturity, Harold Bloom has asserted that, despite dying very young, Owen managed to "establish himself as a major poet" (Bloom 2002: 9). Among the qualities most often praised in his poems is the masterly employment of slant rhyme (or para-rhyme) as well as — in Stallworthy's words — his "readiness to express his feelings — of grief, tenderness, delight [and] indignation," which account for the poignant "immediacy" of his verse (Graalman 2012: 141; Stallworthy 2014: 295). A recent article in *Herald Scotland* entitled "Ordinary Man, Extraordinary Poet" appears to capture the unique reputation that Owen enjoys today — one combining an appeal to "lofty critics, impatient school children and the general reading public in equal measure — a rare hat-trick" ("Ordinary Man" 2014).

If one takes into account the number of biographies, critical studies and editions of his poetry, it is no exaggeration to announce that today Owen remains by far the most popular war poet in English literature (Walter, xxx). He is widely read in British schools, having been included in the list of English Literary Heritage as one of the “authors with an enduring appeal that transcends the period in which they were writing” (GCSE 2012: 34).⁴ Thanks to his continued inclusion in the curriculum, the vast majority of British people are well acquainted with the most famous lines of poems such as “Dulce Et Decorum Est” and “Futility.” The former has been David Cameron’s favourite poem since his school years, as he officially revealed on National Poetry Day in 2010. British Prime Minister confessed that he could still remember the profound impression that poem made on him when he first read it, which was a great anger about the war (Thomas 2010). Owen’s presence in contemporary Britain, however, goes far beyond the classroom. He has inspired, or been made a hero of, a number of highly acclaimed literary texts in Britain over the last decades, such as Susan Hill’s novel *Strange Meeting* (1971), Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* (1993) and Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995). But the two most important works which played a significant role in boosting Owen’s popularity were Stephen MacDonald’s play *Not About Heroes* and Pat Barker’s Booker-winning *Regeneration* trilogy, whose opening part is set at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh at the time when Owen and Sassoon were being treated for shell-shock by pioneering British psychoanalyst W.H.R. Rivers. Barker’s novel focuses on the friendship and artistic collaboration between the two poets and contains a fictional account of the scene in which they both read an early draft of “Anthem for Doomed Youth” and discuss Sassoon’s proposed corrections. Owen’s legacy has also been asserted in more traditional ways; his name is commemorated on a memorial stone in Westminster Abbey as well as on a number of plaques in towns and cities that he inhabited at different stages of his life: Oswestry, Birkenhead, Edinburgh, Manchester, Ripon, Shrewsbury and London. His literary heritage has been promoted and celebrated by the Wilfred Owen Association, which publishes a biannual journal about his work and administers the biennial Wilfred Owen Poetry Award.

4. Owen and the World War One centenary

The centenary is likely to give Owen’s popularity yet another boost in the way that the fiftieth anniversary indisputably did. The year 2014 has already seen the publication of several books concerned with his life and work, including a revised edition of Stallworthy’s seminal *Wilfred Owen*, Jane Potter’s *Wilfred Owen: An Illustrated Life* and Guy Cuthbertson’s new biography. Cuthbertson’s book, which

⁴ The only other war poets to have been selected are Sassoon and Edward Thomas — the latter not appreciated primarily for his war poetry.

came out in February, was reviewed by most leading British newspapers, reigniting a debate on Owen's relevance to contemporary Britain. Jason Cowley in the *Financial Times* hailed him as "deservedly one of [Britain's] most cherished poets," whose lyrics "remain startlingly modern." He also acknowledged Owen's role in "harden[ing] our understanding of the first world war as a futile catastrophe" and asserted his importance as an author of "imperishable first-hand artistic representations of the horror and the pity of it all," all the more precious today, when all the witnesses have died. By recognising Owen's influence on the perception of the Great War as a "futile catastrophe," Cowley suggested that Owen had also contributed to what Gove attacked as a dangerous misconception (Cowley 2014).

Other reviewers of Cuthbertson's biography were quick to draw the connection between Owen and Gove. In the *New Statesman*, the poet and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams argued that it is hardly *Blackadder's* fault (or merit) that the war is currently viewed in anti-heroic terms:

The truth is that the culprits are far more deeply entrenched in the cultural and educational world: the rot set in with the eyewitnesses whose records of the war made such an anti-heroic version almost canonical within a few years — the journalists and memoirists and, above all, the poets. Wilfred Owen has far more to answer for than Rowan Atkinson.

Williams concluded by expressing the hope that the "confused noise currently surrounding" the centenary would not persuade anyone that the Latin slogan quoted in Owen's most famous poem is any less "innocent" than the poet himself believed (Williams 2014). The *Sunday Times's* Daisy Goodwin, likewise, closed her article by ironically stating that "if Gove really wants to rebrand 1914–18 as a just war, he should stop attacking *Blackadder* and ban Owen from the English syllabus" (Goodwin 2014). It appears that almost a hundred years after his death Owen is becoming once again an object of controversy — this time the controversy is not about his artistic merit but about his verdict on the purposefulness of the war — the verdict that the former Education Secretary seems to associate with harmful left-wing propaganda.

Gove is not the first one to view the Owen-inspired perception of the war as rooted in a misconception. Having outlined the immense popularity of his poetry in Britain since the 1960s, George Walter observes that Owen's literary expression has acquired the status of the authoritative account of what the war was truly like and how it felt to all participants. The critic quotes Andrew Rutherford's summary of the stages of that received Owenesque model: "First of all a naive enthusiasm for war and then, after the shock of battle experience, an overwhelming sense of disillusion, anger and pity, culminating in pacifism and protest" (Walter, xxx). This "construction," Walter argues, has reached a status going beyond the literary: "Today, it is accepted as 'the truth about the war' and can be found being reiterated not only in fiction, drama and film, but also in popular and serious journalism, in radio and television documentaries and, in particular, in textbooks and other

educational materials” (xxx). Walter complains that that “Owenesque narrative” has also dominated contemporary anthologies of war poetry, which display a bias towards poems accentuating the atrocities of war and expressing compassion for all its victims — in tune with Owen’s artistic credo professed in his much-quoted Preface, where he states that “the poetry is in the Pity” and “all a poet can do today is warn.” What Walter finds even more disconcerting is the fact that, as a result of the hegemony of Owen’s perspective, a handful of his and Sassoon’s poems are now used in history classes not as literary accounts but as “historical evidence” of the experience of the war (xxxv). In order to illustrate the fallacy of assuming Owen’s perception to be the only valid position, Walter quotes one of the survivors of Somme and Passchendaele, Charles Carrington, commenting on what he sees as a continuous distortion of his war experience:

Just smile and make an old soldier’s wry joke when you see yourself on the television screen, agonised and woebegone, trudging from disaster to disaster, knee-deep in moral as well as physical mud, hesitant about your purpose, submissive to a harsh, irrelevant discipline, mistrustful of your commanders. Is it any use to assert that I was not like that, and my dead friends were not like that, and the old cronies I meet at reunions are not like that? (Walter, xxxv)

Although the Great War centenary, which will continue until 2018, has only just begun, two initial observations can be made on the basis of the debates that have taken place in the British press in the first months of 2014 and of the offers of the publishing industry. Firstly, there seems to be little doubt that Owen will continue to be the literary hero of the upcoming years. No other poet is likely to challenge the dominance of his account of the war or supersede him as the more accomplished soldier-poet. Secondly, however, it can be noted that although there is a prevailing critical consensus about the artistic merit of Owen’s output (despite a few dissenting voices), his effective monopoly on shaping the perception of the Great War in Britain is coming up against a mounting opposition from historians and politicians alike. His unquestionable literary achievement is seen by some as feeding an impoverished view of Britain’s role in the war, which fails to do justice to the complexity of the historical circumstances surrounding that multifaceted conflict. An apt articulation of that concern is given by British historian David Reynolds, the author of a centenary publication entitled *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, who argues that “British remembrance of the Great War seems stuck in the trenches — literally and metaphorically. [It] evokes images of mud and blood, of young men sent to their deaths for no purpose by boneheaded, upper-class generals: the interpreters of this war experience are not historians but a few soldier poets, supremely Wilfred Owen” (Reynolds 2013: 25). Whether the lavish national centenary commemorations (whose overall cost is expected to exceed £50 million), abounding in numerous educational initiatives and around 2,500 hours of TV and radio programming announced by the BBC, are going to be dominated by the voices of scepticism about the supremacy of the Owenesque narrative or those of admiration for his purely literary legacy time will show.

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