

A note on the origins of 1914-18 'war poetry'

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Biography

Dominic Hibberd, was a biographer, editor and critic who taught at universities in Britain, the USA, and China. He wrote biographies of two poets, Harold Monro and Wilfred Owen, as well as the critical study *Owen the Poet* (1986). He edited *Poetry of the First World War* in the Casebook series (1981), and with John Onions, compiled and edited *The Winter of the World: Poems of the First World War* (2007).

Abstract

The sort of work that has often been thought of as typical British First World War poetry – realistic, often angry poems about the actualities of the front line, written from the point of view of the ordinary soldier and aimed at the civilian conscience – was in fact not typical at all. And it was not begun by soldiers in the aftermath of front-line horrors, as is often supposed, but by two civilian poets very early in the war. Harold Monro and Wilfrid Gibson deserve to be recognised as the first of what modern readers would call the 'war poets'.

Résumé

Les œuvres qui sont souvent considérées comme tout à fait caractéristiques de la poésie britannique de la première guerre mondiale, – réalistes, souvent des poèmes d'un style cru, traduisant la réalité du front, telle qu'elle est vécue par le soldat de base, pour en faire prendre conscience aux civils, ne sont en réalité en rien conformes à ce modèle. Les premières œuvres relevant de ce genre n'ont pas été le fait de militaires revenant de l'horreur du front, comme on le croit souvent, mais de deux poètes civils qui les ont écrites au tout début de la guerre. Harold Monro et Wilfrid Gibson méritent d'être reconnus comme étant les premiers que des lecteurs d'aujourd'hui appelleraient « poètes de guerre ».

Keywords

Poetry, Wilfrid Gibson, Harold Monro, World War I, 1914-1918, Ezra Pound, Imagism, Edward Thomas, Rupert Brooke, 1914, War Poetry, *Battle* (1915).

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For many years after 1918 academics took little notice of the poetry of the Great War. But in the Vietnam period the reading public suddenly became interested in the work of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and the other now well-known poets, and academics have had to catch up. Literary critics are beginning to write about 'war

poetry' as a genre in its own right. Soon, no doubt, there will be learned treatises on 'war poetry theory'. But it seems to me that few critics, even now, have read really widely in the original texts. They tend to base their arguments on a relatively small number of familiar poems and whatever they can find in anthologies — and anthologists tend to borrow from each other.

What we now think of as typical First World War poetry was in fact highly unusual in its time. In this brief article I want to make a few simple points about its origins.

Sometimes when I'm lecturing to students I ask them how many 1914-18 'war poets' they can name. The first three or four names are easy, and a good audience may get nine or ten, but after that I'm usually only offered a few faltering guesses. So then I smugly say that Catherine Reilly's bibliography, *English Poetry of the First World War* (1978), lists 2,225 poets. Reilly defines her scope as 'poetry on the theme of the First World War by English [British] poets both servicemen and civilians, who experienced the war'. Her list could be considerably extended. I myself have books by at least forty poets who are, as booksellers' catalogues nowadays often say, 'Not in Reilly'. A complete bibliography — almost impossible to compile — might contain 3,000 names, perhaps even more.

Among this enormous crowd of poets, the few that we now remember were very far from representative. It has been usual for at least the last forty years to imagine that most 1914-18 verse was more or less 'Sassoonish' (the adjective Robert Graves applied to Owen's new poems in 1917): angry, often satirical protests on behalf of ordinary soldiers, written in plain language, attempting to force civilians to recognise the truth about life and death in the trenches. At the start there were Rupert Brooke, Julian Grenfell and a few others, patriotic, naïve, deluded; later, mostly after the Somme, there were Sassoon, Owen and many others, writing in savage indignation from the bitterness of front-line experience. So runs the myth. But the history of First World War poetry is much more complex and interesting than that. Where *did* our 'typical' Great War poetry come from? Who first set aside the language of patriotism and sacrifice and attempted instead to write in simple, direct words about front-line realities, as experienced by the troops?

There had been a revival of interest in poetry in the years just before 1914, and as soon as war broke out publishers and poets saw that there would be a ready market for war verse. The Government gave quiet encouragement, and within a few weeks established writers such as Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Robert Bridges the Poet Laureate were producing poems designed to help the recruiting drive. War poems of the past were hastily dug up and reprinted as anthologies or even as little collections by a single author — Wordsworth's *Patriotic Poetry* (1915), for instance. Poems proliferated in newspapers and magazines, and many were published as postcards or thyme sheets, often to be sold — or so purchasers were assured — in aid of Belgian refugees.

The task of the war poet seemed obvious. It was defined, for example, by the Dean of Norwich in his introduction to *Our Glorious Heritage / A book of Patriotic Verse for Boys and Girls* (1914):

War . . . supplies two opportunities to the poet: he can give articulate voice to the love of country and the love of freedom and any other special idea that animates either combatant, such as respect for a nation's pledged word, or the protection of the weak against the strong; and also he can celebrate the heroic exploits of armies and individuals which every war calls forth.

(The Dean is referring to the two 'special ideas' that were animating the British public: outrage at Germany's violation of the treaty, the 'pledged word', by which both Britain and Germany had guaranteed Belgian neutrality, and sympathy with 'brave little Belgium'. These feelings were deep and genuine: too many modern critics forget the invasion of Belgium altogether when discussing the poetry of the time.)

Senior poets were expected to do their duty. The unfortunate Poet Laureate found himself under increasing pressure to produce odes, elegies and other suitable material, but as the war went on he became increasingly disinclined to respond. In the end questions were asked in parliament about Bridges' silence, and it was suggested that the Laureatship should be transferred to Kipling — whose war poems, despite modern mythology to the contrary, were sternly anti-German up to and beyond 1918. But if the right complained about Bridges, the left was horrified by the alternative: Sir Edward Grey, the Liberal Foreign Secretary, even threatened to resign in 1914 if Kipling were sent to lecture in America.

Neither Bridges nor Kipling was likely to emerge as the nation's leading war poet, but there were writers who coveted that role. By May 1915 the now-forgotten H.D. Rawnsley had published no fewer than 148 poems about the war. William Watson, who had once hoped to be Laureate, was determined to become 'the real national poet' of the war; by mid-September 1914 he had published sixteen poems, with ten more ready to be sent off to newspapers. Watson was convinced that the true language of poetry was that of Tennyson and earlier writers, and his view was widely shared. But he was wrong.

One man at least could see that Watson's sort of verse was hopelessly inadequate. Harold Monro had opened the Poetry Bookshop in 1912 as a centre for young poets and for what Brooke and others called 'the New Poetry'.¹ He believed in supporting any talent that looked promising, so the first of his many publications from the Bookshop was the first volume of Edward Marsh's anthology, *Georgian Poetry* (1912), and the third was that defiantly anti-Georgian collection, Ezra Pound's *Des Imagistes* (1914). One of Monro's self-imposed responsibilities was to keep an eye on current work, and he duly made a large collection of the new war poems in 1914, cutting them out of newspapers and pasting them on large sheets of coloured paper for display in the shop. He lent the collection to his friend Edward Thomas, who used it as the basis for one of the first and best studies of 1914 verse, 'On poets and Poetry in Wartime', published in Monro's periodical, *Poetry and Drama*, in December.²

Neither Monro nor Thomas could find much to admire. In his editorial for the September *Poetry and Drama* Monro expressed the hope that the war might encourage the modern tendency to strip away romantic language and 'expose the raw material of thought, and the elementary facts of experience'. He made the remarkable suggestion that a useful model to follow might be the style of military despatches (he may have been thinking of newspaper reports, which were not yet censored), a language entirely without ornament or superfluous detail, laying bare 'the plain facts of the human psychology of the moment'. This was radical advice, both Georgian and Modernist in its values, echoing the principles that Pound had laid down in 1912.

Monro is often thought of as Georgian, but in many ways he had more in common with the Modernists. Like most people, he had difficulty in keeping on good terms with Pound, but he knew all the Imagists well. Frank Flint and Richard Aldington were among his closest friends, and T.E. Hulme (and Jacob Epstein) had both been lodgers at the Bookshop. Nevertheless, Pound could not tolerate Monro's

willingness to support all talents, whether Modernist or not, so the Bookshop came to be seen, inaccurately, as a Georgian centre. And until the post-war years, that was much to the advantage of Monro's enterprises, for much of our 'typical' war poetry was Georgian, a fact that has often been overlooked by academics.

War poems by Sassoon, Graves, Wilfrid Gibson and Robert Nichols were published in the 1917 volume of Marsh's anthology, and even Isaac Rosenberg was represented, though only by a small lyric. Monro and Gibson were contributors to all five volumes (1912-22). Brooke had been the leader before the war. Owen thought of himself as a Georgian in 1917-18, and Thomas and Ivor Gurney were in sympathy with Georgian aims. By contrast w- again despite many statements to the contrary — the Modernist contribution to wartime art and literature was relatively thin: it is interesting to note that the painter C.R.W. Nevinson started the war as a committed Futurist, the only one in Britain, but he soon found the modern style inadequate; by 1917 he had abandoned Futurism and changed to the stark, 'Sassoonish' realism of his famous painting, *The Paths of Glory*.

Monro tried to put his own advice into practice in a quartet of very early war poems, 'Youth in Arms'. He included two of these, 'Soldier' and 'Retreat', in a Bookshop reading on 22 October 1914. All four poems were published in December, but they may well have been written in September or even August. They seem to be about Monro's beloved friend Basil Watt, who was driven by conscience to volunteer in August. 'Retreat' is clearly based on reports of the August retreat from Mons, when exhausted troops lost contact with their officers and in some cases began to hallucinate.

Damn this jingle in my brain.
I'm full of old songs — Have you ever heard this?

*All the roads to victory
Are flooded as we go,
There's so much blood to paddle through,
That's why we're marching slow.*

Yes sir; I'm here. Are you an officer?
I can't see. Are we running away? . . .

Not great poetry, but astonishing for a 1914 poem. Monro uses a quasi-Modernist technique to convey 'the plain facts of the human psychology of the moment', with no regard for patriotic rhetoric or the high-flown sentiments that other poets were noisily using. He is probably the first 1914-18 poet to focus on the likely front-line experience of the ordinary soldier. As a civilian, he can only imagine that experience, but he gets as close as he can to it by drawing on newspaper accounts.

Monro's *Poetry and Drama* editorial was very probably read by one of the leading Georgians, Wilfrid Gibson, who had lived at the Bookshop in 1913.³ Gibson's earliest known war poems, 'Breakfast' and 'The Messages', were published in *The Nation* on 17 October 1914.

. . . Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt back dead.
We ate our breakfast lying on our backs
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

'Breakfast' deserves to be recognised as one of the most significant poems in the history of 1914-18 writing. Its extraordinarily early publication had been completely forgotten by the 1960s, when a series of anthologists assumed it had to be the work of a battle-experienced soldier — with the result that Gibson has frequently been said to have served on the Western Front. Actually he never got nearer the front than south London, and he didn't even join the army until 1917. Even so, like 'Retreat', 'Breakfast' is based on front-line experience: it derives from a soldier's anecdote that Gibson had just read in *The Nation*.

So here, in the first few months of the war, we have poems by Monro and Gibson in plain language about ordinary soldiers, using actual experience and 'the human psychology of the moment'. 'The Messages' is similar, quite possibly also based on a newspaper report. It may well be the first 1914-18 poem to mention trenches, and, like several of Gibson's later poems, it describes a shellshock victim, a subject that most poets wouldn't have dreamed of mentioning so early in the war.

Gibson continued to produce poems like these for nearly a year, publishing them in a little book, *Battle*, in September 1915. All but one of the *Battle* poems are very short, and many of them are probably drawn from stories he had read in the press or heard from returning soldiers. His concern throughout was to portray actual experiences suffered by men in the line, and he told Marsh that he wanted the poems to 'get at' people. Marsh sent copies of *Battle* to Sassoon, Graves, Rosenberg and others, and the book was also read by Owen and Gurney. It needs to be seen, I think, as a seminal work, preparing the way for later poets. Most obviously, *Battle* provided models for Sassoon in 1916-17, when he started writing short, ironic poems about the real experiences of ordinary Tommies — with the same aims as Gibson's, to 'get at' civilians.

If my claims for Monro and Gibson are accurate, the First World War poetry that modern readers tend to think of as 'typical' was begun not by soldiers in the bitterness of the post-Somme period but by two civilians — both of them friends of Rupert Brooke — in the first few months of the conflict. They wrote before Brooke. His famous '1914' sonnets, written at the end of the year after his return from the Antwerp expedition, may be the first 1914-18 poems to emerge from a poet's own experience of the front. Brooke was in action only very briefly, but he saw enough to know something of the reality and in particular he saw the long lines of Belgian refugees. It was the human misery of the war that convinced him of the rightness of the Allied cause and drove him to write as he did. Ironically, news of his death reached Gibson on 24 April 1915, the very day that ten of the *Battle* poems were published in *The Nation*. In the surge of feeling and propaganda that followed Brooke's death, the early achievement of Gibson and Monro was forgotten. It is more than time to remember it.

¹ For Monro, see my *Harold Monro: Poet of the New Age*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011 and *Strange Meetings: a new selection of poems by Harold Monro*, Holt: Laurel Books, 2003. (Copies of *Strange Meetings* can be obtained from the publisher at 292 The Common, Holt, Wiltshire, BA14 6QJ, England.)

² Thomas's article is reprinted in my *Poetry of the First World War*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Casebook Series, 1981, 25-30.

³ For Gibson, see three articles in *Dymock Poets and Friends: Journal of the Friends of the Dymock Poets* (Burgage House, 19 Southend, Ledbury, Herefordshire, HR8 2EX, England): Judy Greenway, 'Shoulder to Shoulder: Elizabeth and Wilfrid Gibson', and R.K.R. Thornton, 'Sheep or Horses: notes on two books by W.W. Gibson', No.3 (2004), 23-33, 34-46; Dominic Hibberd, 'First of the War Poets: Wilfrid Gibson and the Great War', No.4 (2005), 17-31. The most complete study is Roger H. Hogg, 'Wilfrid Wilson Gibson: People's Poet', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Newcastle, 1989.