

CHAPTER III

Charles Sorley (1895 - 1915) lived and wrote during the first stage of the War, and was killed in the Battle of Loos, well before the War assumed any apparent dismal outlook. Yet his works revealed a mature understanding of the catastrophic nature of the conflict. In the author's opinion, he was a phenomenal discovery of the War, for he was still so young when he produced his war-verse. John H. Johnston rates him as "the most intellectually brilliant and perceptive of the English war poets." He was only twenty when killed, so there are not too many war poems by him. Three of his best ones, written in the midst of patriotic excitement when the conflict was only eight weeks old, reveal a philosophic insight into the true nature of the War.

It is a sin in a man to write of the world before he has known the world, and the failing of every poet up till now has been that he has written of what he loved to imagine but dared not experience.¹

The extent to which he was at odds with the tendencies that marked the Georgian resort to sentiments and sensibility can be seen in his letter:

The voice of our poets and men of letters is finely trained and sweet to hear; it teems with sharp saws and rich sentiment:...it pleases, it flatters, it charms, it soothes; it is a living lie.²

Speaking of Hardy's Satires of Circumstances in a letter dated November 30, 1914, Sorley remarks:

Curiously enough, I think that "Men Who March Away" is the most arid poem in the book, besides being untrue of the sentiments of the ranksmen going to war. 'Victory crowns the just' is the worst line he ever wrote... and unworthy of him who had always previously disdained to insult Justice by offering it a material crown like Victory.

As a result, in "All The Hills And Vales Along," there is no inspirational appeal or celebration of "visible virtues", nor is there any romantic self-contemplation. Fully aware of the practical effects of the War, he urges the soldiers en route to the battle to be joyful.

All the hills and vales along
 Earth is bursting into song,
 And the singers are the chaps--
 Who are going to die perhaps.

O sing, marching men,
 Till the valleys ring again.
 Give your gladness to earth's keeping,
 So be glad, when you are sleeping.

Death is inevitable and far from being heroic; but keep in mind that "little live, great pass". Sorley's Nature remains aloof, indifferent to human misery:

Earth that never doubts nor fears
 Earth that knows of death, not tears,
 Earth that bore with joyful ease
 Hemlock for Socrates.
 Earth that blossomed and was glad
 'Neath the cross that Christ had,
 Shall rejoice and blossom too
 When the bullet reaches you.

Since they cannot call forth sympathy from anywhere, they must cheer up. At any rate, they are to die, they had better die happily.

On, marching men, on
 To the Gates of Death with songs.
 Sow your gladness for earth's reaping
 So you may be glad, though sleeping.
 Strew your gladness on earth's bed,
 So be merry, so be dead.

Here, he sees the War in terms of the young man who must fight it.

In "To Germany," Sorley demonstrates an understanding of the historical significance of the crisis which was unique among the younger war poets. While in Germany for a brief period of study abroad before entering Oxford, Sorley had developed his sense of objectivity and critical detachment to a remarkable degree. The detachment permitted him to view both Germany's and England's cause with superior understanding.

It seems to me that Germany's only fault is a lack of real insight and sympathy with those who differ from her... I regard the War as one between sisters, between Martha and Mary, the efficient and intolerant against the casual and sympathetic. Each side has virtue for which it is fighting, and each has that virtue's supplementary vice. And I hope that whatever the material result of the conflict, it will purge the two virtues of their vices and efficiency and tolerance will no longer be incompatible.³

"To Germany" conveys the same idea:

When it is peace, then we may view again
 With new-won eyes each other's truer form
 And wonder. Grown more loving-kind and warm
 We'll grasp firm hands and laugh at the old pain,
 When it is peace.

But before peace comes, "...the storm/ the darkness and the thunder rain".⁴

In the same poem, the poet values his experiences in Germany and tries to account for the tragic element in the conflict of national interests. Both sides are blind as to the possible consequence of the War. They want to make good the cause that they believe to be just. Germany, like England, believed that her army was unbeatable, "...his (German) one dream and thought is how quickest to die for his country".⁴ He saw nothing but "the future bigly planned". England, on the other hand, declared, "we must win, for our cause is just".⁵ Thus, Sorley presents an image of

...groppers both through fields of thought confined
 We stumble and we do not understand.
 You only saw your future bigly planned,
 And we, the tapering paths on our own mind,
 And in each other's dearest ways we stand,
 And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind.

Sorley impartially made out that both sides "don't yet see that what they consider is being done for the good of the world may be really being done for self-glorification."^b

In another poem, Sorley foresees the misery that the War will eventually produce, and the pointlessness of it all.

A hundred million thousand mites we go
 Wheeling and tacking o'er the eternal plain,
 Some black with death—and some are white with woe.
 Who sent us forth? Who takes us home again?

The poet is wondering who is responsible for the fate of them, miserable "mites". He strongly doubts that there is any sense at all in the waging of war, "And there is emptiness and drink and power."

In the first of the "Two Sonnets," Sorley again talks about the millions who are doomed to die. They are not indifferent to this fact, though they "tried /to live as if your (Death's) presence unaware." The idea of death, moreover, is no longer associated with conventional spiritual comforts. The life after death is by no means a better alternative, if the soldiers can be said to have ever been offered a choice.

... now in every road on every side
 We see your straight and steadfast signpost there.

I think it like that signpost in my land,
 Hoary and tall, which pointed me to go
 Upward, into the hills, on the right hand,
 Where the mists swim and the winds shriek and blow,

A homeless land and friendless, but a land
I did not know and that I wished to know.

Sorley's diction and imagery emphasizes the contrasts he seeks to establish between Brooke's romantic self-conscious interpretation of death in battle and his own tragic intuitions, now confirmed by his introduction to the realities of trench warfare. For Sorley, death is a complete and final separation from all aspects of physical life.

Such, such is Death: no triumph: no defeat:
Only an empty pail, a slate rubbed clean,
A merciful putting away of what has been.

And this we know: Death is not Life effete,
Life crushed, the broken pail. We who have seen
So marvellous things know well the end not yet.

Victor and vanquished are a-one in death:
Coward and brave : friend, foe. Ghosts do not say
"Come, what was your record when you drew breath?"

In a way Sorley was saying that Brooke's list of sacrificed pleasures and joys is irrelevant to the soldiers who must die, his 'record' will be blotted out forever.

"When You See Millions Of The Mouthless Dead" presents Sorley as the first of the war poets to perceive that in a conflict based on mere human attrition the loss of human life bore a sacrificial aspect that could no longer be treated in conventional elegiac terms.

When you see millions of the mouthless dead
Across your dreams in pale battalions go,
Say not soft things as other men have said,
That you'll remember. For you need not so.
Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they
know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow,



Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
 Say only this, "They are dead". Then added thereto,
 "Yet many a better one has died before".
 Then, scanning over all the o'ercrowded mass, should you
 Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
 It is a spook. None wears the face you know.
 Great death has made all his for evermore.

Robert Graves decided to enlist as soon as England declared war because he hoped to delay his entering Oxford; the other reason was that he was outraged by Germany's cynical act. Upon his parents' consent, he entered the War, believing that he was doing the "right thing". Nevertheless, because of the German side of his family, Graves was far from thinking that he was in a "heroic war against diabolic enemies".⁷ He did not expect much of the War, from the start. He was aware that one could not be idealistic about any war "of attrition". Sassoon said that Graves had "a first-rate nose for any thing nasty from the start".⁸ So his attitudes towards the enemy, the officers, the civilian, oddly individual at the beginning of the War, were by no means changed when it drew close to an end, and when they were found so much in keeping with the realities.

His autobiography, Goodbye to All That, reveals that, despite his "Prussian rationalism", he also had the 'nonsense' of the youth, so grateful for being sent out to France pretty soon after his training at the depot. He found that officers were not very likable, giving an apparent instance of two miners who disliked their sergeant so much that they decided to kill him. They were finally court-martialled and shot for having shot the company sergeant-major whom they mistook for the sergeant. The anti-commanding staff was prevailing when he was initiated to billet life.

From first-hand experiences, he learned that most officers were readily inclined to put the blame on the men for each failure. The men were so often sentenced for desertion or other demonstration of their "cold-feeting." Sometimes it was not fair. A certain amount of consideration should have been set aside for 'fright'. The men could lose head and turn tail through panic. He once refused to take part in the courtmartialing of a sergeant.

If I refused, I should be courtmartialled myself, and a reconstituted court would sentence the sergeant to death anyhow. Yet I could not sign a death-verdict for an offence which I might have committed myself in the same circumstances.⁹

He managed to evade the dilemma. A captain was willing enough to take his place. At a safe distance, the officers wanted to run the machine as planned, but unfortunately, its constituents could not always keep up with their will; they were human and vulnerable.

This early impression of the self-ingratiating commanding staff was of some use to him in his subsequent army life. He found his new company-commander quite tolerable. Graves had always expected the worst kind of officers; but here was a captain, very efficient though younger than himself, who never was authoritative, and always took junior officers into his confidence. A dependable company-commander was like a boon to the troops. A mere mention of his name, Captain Dunn, was already invigorating. Under his command, one could be sure never to be sacrificed at random. His preconceived opinion led him to appreciate the smallest confidence that a single man could cultivate.

Graves was ordered to many regiments, but he had no problems with his acquaintances. He was not especially intimate with anybody

except Siegfried Sassoon. He was in fact comparatively happy, for he expected the whole war business to be uglier than it actually was. He bore no grudge against his second-in-command who punished him for having dismissed a parade before his permission:

This was not a particular act of spite against me, but an incident in the general game of 'chasing the warts', at which all conscientious senior officers played, and honestly intended to make us better soldiers.¹⁰

In his sobriety, he understood that the War had upset the essential equilibrium of mind. In this kind of situation, it was advisable to overlook any actions that might be considered lapses from good forms in peacetime, and be contented.

The author thinks "sobriety" was the keyword of Graves' character as revealed in Goodbye to All That, and also of his writing. Unlike Grenfell and Sassoon, he was not blinded with joy or angry hatred. He was not quite certain whether the War was justifiable after all. But it was unavoidable; and what could be made of it: that was the more important question.

The War had done away with the significance of "patriotism."

As 'Blighty', a geographical concept, Great Britain was a quiet, easy place for getting back out of the present foreign misery; but as a nation it included not only the trench-soldiers themselves and those who had gone home wounded, but the staff, Army Service Corps, lines of communication troops, base units, home-service units, and all civilians down to the detested grades of journalists, 'starred' men exempted from enlistment, conscientious objectors, and members of the Government.¹¹

As Professor Pinto indicated in Crisis in English Poetry, the War cut across the old horizontal line, making vertical division

of "Nation At Home" and "Nation Overseas." And somehow the community on the Continent got together not against the enemy, but against the people at home, who remained ignorant of and indifferent to the War and its miseries.

Graves regarded the Germans as another people suffering from the same kind of situation. Their country called for their service, and they had to carry out their duty. When off duty, nevertheless, they were eager enough to make friends. Graves' Germans were so humane and understanding. Besides many "exchanges of courtesies" with the British, the Germans more than once allowed the British wounded to be taken care of near the German line. In addition to instances of German generous behaviour, Graves tried to defend them against the Allied accusations.

Propaganda reports of atrocities were, it was agreed, ridiculous. We remembered that while the Germans could commit atrocities against enemy civilians, Germany itself, except for an early Russian cavalry raid, had never had the enemy on her soil. We no longer believed the highly-coloured accounts of German atrocities in Belgium; knowing the Belgians now at first-hand. By atrocities we meant, specifically, rape, mutilation and torture-not summary shootings of suspected spies, harbourers of spies, or disobedient local officials. If the atrocity-list had to include the accidental-on-purpose bombing or machine-gunning of civilians from the air, the Allied were now committing as many atrocities as the Germans. French and Belgian civilians had often tried to win our sympathy by exhibiting mutilations of children-stumps of hands and feet, for instance-representing them as deliberate, fiendish atrocities when, as likely as not, they were merely the result of shell-fire. We did not believe rape to be any more common on the German side of the line than on the Allied side. And since a bully-beef diet, fear of death, and absence of wives made ample provision of women necessary in the occupied areas, no doubt the German army authorities provided brothels on the principal French towns behind the line, as the French did on the Allied

To Graves, the Allies were equally guilty of atrocities against the enemy civilians, especially women and children, and prisoners, as the Germans. Moreover,

The presence of semi-civilized coloured troops in Europe was, from the German point of view, we knew, one of the chief Allied atrocities.

Just to have his usual tin of jam, a Turcos was willing enough to go twenty miles to cut a "Fritz" head. Graves was reluctant to kill the surprised Germans and was often reprimanded for refraining from so doing. However, because of his efficient commanding, he was not without people who looked up to him with jealousy. But he took it easy. He was in ^a human community. And jealousy was a most characteristic of human attributes.

Instead of putting under arrest a second-lieutenant who made a nasty remark in public about "jumped up captains", he quoted at him the consoling lines:

O deem it pride, not lack of skill,
That will not let my sleeves increase.
The morning and the evening still
Have but one star apiece.¹³

Of the civilians, he did not have very high opinion. During the Somme Offensive, he was grievously wounded in the lungs for which he was, by some mistake, reported dead. While hospitalized at Highgate, he was much disgusted by the civilian amateur militarism and jingoism. Though he was brief in his words, he could make himself clearly understood.

England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudo-military outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language. I found serious conversation with my parents all but impossible.¹⁴

He then quoted a typical document of the time, the message of "little mother" to "the pacifists", "the bereaved" and to "the trenches."

To the Editor of 'The Morning Post'

Sir,—As a mother of an only child—a son who was early and eager to do his duty—may I be permitted to reply to Tommy Atkins, whose letter appeared in your issue of the 9th inst? Perhaps he will kindly convey to his friends in the trenches, not what the Government thinks, not what the Pacifists think, but what the mothers of the British race think of our fighting men. It is a voice which demands to be heard, seeing that we play the most important part in the history of the world, for it is we who 'mother the men' who have to uphold the honour and traditions not only of our Empire but of the whole civilized world.

To the man who pathetically calls himself a 'common soldier', may I say that we women, who demand to be heard will tolerate no such cry as 'Peace! Peace!' where there is no peace. The corn that will wave over land watered by the blood of our brave lads shall testify to the future that their blood was not spilt in vain. We need no marble monuments to remind us. We only need that force of character behind all motives to see this monstrous world tragedy brought to a victorious ending. The blood of the dead and the dying, the blood of the 'common soldier' from his slight wounds' will not cry to us in vain. They have all done their share, and we, as women, will do ours without murmuring and without complaint. Send the Pacifists to us and we shall very soon show them, and show the world, that in our homes at least there shall be not 'sitting at home warm and cosy in the winter, cool and "comfy" in the summer.'. There is only one temperature for the women of the British race, and that is white heat. With those who disgrace their sacred trust of motherhood we have nothing in common. Our ears are not deaf to the cry that is ever ascending from the battlefield from men of flesh and blood whose indomitable courage is borne to us, so to speak, on every blast of the wind. We women pass on the human ammunition of 'only sons' to fill up the gaps, so

That when the 'common soldier' looks back before going 'over the top' he may see the women of the British race at his heels, reliable, dependent, uncomplaining.

The reinforcements of women are, therefore, behind the 'common soldier'. We gentle-natured, timid sex did not want the War. It is no pleasure to us to have our homes made desolate and the apple of our eye taken away. We would sooner our lovable, promising, rollicking boy stayed at school. We would have much preferred to have gone on in a light-hearted way with our amusements and our hobbies. But the bugle call came, and we have hung up the tennis racquet, we've fetched our laddie from school, we're put this cap away, and we have wrapped them all in a Union Jack and locked them up, to be taken out only after the War to be looked at. A 'common soldier' perhaps, did not count on the women, but they have their part to play, and we have risen to our responsibility. We are proud of our men, and they in turn have to be proud of us.¹⁵

Referring to this letter, a "bereaved mother" wrote:

I have lost my two dear boys, but since I was shown the 'Little Mother's' beautiful letter, a resignation too perfect to describe has calmed all my aching sorrow, and I would now gladly give my sons twice over.¹⁶

Everything was self-flattering, sweetsounding and sentimental. People at home knew of bloodshed, but they did not understand what the fighting cost the soldiers emotionally. There was nothing dreadful or tormenting about a life being suddenly taken away. What actually tortured them was the miserable periods between life and death. To the "Little Mother's," death was a supreme sacrifice. Yes, anybody could readily make this sacrifice; but death, in the War, was too good, after all. One was finished once and for all. In despondency, this was a salvation, almost longed for.

Graves thought of the War as something he had to fight all right. As late as 1917, he felt that the War should be put to an end. He disapproved of Lloyd George's "Win-the War" Coalition Government.

We (he and Sassoon) no longer saw the War as one between trade-rivals: its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder.¹⁷

Graves entirely agreed with Sassoon about the "political errors and insincerities." But he believed that his friend's vehement protest would certainly be of no avail. More things had to be considered than the strength of this case against the politicians. For one thing, nobody would follow his example, either in England or in Germany. "The War would inevitably go on and on until one side or the other cracked".¹⁸

He persuaded Sassoon to appear before the medical board: "it was no use offering common sense to the insane," this being what Graves told his friend. The fellow soldiers would surely accuse him of letting the regiment down. The army could only read his letter of protest as cowardice, or at the best as a lapse from good form. Then Graves applied for permission to give evidence as a friend of the patient.

Much against my will, I had to appear in the role of a patriot distressed by the mental collapse of a brother-in-arms—a collapse directly due to his magnificent exploits in the trenches. I mentioned Siegfried's 'hallucinations' of corpses strewn along on Piccadilly. The irony of having to argue to these mad old men that Siegfried was not sane!¹⁹

Sassoon did not suffer the penalty that his letter invited because of Graves' efforts to persuade some people in authority to take a sympathetic view and to consider the affair in a reasonable light: the man had a nervous break-down, so to speak. Much was also due to Sassoon's distinguished service in the War. This was a

Military Cross awardee, not a conscientious objector. The fact provided him with some excuses.

As already indicated, Graves was a sober soldier and looked at things with judicial eye. He was also very practical. An instance was when he said that one had got to be calculating in order to survive the War. He himself, Graves related, always avoided being unnecessarily exposed to the enemy. When leading a patrol or a working party across No-Man's-Land, he arranged it in such a way that if he was hurt, it would not be in the head, which would be mortal. If one could, one should not try to get injured while the dressing-station was very busy, or when it was so far away from where they were fighting. It was wise to have a wound that would get one sent back to the "Blighty"; but one had to be especially cautious that the wound would not kill oneself prematurely.

Graves disapproved of the Church, the existence of whose representatives being so out of place in the army. What he did not like was that the priests usually made their duty an excuse for avoiding to take part in the trench activities. He was almost blasphemous in a passage:

For Anglican regimental chaplains we had little respect. If they had shown one-tenth the courage, endurance, and other human qualities that the regimental doctors showed, we agreed, the British Expeditionary Force might well have started a religious revival. But they had not, being under orders to avoid getting mixed up with the fighting and to stay behind with the transport. Soldiers could hardly respect a chaplain who obeyed these orders, and yet not one in fifty seemed sorry to obey them. Occasionally, on a quiet day in a quiet sector, the chaplain would make a daring afternoon visit to the support line and distribute a few cigarettes before hurrying back. But he was always much to the fore in the rest-billets,

Sometimes the colonel would summon him to come up with the rations and bury the day's dead; he would arrive, speak his lines and shoot off again.²⁰

Graves far more liked the Roman Catholic chaplains because they never failed to do "all that was expected of him and more;"

Jovial Father Gleeson of the Munsters, when all the officers were killed or wounded at the first battle of Ypres, had stripped off his black badges and, taking command of the survivors, held the line;...²¹

It was worthwhile to have priests in the troops; in a precarious existence, they needed someone to somehow guarantee that if they died fighting for a good cause, at least they would be excused a great many years in Purgatory. They had had so much of it on earth. The priests, however, should profess themselves as reliable not only in preparation for the life after death, but also when immediate needs arose. Actually speaking, pure religion did not matter so much there as its illusory effects. Graves never could tolerate the chaplains who were good only at talking of Christ, His miraculous performances and how to please Him.

Hardly one soldier in a hundred was inspired by religious of even the crudest kind. It would have been difficult to remain religious in the trenches. A regular sergeant... had recently told me that he did not hold with religion in time of war. He said that the niggers (meaning the Indians) were right in officially relaxing their religious rules in fighting. 'And all the damn nonsense, sir...that we read in the papers, sir, about how miraculous it is that the wayside crucifixes are always getting shot at, but the figure of our Lord Jesus somehow don't get hurt, it fairly makes me sick'.²²

Graves' manner in giving accounts of the War was such that, despite frequent quotations from diaries which give more reality to the narration, we cannot feel real participation in the action.

He did describe some demoralizing scenes: when a battle was just over, for instance:

After the first day or two the corpses swell and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying. Those we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell until the wall of the stomach collapsed, either naturally or when punctured by a bullet; a disgusting smell would float across. The colour of the dead faces changes from white to yellow-²³ grey, to red, to purple, to green, to black, to slimy.

The author finds him remote and impersonal. There was one death that he felt deeply.

My breaking point was near now, unless something happened to stave it off. Not that I felt frightened... I never would. Not would the breakdown come as insanity; I did not have it in me.²⁴

He just felt "empty" and "lost". He did not go out on patrol looking for Germans to kill for revenge like Sassoon. His reserve could make many think that the War had made no impression on him at all. The following quotation can probably make the reader of Robert Graves understand him more correctly.

In November came the Armistice. I heard at the same time of Frank Jones-Batesman, who had gone back again just before the end, and Wilfred Owen, who often used to send poems from France. Armistice-night hysteria did not touch our camp much;... The news sent me out walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddland...cursing and sobbing and thinking of the dead.

Siegfried's famous poem celebrating the Armistice began:

Everybody suddenly burst out singing,
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds might find in freedom...

But 'everybody' did not include me.²⁵

Like Sorley and Graves, Edmund Blunden has to be separated from the other writers of the First World War. Though he was extremely sensitive to the violence and cruelty of the War, he hardly let them disturb his vision and poetic reserve.

Blunden entered the War too late for any idealism. He had been in charge of a squad of men just recovered from injury when he was called to the Front. From what he learned from the convalescing soldiers, he could not be very optimistic about the War. Though the War would reclaim them all after a brief release, though the War was 'a jealous war, a long-lasting,' it had to be attended to.

The effect of the years of war on his sensibility is told in Undertones of War. Wisely, the book was not written until years after, in 1928, when he attained some emotional detachment. The author creates moments of human waste, and emphasizes war as man's greatest error, not by uncontrolled disparagement, but by quiet understatement.

The joyful path away from the line, on that glittering summer morning, was full of pictures for my infant war-mind. History and nature were beginning to harmonize in the quiet of that sector. In the orchard through which we passed immediately, waggons had been dragged together once with casks and farm gear to form barricades; I felt that they should never be disturbed again, and the memorial raised near them to the dead of 1915 implied a closed chapter. The empty farm houses were not yet effigies of agony or mounds of punished, atomized materials; they could still shelter, and they did. Their hearths could still boil the pot. Acres of self-sown wheat glistened and signed as we wound our way between, where rough scattered pits recorded a hurried firing-line of long ago. Life, life abundant sang here and smiled; the lizard ran warless in the warm dust; and the ditches were trembling quick with odd tiny fish, in worlds as remote as Saturn.

Artistically, Undertones of War, is an integrated work that

avoids the episodic. The author tries to stay in the background; the reader hears comparatively little of his own reactions.

Presently the drizzle was thronging down mistily again, and shelling grew more regular and searching. There were a number of concrete shelters along the trench, and it was not hard to see that their dispossessed makers were determined to do them in. Our doctor, an Irish-man named Gatchell, who seemed utterly to scorn such annoyances as Krupp, went out to find a much discussed bottle of whisky which he had left in his medical post. He returned, the bottle in his hand, 'Now, you toping rascals'--a thump like a thunderbolt stopped him. He fell mute, white, face down, the bottle still in his hand; 'Ginger' Lewis, the unshakable adjutant, whose face I chanced to see particularly, went as chalky-white, and collapsed; the Colonel, shaking and staring, passed me as I stooped to pull the doctor out, and tottered, not knowing where he was going, along the trench. This was not surprising. Over my seat, at the entrance, the direct hit had made a gash in the concrete, and the place was full of fragments and dust. The shell struck just over my head, and I supposed it was a 5.9. But we had escaped, and outside, scared from some shattered nook, a number of fieldmice were peeping and turning as though as puzzled as ourselves. A German listening-set with its delicate valves stood in the rain there, too, unfractured. But these details were perceived in a flash; and meanwhile shells were coming down remorselessly all along our alley. Other direct hits occurred. Men stood in the trench under their steel hats and capes, resigned to their fate. A veterinary surgeon, Gatfield, with his droll, sleepy, profoundly kind manner, filled the doctor's place, and attended as best he could to the doctor and the other wounded. The continuous and ponderous blasts of shell seemed to me to imply that an attack was to be made on us, and being now more or less the only headquarters officer operating, after an inconclusive conference with the Colonel, I sent the S.O.S. to the artillery; the telephone wire went almost immediately afterwards. Our wonderful artillery answered, and at length, the pulverization of our place slackened, to the relief of the starting nerves...

His comrades, in the strong bond that can tie strangers together under uncertainties and dangers, are the central figures; Colonel Harrison, especially, whom he believed to be the 'greatest discovery' of the War.

We suffered much from death and wounds, but still there existed a warm fraternity, a family understanding for a large proportion of those who saw the Somme battle together still formed the cordial opinion of the battalion. Harrison, with his gift of being friend and commander alike to all his legion, was at our head: everyone was outwardly censorious and inwardly happy when he paraded the battalion by the bleak hop-garden at Vlamertinghe for arms drill. It was cold, but he put life into us, and there is a religious or poetic element in perfecting even one's dressing by the right...

An extract from War Autobiography,

War might make his worst grimace,
And still my mind in armour good
Turned aside in every place
And saw bright day through the black wood:
There the lyddite vapoured foul,
But there I got myself a rose;
By the shrapnelled lock I would prowl
To see below the proud pike doze.



characterizes Blunden as a soldier-poet. He was said to be the most light-hearted of the World War I poets, never allowing emotional forces of the War to affect his attitude and visualization. Blunden himself knew that he had been like "a child who was happy with a bag of sweets,"²⁷ when he dealt with the War in Under-tones of War. But he thought that "the happiness of life does not altogether depend on its being without agony."³⁰ Later in his Preface to Under-tones of War, he says, "There were times when, with all that had passed and all that was obviously impending in our minds, we could be astonishingly happy."³¹ His war poetry bears this out.

Blunden was well aware of the pity of suffering and death brought about by the War. Yet, he was not obsessed with hatred of it. His poetry is not preconceived in a negative attitude. He has no obviously curative purpose. His anger is rarely outrageous and his irony is rarely cynical.

The chapel at the crossways bore no scar,
 Nor near had whining covey of shells yet pounced,
 The calm saints in the chapel knew no war,
 No meaning there the horizon's roars announced;
 We halted, and were glad; the country lay
 After our marching like a sabbath day.

...it seemed sin to soil the harmonious air
 With the parade of weapons built to kill.
 But now a flagged car came ill-omened there.
 The crimson-mottled monarch, shocked and shrill,
 Sent on our poor sentry scampering for his gun,
 Made him once more 'the terror of the Hun'.

"(The Sentry's Mistake)"

The poet was not swept through with the early romantic idealism; still, his verses do not confine themselves to the crude details of suffering and death. He is more interested in the emotional impacts, in the 'undertones' of the War. And his work is by no means less expressive of the necessary tragic import than those of the outspoken poets.

Days or eternities like swelling waves
 Surge on, and still we drudge in this dark maze,
 The bombs and coils and cans by strings of slaves
 Are bound to serve the coming day of days;
 Pale sleep in slimy cellars scarce allays
 With its brief blank the burden. Look, we lose;
 The sky is gone, the lightless drenching haze
 Of rainstorm chills the bone; earth, air are foes,
 The black fiend leaps brick-red as life's last picture goes.

"(Preparations for Victory)"

In Undertones of War, he is much of an observer-participant. In the passage previously quoted, we can see that he describes his three shell-stunned companions without the slightest hint of his own feelings or sensations. He is less detached emotionally in his poems. As the consumption of human life increased in rapidity and desperation, for instance, the poet has to cheer himself up.

My soul, dread not the pestilence that hags
 The valleys; flinch not you, my body young,
 At these great shouting smokes and snarling jags
 Of fiery iron; as yet may not be flung
 The dice that claims you. Manly move among
 These ruins, and what you must do, do well;
 Look, here are gardens, there mossed boughs are hung
 With apples whose bright cheek none might excel,
 And there's a house as yet not shattered by a shell.

"(Preparations for Victory)"

Blunden is a pastoral poet. He took great delight in the evocation of simple rural scenes, and especially of the ordered processes of nature and human life, the departure from which the War had necessitated. By resorting to symbols of the normal peacetime world, the poet can retain some degree of composure. Out of this inner struggle comes an imperative for action that is not simple patriotism but a courage born of a sense of tragic necessity and a basic need to assert the human will in the face of brutality:

The body, poor unpitied Caliban,
 Parches and sweats and grunts to win the name of Man.

Blunden highly values the harmony and the beauty of Nature. He mentions disagreeable realities of the destruction by the inhuman mechanism of war, not for their own sake, but to emphasize the tragic point that aspects of Nature had cruelly undergone an alteration for the worst. Romantically, he gives human feelings and emotions to both animate and inanimate nature.

The tired air groans as the heavies swing over, the
 river-hollows boom;
 The shell-fountains leap from the swamps, and with
 wildfire and fume
 The shoulder of the chalkdown convulses.
 Then jabbering echoes stampede in the slatting wood,
 Ember-black the gibbet trees like bones or thorns
 protrude

From the poisonous smoke-past all impulses.
 To them these silvery dews can never again be dear,
 Nor the blue javelin-flame of thunderous noons strike
 fear.

"(Thiepval Wood)"

His cherished Nature assumes its most poignant aspects when soldiers are permitted brief interludes of rest in areas behind the front lines.

How they crowded the barn with lusty laughter,
 Hailed the pierrots and shook each shadowy rafter,
 Even could ridicule their own sufferings,
 Sang as though nothing but joy came after!

"(At Senlis Once)"

Blunden's calm sympathy, controlled presentation, and his occasional tragic insight may be due to the fact that he views the War as designed by a superintending power. In "Come On My Lucky Lads", the sight of a wounded soldier confirms the brutal reality of the demoralizing war of attrition.

Here limps poor Jock with a gash in the poll,
 His red blood now is the red I see,
 The swooning white of him, and that red!
 These bombs in boxes, the crunch of shells,
 The second-hand flitting round; ahead!
 It's plain we were born for this, and naught else.

Isaac Rosenberg enlisted with the Suffolk Bantam Regiment in 1915. His motives reflect resignation rather than patriotic enthusiasm. In a letter to Edward Marsh, he said: "Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must all fight to get the trouble over." All his trench poems are to bear out this early remark.

Though he could find no justification for this "peculiarly human activity" and was conscious of not only the "crime" but also of the "guilt" and "punishment", he had a very high opinion of

people who went to war. The sacrifice, worthy of 'God's kiss', can find no compensation. That the waste is so real is illustrated in "August 1914."

Three lives hath one life--
 Iron, honey, gold.
 The gold, the honey gone--
 Left is the hard and cold.
 Iron are our lives
 Molten right through our youth.
 A burnt space through ripe fields.
 A fair mouth's broken booth.

In "Spring 1916," the season is "ruined Queen", the War threatening not only the individual life, but also the aspect of Nature that is the source of life and vitality. In "Returning We Hear the Larks" is another element of natural beauty; it can be dangerous for the unwary for upon the 'upturned list'ning faces...

Death could drop from the dark
 As easily as song...

Sassoon remarked that Rosenberg was not consciously a 'war poet'--that is, in the sense that Sassoon himself was a war poet, deliberately using the materials of warfare. Upon learning that his own brother is among the dead whose burial service he is preparing:

What are the great sceptered dooms
 To us, caught
 In the wild wave?
 We break ourselves on them,
 My brother, our hearts and years.

"(In War)."

The absence of external realism and the emphasis on what is timeless and universal is a quality rather rare in World War I verse.

"The Daughters of War" is originally intended to get *that

sense of inexorableness the human (or inhuman) side of this war has." The poem is striking for its symbolic projection: the future of the soldiers is seen in terms of an 'Amazon' waiting for her lover, a spirit of the "slain earth men" to be released. The poem, however, has little relationship to the underlying reality of the War.

Rosenberg's most famous poem is "Break of Day in the Trenches." The rat, in cosmopolitan fashion, commutes freely between opposed sets of trenches. In a way, the figure of the rat emphasizes the tragic absurdity of this human activity. The supposedly humbler creature is grinning upon the brutish and irrational way of men who are "less chanced" for life. To quote the poet's proper words when addressing the rat that has just jumped over his hand:

Now you have touched this English hand
 You will do the same to a German --
 Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure
 To cross the sleeping green between.
 It seems you inwardly grin as you pass
 Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes
 Less chanced then you for life,
 Bonds to the whims of murder,
 Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,
 The torn fields of France.

The title of "Dead Man's Dump" suggests the callousness of modern warfare, the brutal indifference to life as well as to death. The opening stanzas present a consciousness sensitive to the effects of war, vividly depicted in the pathetic passivity of the dead:

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead
 But pained them not, though their bones crunched,
 Their shut mouths made no moan.

The men, "friend and foeman," are reduced to the same condition, a mere dump. The earth, that has long been "fretting for their

decay," has them at last. The poem also reveals a realization that war destroys youth "in the strength of its strength."

There is a point where Rosenberg comes close to Sorley, who recognizes that pity is irrelevant when its object is the victim of forces beyond human control or understanding:

A man's brains splattered on
A stretcher-bearer's face;
His shock shoulders slipped their loads,
But when they bent to look again
The drowning soul was sunk too deep
For human tenderness.

At this point, tenderness or sympathy is of no avail. This is reminding of Sorley's

...give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.

The rest of "Dead Man's Dump" illustrates how death in a modern war is far from being heroic or admirable. The grievously wounded man is left struggling for life, or, at least, for human recognition, but...

...the rushing wheels all mixed
With his tortured upturned sight.
So we crashed round the bend,
We heard his weak scream,
We heard his very last sound,
And our wheels grazed his dead face.

Thus the poem comes out with another 'ignominious and pitiable' death.

Unlike most of his contemporaries, who were caught up in their interpretation of the War as a present actuality, Rosenberg looked into the future for a complete realization of his talents and his inner vision. As he stated in a letter, he planned to put all his

'innermost experiences' in a grand poetic drama -- 'The Unicorn,' which was to transcend the crude particularities of war by means of an elaborate symbolism. The play, however, was not finished. Considering what he was subject to in the trench, a mere private with frail health and psyche, an object for racial discrimination, the determination of never to let the War 'master' his poeting and to 'saturate myself with the strange and extraordinary new conditions of this life, which will refine itself into poetry later on...!' bears out a strong poetic faith.