CHAPTER I

INITIAL IDEALISTIC REACTIONS OF WRITERS TO THE WAR

The War which broke out in August, 1914, was greeted with an overwhelming enthusiasm which Professor V.de S.Pinto attributed to :

> ..the sense of relief from the intolerable tension of the years immediately preceding the war and from the drabness and monotony of commercialized civilization,..the sense of the breaking down of the barriers of the British insularity and a reassertion of unity with the rest of Europe,..the outcome of the moral sense derived from the English puritan tradition, which had been starved, corrupted, and which now seemed to have found an outlet in heroic action.

Englishmen from all walks of life enlisted, and felt certain that conscription would never be exercised. It seemed clear to all that the War was inevitable and justifiable. If England ignored Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality, it would be to overlook a threat to freedom and national stability as a whole. How could the British Empire stand aloof, seeing Germany rising to power with more than half of European countries in hand? To the British, this war provided them with a strong cause for defence and liberation. The waging of another war meant one more evocation of courage, which, to most, remained a virtue.

Idealism and optimism in the early war poetry find justification in two main facts. In the first place, England went to war in 1914 in the mood of joyous certainty. She was confident that her cause was just, that her army was invincible and that her consequent victories would be glorious, overwhelming and practically immediate. It was difficult, at that early date, to alert people to the dangers of the conflict; no one could predict the long, hopeless stalemate of trench warfare to follow. A good illustration is Thomas Hardy's *Men Who March Away*:

What of the faith and fire within us
Men who march away
Ere the barn-cocks say
Night is growing gray,
To hazards whence no tears can win us;
What of the faith and fire within us
Men who march away?

In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just,
And that braggarts must
Surely bite the dust,
Press we to the field ungrieving,
In our heart of hearts believing
Victory crowns the just.

The rhythm of this poem is the rhythm of marching men; it is a rhythm also that expresses the reawakening of the adventurous spirit, stifled for so long, of the men believing that they were embarking on a crusade for a righteous cause.

Most of the young war poets, moreover, shared the Georgian outlook and modelled their early verse on the techniques established by the Georgians. These people refused to go beyond the limits of carefully chosen "poetic" situations. And, adopting the tendency to forget about "the lies, and truths, and pain",[2] they were apparently oblivious of causes, issues and practical effects and indulged themselves in romantic fantasies of honours, sacrifice, self-redemption and immortality.

Among the young university men who were mostly ordered to officer the New Armies was Rupert Brooke, (1887-1915). He did not consider himself a victim of this cruel outcome of nationalistic and economic rivalry. He was proud, as C.E. Montague indicates in his Disenchantment, to have been "chosen" for the sacrifice he made only too willingly. Brooke joined the newly formed Royal Naval Division and was present at the unsuccessful attempt to relieve

Antwerp. He died in the Aegean on his way to Gallipoli in 1915, at the age of twenty-seven.

His celebrated sonnet sequence, "1914," sums up the attitudes of this Georgian towards the War, which were common among Englishmen in the autumn of 1914. With allusion to this sequence, a writer said:

> It's clear that the War surprised him and that he found in his readiness to do his duty for his country a high religious joy...To him, the call for sacrifice was the opportunity for purification.[3]

The feeling has never been better expressed than in the lines which begin the sonnet "Peace:"

> Now, God be thanked Who had matched us with His hour,
> And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping.

According to his own confession, Brooke was "barely even under fire", though he witnessed some spectacular feats of the War. His war sonnets are at any rate abstract. There is no attempt to define the crisis that had an inspirational effect on him. The poet views it only in terms of the effects that the crisis had on him personally.

The first sonnet of the sequence "1914" is "Peace." The poet is here thankful to God that he is at the right age to fight in the War. This is an opportunity for moral regeneration:

> Now, God be thanked Who had matched us with His hour,
> And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
> With hand madesure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
> To turn, as swimmers into cleaness leaping,
> Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
> Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
> And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
> And all the emptiness of love!

He does not have any apprehension in the least. The only thing that can suffer is the body and the pain is not endless. Moreover, "the worst friend and enemy is but Death."

In the next sonnet, "The Safety," he recovers peace of mind. That he is on the side of the just guarantees a kind of moral safety. The War may lead to death, but, isn't it the safest of all shelters against the dangers of life?

> We have gained a peace unshakened by pain forever.
> War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,
> Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;
> Safe though all the safety's lost; safe where men fall;
> And if the poor limbs die, safest of all.

In "The Dead," the poet talks about the soldiers who have fallen in the battlefield. The poem evokes the pathos of terminated hope and joy:

> These laid the world away; poured out the red
> Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be
> Of work and joy, and that unhoped serene,
> That man called age; and those who would have been,
> Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

The holy, honourable sacrifices have inspirational effects, "..rarer gifts than gold," upon the living:

> And nobleness walks in our ways again;
> And we have come into our heritage.

Another sonnet, also entitled "The Dead," relates human experiences on the sensuous and emotional level, which are put to an end by Death. This, however, is but a transformation into "a white unbroken glory." The idea of spiritual survival implicit here clearly shows that the sonnet lacks contact with the actuality that inspired it, because Brooke had to abide by the established Georgian

limits of the "poetic."

"The Soldier" is the final sonnet of this sequence. The poet dramatizes the pathos of his own possible death, and in a way writes his own elegy.

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.

The poem contains another Georgian concept: to die is to become "a pulse in the eternal mind". If he dies somewhere in a foreign land, his mind will go back to the home country, England, which he knows and loves so well.

Alluding to Brooke, Charles Sorley, who did not outlive him long, said:

He is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances, where non-compliance with this demand would have made life intolerable...He has clothed his attitude in fine words: but he has taken the sentimental attitude.[4]

And in a sonnet, Sorley makes an explicit rejoinder to Brooke's "1914" sequence.

When you see millions of 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 honor. It is easy to be dead.

Sorley's criticism is radical and essentially correct. It touches the heart of the situation of the volunteers of 1914. He blamed Brooke for being too subjective and emotional in his works, full of affectation and insincerity. But Brooke took to the attitudes and techniques of Georgian lyricism so much that to have admitted fact or necessity among his spiritualized motivations would have been to destroy a fantasy of heroic self-sacrifice and moral regeneration. Nevertheless, nobody can credit whether he would have continued to write in the spirit of "1914" sonnets if he had survived into the years of deepening horrors and despair. However, there is an indication that he began to turn towards the poetry of the real war in his "Fragment" from the troopship in April 1915:

> I strayed about the deck, an hour, to-night
> Under a cloudy moonless sky; and peeped
> In at the windows, watched my friends at table
> Or playing cards, or standing in the doorway,
> Or coming out into the darkness. Still
> No one could see me.
>
> I would have thought of them
> --Heedless, within a week of battle--in pity,
> Pride in their strength and in the weight and firmness
> And link'd beauty of bodies and pity that
> This gay machine of splendour 'ld soon be broken,
> Thought little of, pash'd, scatter'd...

Moreover, a hint of what may have been his real feeling emerges unexpectedly, considering the positive sentiment of "1914," in an early account of his reaction to the first news of the War.

> I am so uneasy-subconsciously; all the vague perils of the time—the world seema so dark—and I am vaguely frightened.

These physical and emotional realities find no expreasion in the "1914" sequence.

Julian Grenfell died a little more than a month after Brooke's death. His war verse exhibits the same attitude of joyous acceptance expressed in Brooke's sonnets, but the fervor is of a different order and is inspired by altogether different conceptions.

Grenfell had much enthusiasm for a military career. When the War broke out, he was already a professional soldier in France in early October; and in a letter from Flanders, he wrote:

> Here we are, in the burning center of it all, and I would not be anywhere else for a millions pounds and the Queen of Sheba...I have never, never felt so well, or so happy or enjoyed anything so much. It just suits my stolid health, and stolid nerves, and barbaric disposition. The fighting excitement vitalizes everything, every sight and word and action.

T. Sturge Moore, in his attempt to define the feeling of exhilaration effectively communicated by "Into Battle," said: "Harmony between impulse and circumstance creates this joy."[5]

Grenfell's best poem, "Into Battle," is an evocation of his delight in combat which was due to "a mixture of professional pride, a boyishly romantic conception of warfare, and a susceptibility to the violent physical activity."[6] The delight probably owes something to the adventurous nature of the conflict in 1914 and early 1915, too. Upon reading the poem, Sir Walter Raleigh said: "It can't be done again."

In "1914," Brooke visualizes the War only in terms of its effects on his class. Grenfell advances us to the edge of the War, but the battle hardly assumes any more reality. His combat experience was considerable by the time the poem was written, but his lyric response is self-regarding, self-revealing, oblivious of

causes, meanings or consequences.

The warmth, liveliness and beauty of the natural surroundings evoked at the beginning of "Into Battle" are somehow suggestive of the sensations and the joys of the soldier about to enter the battle.

> The naked earth is warm with spring,
> And with green grass and bursting trees
> Leans to the sun's gaze glorying,
> And quivers in the sunny breeze;
> And life is colour and warmth and light,
> And a striving evermore for these;
> And he is dead who will not fight;
> And who dies fighting has increase.

To him, to die as a soldier is to share Nature's "increase", not because death is a sacrifice (as in "1914") but because death is an effect of fighting. In the poem, Nature is all benevolent:

> The fighting man shall from the sun
> Take warmth, and life from the glowing earth;
> Speed with the light-foot winds to run,
> And with the trees to newer birth;
> And find, when fighting shall be done,
> Great rest, and fullness after dearth.

The stars "hold him in their high comradeship"; the trees, stirred by the wind, "guide to valley and ridge's end"; the owl and kestrel "bid him be swift and keen as they"; most remarkable of all:

> The thundering line of battle stands,
> And in the air Death moans and signs;
> But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
> And Night shall hold him with soft wings.

Apparently, what is shown in the poem is an instinctive delight in aggressive physical action. Any moral or nationalistic purpose that might be responsible for his being soldier is irrelevant. The following stanzas make clear the point:

And when the burning moment breaks,
  And all things else are out of mind,
And only joy of battle takes
  Him by throat, and makes him blind,

Through joy and blindness he shall know,
  No caring much to know, that still
Nor lead nor steel shall reach him, so
  That it be not the Destined Will.

Unlike Brooke and Grenfell, Robert Nichols survived the War. His collection of poems, Ardours and Endurances, indicates stages through which early war poetry was progressing. The first stage is that of ardent romantic idealism. The second stage, that of an as yet exuberant and uncritical response to the thrills, adventures and horrors of warfare. Both the endurances and the ardours are personal rather than general. There is no suggestion of the tone of desperate endurance so common in later poetry.

Guns again! the quiet
Shakes at the vengeful . . .
It is terrible pleasure.
I do not fear. I rejoice.

"(In The Grass: Halt By Roadside)"

"Battery Moving Up" gives way to something more real in its sense if actual suffering and death.

Turn hearts to us as we go by,
Salute those about to die,
Plead for them, the deep bell toll:
Their sacrifice must soon be whole.

Entreat you for such hearts as break
With the premonitory ache
Of bodies, whose feet, hands, and side
Must soon be torn, pierced, crucified.

However, "Our Dead," written as late as in 1916, shows no deepened understanding of the War's significance and no effort to

depart from the images and the techniques of Georgian lyricism.

> They have not gone from us. O no! they are
> The inmost essence of each thing that is
> Perfect to us; they flame in every star;
> The trees are emerald with their presences.

Siegfried Sassoon was especially known for his bitter protest against the War, though he was in fact the first poet to offer himself for military service.

According to his fictionized autobiography, Memoirs of George Sherston, Sassoon joined the Army, in the first place, as a trooper in the Sussex Yeomanry. Though he was already twenty-eight, he still had many fancies of the youth:

> On that ominous July 31st, I said long and secret goodbyes to everything and everyone...I looked my last and rode away for the War on my bicycle. Somehow I know that it was inevitable, and my one idea was to be the first in the field. In fact, it did not occur to me that everyone else would be rushing off to enlist next week. My gesture was, so to speak, an individual one, and I gloried in it.[7]

The young Sherston feels himself so much of a hero:

> There was something almost idyllic about those early weeks of the War...Never before had I known how much I had to lose. Never before had I looked at the living world with any degree of intensity. It seemed almost I had been waiting for this thing to happen, although my own part in it was so obscure and submissive.[8]

His innocent excitement is almost lovely when he is first "warned of guard."

> I can remember how I polished my boots and buttons for the event. And when, in the middle of the night, I had been waked up to take my turn as sentry,...My King and my country expected it of me. In the autumn smelling silence...I heard someone moving in my direction across the field which I was facing. The significance of those approaching feet was intensified by my sentrified nerves. Holding my rifle defensively (and a loaded rifle, too) I remarked in an unemphatic voice: 'Halt, who goes there?'[9]

And it is a cow that he has challenged.

He soon became infinitely bored with having nothing definite to do.

> Raking up horse-dung before breakfast had ceased to be a new experience. And the jokes and jollity of my companions had likewise lost freshness.[10]

He felt homesick. And escape came unexpectedly. A fall from his horse while acting as a ground scout resulted in a badly broken arm; and in January 1915, he was sent home for two months to convalesce. While his arm was still in sling, he felt a fraud, for people naturally assumed he had been to the Front. As soon as the arm healed, he applied for a special reserve commission, the opportunity for which he had previously turned down twice, feeling himself incompetent as a soldier. Up to now, the War still seemed so far away. He had no intuitions that "the War is a crime against humanity"[11] and that he was in a soldier machinery as soon as he got out at Clitherland camp for training as an infantry officer. He started his active service with a peaceful interlude, for his platoon was soon to have a divisional rest. That's why

> When riding alone I explored the country absent-mindedly, meditating on the horrors which I had yet to experience; I was unable to reconcile that skeleton certainty with the serenity of this winter landscape-- clean-smelling, with larks in the sky,...[12]

Poems written about this time are "Absolution," "To My Brother," "To Victory." Like many of the early soldier poets, he voiced the idealism of the first months of the War.

"Absolution" takes after the Georgian fashion in Brooke's celebrated "1914." The poem introduces the Sassoon who still

"wanted the War to be an impressive experience--terrible but not horrible enough to interfere with my (his) heroic emotions"[13]

The anguish of the earth absolves our eyes
Till beauty shines in all that we can see.
War is our scourge; yet war has made us wise,
And, fighting for our freedom, we are free.

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.
We are the happy legion, for we know
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

The War is at the same time an "absolution" and a "scourge"." The latter, however, is somehow outweighed. Certainly we all have to suffer the impacts of the War; but isn't all for an obviously worthy end? i.e. moral transformation.

There were many physical discomforts in the battlefield. Yet he found oblivion in the idea of supreme sacrifice. His younger brother died in action at Gallipoli--this set an exemplar to be lived up to.

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;
Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame
For we have made an end of all things base.
We are returning by the road we came.
Your lot is with the ghosts of the soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head
And through your victory I shall win the light.

"To Victory" was written after Sassoon had been in France for a few weeks. It is likewise conventionally "poetic."

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain,
But shining as garden; come with the streaming
Banners of dawn and sundown after rain.

Though he had not yet actually participated in the fighting, and though for him it was not easy to think of dying, he was not ignorant of the increasing human carnage. Referring to the compara-

tive comforts with which the Western Front received him, he said:

> It was a hand-to-mouth happiness, preyed upon by the remote noise of artillery; and as for health,...we are all of us provisionally condemned to death in our own thoughts, and if any one had been taken seriously ill and sent back to 'Blighty', he would have been looked upon as lucky.[14]

When the First Battalion was ordered for the Somme trenches, Sassoon was to take over the job of a Transport Officer. He continued seeing the War as a looker-on. He had been in France for four months and felt a bit of an impostor as regards war experiences when he was given a leave to England. It is at this moment that he realized that his past was "wearing thin."

> The War seemed to have made up its mind to obliterate all these early adventures of mine...Perhaps the only way to forget about the War was to be the other side of the Channel.[15]

After all, "obedience and self-sacrifice for right and truth in spite of suffering and death is Christianity,[16]" he reminded himself of a Rector's words. Though he sensed something amiss about the "right and truth," he was too inexperienced to think it all out now.

His closest friend's passing away in action was a step nearer to the bleak realization of what he was in for. A few days later, he was ordered to his platoon. To him, the enemy was an as yet unknown quality; and he never saw a prisoner until the Somme battle began in summer.

He was instructed to go in for a refresher course in the Fourth Army School at Flixécourt. Parades and lectures were so out of keeping with the reality that he almost believed that the school was in fact only a holiday for officers who needed a rest. After

the four weeks at this school, he still thought of trench warfare as an adventure.

> Six years before I had been ambitious of winning races because that had seemed a significant way of demonstrating my equality with my contemporaries. And now I wanted to make the World War serve a similar purpose, for if only I could get a Military Cross I should feel comparatively safe and confident...Trench warfare was mostly monotonous drudgery, and I preferred the exciting idea of crossing the mine-craters and getting into the German front line. In my simple-minded way, I had identified myself with that strip of No-Man's-Land opposite Bois Français; and the mine-craters had always fascinated me,...[17]

According to Robert Graves's Goodbye to All That, he was known as "Mad Jack." Sassoon established something of a divisional reputation for his voluntary night-patrols in No-Man's-Land. For his heroism in bringing back a wounded officer after a raid opposite Mametz, he was awarded the Military Cross, which became something for him to live up to. On his second leave, he felt more like an intruder from the Western Front. The happy home life had less and less connection with his coming and going. He went back to France just before the Push, which he believed would finish the War by Christmas. During the Great Somme battles in early July, he performed another extraordinary exploit by occupying, single-handedly, a whole section of enemy trench.

The Somme Offensive, primarily a British operation, was the first great attempt to crash through the fortifications that the German had constructed along the Western Front. After a week of artillery bombardment unprecedented in weight and intensity, the Allies launched the great attack for which they had prepared so long and for which they held such high hopes. After the summer

of 1916, it became clear that the Somme Offensive, though it threateningly broke the German front line, fell far short of expectations.

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