

## The First World War: British writing

### Soldiers and civilians

In May 1917, Virginia Woolf published a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of *The Old Huntsman*, Siegfried Sassoon's first collection of war poems. Sassoon was to become one of the most famous of the British First World War poets, and Woolf was among the first to recognize the importance of his work. No other poet, she writes, has managed to convey so strongly what is "sordid and horrible" about the war. Many others are writing about the conflict, but Sassoon produces "a new shock of surprise" in his readers. "Yes," writes Woolf, we find ourselves saying, "this is going on; and we are sitting here watching it." She describes the "loathing" and "hatred" at work in Sassoon's poetry (a quality some readers at the time and since have criticized as too obvious) and speculates that it shocks readers into thinking about their role as spectators to the sufferings of war, producing "an uneasy desire to leave our place in the audience." In this, Sassoon's poetry is "realism of the right, of the poetic kind."<sup>1</sup>

Woolf's modest article shrewdly notes two areas that are crucial to an understanding of British writings of the First World War (1914–18). Firstly, it was in literature that readers at the time could learn something of what was really happening ("this is going on"). Secondly, Sassoon, Woolf, and many other writers of the period were troubled by the problem of witnessing. Woolf draws attention to the question of who sees what in war, and how the act of witnessing can make one complicit in events over which one has no control. She also raises the continuing question of how war literature should be judged in aesthetic terms. Is it more important that Sassoon is a soldier, writing out of his own experience, or is it primarily as a poet that he should be read?

Sassoon served in the front lines and was profoundly distressed by his experiences. He was even more troubled by the suffering of others and this

informs much of his poetry. He frequently describes ordinary soldiers and their struggle just to survive:

Disconsolate men who stamp their sodden boots  
And turn dulled, sunken faces to the sky  
Haggard and hopeless.<sup>2</sup>

Despite their apparent despair, the men “cling to life with stubborn hands.” But inevitably the war will defeat them:

O my brave brown companions, when your souls  
Flock silently away, and the eyeless dead  
Shame the wild beast of battle on the ridge,  
Death will stand grieving in that field of war  
Since your unvanquished hardihood is spent.<sup>3</sup>

Striving to express both the depth and the sheer pointlessness of the men’s endurance, Sassoon imagines that war itself (“the wild beast of battle”) will feel ashamed and even Death will grieve the loss. This despairing concern for fellow soldiers, expressed as a complex of love, mourning, and anger, marks much of Sassoon’s poetry, and that of other British trench poets, including Isaac Rosenberg, Ivor Gurney, Edmund Blunden, Richard Aldington, Charles Hamilton Sorley, David Jones, and Herbert Read. Wilfred Owen, too, tries to convey the suffering of the troops, describing the experience from within (“we cursed”) and without (the men’s feet appear “shod” with their own blood), in one of his best-known poems of the war, “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1917):

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
...  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod.<sup>4</sup>

Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, was a civilian. Many of her friends and relations served; other friends were conscientious objectors or pacifists (Lytton Strachey, Ottoline Morrell, Duncan Grant, Clive Bell, Aldous Huxley, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, Bertrand Russell). Her husband Leonard Woolf was active in the Labour Party and in movements to promote internationalism and peace after the war. Virginia Woolf herself was very ill in the early part of the war, missing much of the news of 1915.<sup>5</sup> When she recovered, she followed events with dismay. Much of her writing thereafter struggles to bear witness to this terrible period, and to warn against warfare in the future. We see this in different ways in *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), and *The Years* (1937), culminating in her most explicit engagement with the problem of war, *Three Guineas* (1938).

### Literature and the press

Woolf's 1917 review of Sassoon marks an important moment in literary history. It signals that modernists such as Woolf were profoundly aware of the sufferings of the First World War and were from the beginning interested in the writings of those who served. Above all, Woolf is aware of the distinction between the role of literature and that of the press during the conflict. She makes this point again in 1918, reviewing Sassoon's next collection of poems, *Counter-Attack*. Here, she praises his capacity to show "the terrible pictures which lie behind the colourless phrases in the newspapers."<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the press coverage of the Crimean War, when the newspapers, for the first and last time, revealed the realities of conflict with considerable accuracy and constituted a reliable source of information, British newspaper reporting of the First War was full of lies, half-truths, and propaganda – alongside much that was true. Very often it was impossible to tell the difference. Official government announcements and army dispatches were no more reliable. It took some time for the shocking reality of the worst of the war experience to be known to British civilians. And that knowledge came, in part, through literature.

This is one reason why the literature of the First World War remains so important, both for historians and for literary critics. Writing of the First World War is an important strand in the complex movements of modernism in the early twentieth century. Though often regarded as a highly aestheticized body of writing – even as "art for art's sake" – much modernist literature had a strong interest in the politics and problems of its day. Alongside the more traditional and realist writers of the period, the modernist, experimental, and avant-garde writers of the early twentieth century attempted to bear witness to the war. The literature tries to tell truths that could not easily be expressed elsewhere and marks a groundbreaking period in the history of war writing.

What, then, is meant by the "literature of the First World War?" Several kinds of writing should be included. The work of the trench poets is most familiar; to this important body of literature can be added combatants' memoirs and fiction; memoirs by nurses and other civilian participants; popular, patriotic, and propagandistic writings; pacifist writings; and civilian reflections upon the war experience. Some of these works can be termed modernist; others are more traditional in form. T. S. Eliot's iconic modernist poem *The Waste Land* (1922) is in part a bitter commentary upon a war that left much of European civilization in ruins. It looks too at the uncertainties created by the peace treaties, and the new borders within Europe, which rendered millions of people homeless or stateless – Eliot's "hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains."<sup>7</sup>

None of these groups of war writing is discrete. But the categories are helpful as a way of indicating the range of discourses of the First World War. And despite the propaganda and inaccuracies, it is also helpful to read the literature in the context of the press of the day in order to make fullest sense of the issues raised by Woolf and Sassoon. Newspapers such as *The Times*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Daily Chronicle*, and periodicals such as the *TLS*, *Bookman*, *New Statesman*, *Illustrated London News*, *Land and Water*, *Athenaeum*, *Nation*, and *The British Medical Journal*, can assist understanding of the debates which are taking place, explicitly and implicitly, within the literature – and sharpen perception of how the literature takes up and, especially, refutes the language and sentiments of the press.

### Impact and responses

The First World War was much greater in geographical scope and in human cost than any previous war. It is often described as the world's first industrial war – that is, war on an industrial scale using industrial technology.<sup>8</sup> Approximately seventy million people served in the war; more than nine million died. Millions more were mentally or physically injured. The nations involved included, on the Allied side, Britain, France, Russia, Serbia, Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, and, from 1917 to 1918, the United States; and, fighting as the Central Powers, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Turkey, and Bulgaria. Much of the war for British troops took place in Belgium and northern France, but the trenches extended far beyond this, from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps, a distance of nearly five hundred miles. At the time it was known as the European War or the Great War, but it was in many respects the first true world war, with fighting occurring in Italy, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Palestine, Persia, Mesopotamia, Cameroon, German East Africa, the North Sea, and the Falkland Islands.<sup>9</sup> As well as vast international forces of troops, there were large labor corps from China, India, the Belgian Congo, Nigeria, Malta, and Egypt that served Britain in all the major war zones. Mortality rates among these workers were high: more than fifty thousand Chinese and Indian workers died on the Western Front; tens of thousands of African laborers died of disease.<sup>10</sup> The war ended with an Armistice at 11 A.M. on November 11, 1918, a moment that is still commemorated in Britain and the Commonwealth with a two-minute silence and the laying of wreaths at war memorials.

Most British writers of the early twentieth century were affected, one way or another, by the First World War. Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Read, Aldington, Blunden, Robert Graves, Edgell Rickword, Ford Madox Ford,

Wyndham Lewis, and many others served in the armed forces. Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain both served as nurses in the war; both later became activists in the peace movement. Brittain's *Testament of Youth* (1933) is a powerful account of her nursing experiences, and describes the grief and rage of young people who lose beloved friends and family in a war they come to see as without purpose. E. M. Forster served in the Red Cross in Egypt. Somerset Maugham worked as a volunteer in an ambulance unit and later worked for British Intelligence in the war; his short story collection *Ashenden* (1928) draws upon this experience. Novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner worked in a munitions factory; later she became active in the peace movement. Radclyffe Hall, author of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), contributed to propaganda work and longed to join the women helping at the front. Rudyard Kipling also assisted with propaganda and played an important role in the memorialization of the war and the work of the Imperial War Graves Commission. Other writers who actively supported the war effort include J. M. Barrie, Hilaire Belloc, Arnold Bennett, John Buchan, John Galsworthy, Ian Hay (author of *The First Hundred Thousand* [1916]), Henry James, May Sinclair, H. G. Wells, and Mrs. Humphry Ward.<sup>11</sup>

A number of writers greeted the outbreak of war with patriotic excitement. Probably the most familiar voice is that of Rupert Brooke, a young man who joined up enthusiastically and encouraged others to do the same. His well-known poem "Peace" (late 1914) celebrates the idea that the war is raising young men from the "sleep" of peace and giving them a chance to prove themselves:

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,  
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary.<sup>12</sup>

Where other poets found dirt, suffering, and despair, Brooke imagines the war as clean water, the soldiers swimmers leaping joyfully into its depths. Brooke died of illness in April 1915 on his way to the war, without ever engaging in combat. As many people have commented, his enthusiasm for the war was never to be tested by experience. Other young, idealistic soldiers wrote in praise of the war in the early days of the conflict; many changed their views in the light of their service.

Nonetheless, disillusionment was not universal. While much of the best literature tends to be highly critical of the war and its effects, this is not the only view expressed. There were propagandist writers – mainly civilians – who maintained their enthusiasm throughout the conflict and used their

writing to urge others to participate. This kind of propagandist writing can be crude, as in Jessie Pope's doggerel verse, "The Call" (1915):

Who's for the trench –  
Are you, my laddie?  
Who'll follow the French –  
Will you, my laddie?  
Who's fretting to begin,  
Who's going out to win?  
And who wants to save his skin –  
Do you, my laddie?<sup>13</sup>

Owen originally suggested an ironic dedication of his "Dulce et Decorum Est" to Jessie Pope, bitterly denouncing her propagation of the "old lie" that it is "sweet and decorous" to die for one's country. Pope is an extreme example, and an influential one. But not all of the pro-war writings were so unintelligent, nor did they lack nuance. For example, Kipling and May Sinclair produced some subtle works, and sometimes came to challenge, at least implicitly, their own public support for the war. Even the work of Mrs. Humphry Ward, a dedicated propagandist, is more complex than might be expected. Her war books include *England's Effort* (1916), *Towards the Goal* (1917), *Missing* (1917), *The War and Elizabeth* (1918), and *Fields of Victory* (1919); these raise quiet questions about the conflict, even while maintaining an overtly pro-war attitude.<sup>14</sup>

Writers who were pacifists or opposed the war include Vernon Lee (*Satan the Waster* [1920]), Rose Macaulay (*Non-Combatants and Others* [1916]), Rose Allatini (*Despised and Rejected* [1917] [written under the pseudonym A. T. Fitzroy]), John Rodker, Leonard Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Bertrand Russell, and George Bernard Shaw. The *Cambridge Magazine*, edited by C. K. Ogden, campaigned vigorously against the war and was much criticized for its pacifism.<sup>15</sup>

### Literature and experience

Combatants often express the belief that only those who were present can really understand the enormity of the experience. This is no doubt true, and yet some of the most powerful and enduring works of the First World War draw not simply upon the writers' own experiences but on stories they heard from others. Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen Nichts Neues*) (1929), for example, is a classic of First World War literature. Some of this book is based upon Remarque's war service in the German Army, but much of it derives from what he heard from other soldiers,

and from an earlier war book, *Under Fire (Le Feu)* (1916), by Henri Barbusse, a French socialist and journalist who worked as a stretcher-bearer in the front lines. *Under Fire* was immensely influential at the time. It was quickly translated from French into other languages, was probably the most admired book among British servicemen, and by the end of the war had sold close to 250,000 copies.<sup>16</sup>

While those who served in the front lines argued that their experiences were unique, the writing they produced is concerned to share something of that experience, to explain it to others, to memorialize it. In other words, there is a kind of shared memory of the war, a cultural imagining. Some British memoirs and novels by servicemen appeared shortly after the armistice: A. P. Herbert's *The Secret Battle* (1919); Arthur Jenkin's *A Tank Driver's Experiences* (1922); C. E. Montague's *Disenchantment* (1922). A decade or so later, many more works appeared, including R. H. Mottram's *The Spanish Farm Trilogy* (1924–26), Ford Madox Ford's tetralogy *Parade's End* (1924–28), R. C. Sherriff's play *Journey's End* (1928), Edmund Blunden's *Undertones of War* (1928), Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929), Charles Carrington's *A Subaltern's War* (1929), Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune* (1929) (published in expurgated form as *Her Privates We* in 1930), Henry Williamson's *The Patriot's Progress* (1930), Guy Chapman's *A Passionate Prodigality* (1933), V. M. Yeates's air force memoir, *Winged Victory* (1934), David Jones's prose-poem *In Parenthesis* (1937), and Wyndham Lewis's *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937).

Many women wrote books about the war, based on both their own and others' experiences. Alongside the works of Brittain and Holtby, nursing memoirs include Enid Bagnold's *A Diary without Dates* (1918), Irene Rathbone's *We that Were Young* (1932), and the Anglo-American Mary Borden's *The Forbidden Zone* (1929). Journalist Evadne Price wrote a striking novel about women ambulance drivers at the front, *Not So Quiet: Stepdaughters of War* (1930) (published under the pseudonym Helen Zenna Smith), based upon what she had learned from veterans. May Sinclair, then a well-respected and successful author in her fifties, accompanied an ambulance corps to Belgium in 1914. She published her account of this experience as *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium* in 1915. As Suzanne Raitt points out, Sinclair's war experiences were not edifying: she felt quite useless in the ambulance corps. Three of her beloved nephews served and two were killed. But she maintained an enthusiasm for the conflict and wrote several novels which "explore its attractions," including *Tasker Jevons* (1916), *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), and *The Romantic* (1920).<sup>17</sup>

Sinclair's work sits somewhere between modernism and popular fiction. There are many other writers who had no apparent aspirations to high art or explorations of human complexity, and their work is another element of the literary history of the First World War. As Jane Potter has shown, there was a huge body of romantic, propagandist, and popular fiction, much of it by women – escapist, morale-boosting, sometimes highly implausible, sometimes speaking to the realities of readers' lives (especially civilians) during the war. Writers of such fiction include Ruby Ayres, Olive Dent, Kate Finzi, Marie Belloc Lowndes, and Berta Ruck.<sup>18</sup> Popular fiction supposedly describing military or spy experiences, such as John Buchan's thrillers, W. E. Johns's Biggles books, and Ian Hay's *The First Hundred Thousand*, often promote the "cheery Tommy" view of the war as both a serious call and a great lark. Some popular war books, such as the Bulldog Drummond stories by "Sapper" (H. C. McNeile, an ex-soldier), were popular among veterans after the war.

Other combatant writers express disgust at the lies and fantasies circulating among civilians, cynically promoted, in many cases, to boost recruitment and suppress dissent. How could those involved put the record straight? Soldiers' letters were strictly censored. Often they did not feel able to talk about their experiences when they came home on leave, partly because civilians could be skeptical about their stories, which differed so greatly from the fictions in the press. As Robert Graves remarks in *Goodbye to All That*, when he was sent home in 1916 to recover from his wounds, "England looked strange to us returned soldiers. We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere ... The civilians talked a foreign language; and it was newspaper language."<sup>19</sup> For Graves, serving the nation paradoxically left him feeling a stranger in his homeland. This was a common view. Britain expected a good deal from the young men and women who served, but seemed to offer little in return. Many veterans found themselves unemployed, impoverished, with little support or recognition. Many were troubled by the long-term effects of war injuries. Thousands were traumatized by the war and suffered long-term mental illnesses, known at the time as "shell shock" or war neurosis.

### War neurosis or "shell shock"

Both soldiers and civilians wrote about the terrible effects of war trauma. Wilfred Owen's "Mental Cases" (1918) asks:

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?  
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,



Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,  
 Baring teeth that leer like skulls' teeth wicked?

...

These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.

Owen cunningly begins by implying that it is those who see the patients, rather than the patients themselves, who suffer, as if witnessing damage were worse than experiencing it. But his sympathy is entirely with the mentally injured soldiers, who stand as a reproach to an uncaring society. The poem concludes with an image of the traumatized veterans “plucking at each other” and “Snatching after us who smote them, brother / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.”<sup>20</sup>

In similar vein, Ivor Gurney writes:

There are strange Hells within the minds War made  
 Not so often, not so humiliatingly afraid  
 As one would have expected.

Gurney suggests the pain and isolation of the “strange Hells” created by war trauma, but, at the same moment, he comments that combatants were not always afraid, nor traumatized, by their terrible experiences. The poem invokes both tremendous resilience and complete collapse. Gurney concludes with a sad and angry account of life for many veterans after the war:

Where are they now on State-doles, or showing shop patterns  
 Or walking town to town sore in borrowed tatters  
 Or begged. Some civic routine one never learns.  
 The heart burns – but has to keep out of face how heart burns.<sup>21</sup>

Whose “heart burns”? Is the poem speaking in the voice of the neglected veterans or from the point of view of an observer? Why must the justifiable anger implied in “the heart burns” be hidden (“has to keep out of face how heart burns”)? Gurney’s characteristically elliptical style makes the political point all the more strongly.

Richard Aldington, by contrast, writes angrily and directly about conditions for veterans immediately after the war. His short story “The Case of Lieutenant Hall” (in *Roads to Glory* [1930]) is narrated by a soldier immediately after the armistice. In March 1919, Lt. Hall writes in his diary: “It has been very strange, returning to England, civilian life and ways, after the tremendous physical and moral efforts of the past years.” He suffers from nightmares, hallucinating the face of a German soldier he has killed. Peacetime life seems abnormal now:

All this existence in London seems most unreal. What gave a false appearance of reality to our life in the line was that we were not – at least directly – merely slaves of the economic idea.

Even now, it is difficult for ex-soldiers to get employment. Many of us are in a rotten state, and quite unfit to perform those actions which would enable us to “pay our way.”

Hall regrets being so eager to come home and wonders if those who died in the war are actually the lucky ones. He remarks bitterly that civilians make fun of demobilized soldiers, mocking them for the difficulties in adapting to civilian life. Aldington’s character is clearly traumatized by his war service. The lack of support or understanding in civilian life makes his condition worse and eventually he commits suicide.<sup>22</sup>

The trauma of war is as old as war itself, but it was not until the First World War that it came to be seen as a serious medical problem, and this only after considerable resistance by military and medical authorities. Traumatized soldiers were sometimes seen as cowardly or mutinous rather than ill. Some were shot as cowards or deserters. But the sheer numbers of men suffering from mental illness induced by their war experiences eventually forced the authorities to take “shell shock” seriously and to seek medical cures rather than military punishment. War trauma, then, is an old–new ailment, taking new forms in the theater of industrial warfare and, it seems, far more prevalent than in previous wars. The precise reason for this is unknown, but it might be that the experience of the First World War trenches forced soldiers into extremes of passivity – in effect, waiting to be shelled – at the same time as the war demanded immense courage, resourcefulness, and action. Threatened constantly with death or mutilation, frequently witnessing the grotesque deaths of their friends and companions, men often felt at the mercy of immense machines that always seemed to be winning.

The problem of trauma continued for many years after the war and is explored by writers in the 1920s. One of the most notable novels on the subject is Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), parts of which present postwar Britain from the point of view of a war-traumatized veteran, Septimus Warren Smith. Woolf explores Septimus’s experience within the social and political context of the early 1920s, asking who remembers and who forgets the sufferings of the war – and who should take responsibility? Clarissa Dalloway’s husband is a Conservative MP, part of a government which Woolf felt had done badly in the years immediately after the war. Who pays the price for the bunglings of war and peace? Not the Dalloways and their circle (which includes the prime minister of the day, an unnamed portrait of Stanley Baldwin), despite Woolf’s often sympathetic representations of Clarissa. Like many soldier-writers of the day, Woolf here suggests that combatants were expected to make superhuman sacrifices in the war and were given little help in coping with life afterwards.

An earlier novel by Rebecca West is one of the first attempts to represent First World War neuroses in fiction. In *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), wealthy officer Chris Baldry is shell-shocked and loses much of his adult memory. This leads to a curious class comedy as he yearns to be with his girlfriend from youth, a girl from a lower social class who is now a dowdy married woman. A doctor proposes an unconventional cure. The soldier should be confronted with an object associated with an earlier trauma – a toy belonging to his son, who died in infancy. One trauma will supposedly mend another. Improbably, this remedy works. Comedy turns to muted tragedy as he returns to his loveless, joyless, middle-class marriage. West's book is compelling, but should not be regarded as an accurate representation of war trauma. Rather, West takes the emerging idea of shell shock to explore other issues, such as memory and class.

For a number of writers, war trauma is the dreadful culmination of a century or more of modern industrialization. The marvelous achievements of science and technology, the immense industrial capacities developed through the nineteenth century, are turned to the specific purpose of destruction. As the narrator in Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet* complains:

I see my own father – a gentle creature who would not willingly harm a fly – applaud the latest scientist to invent a mechanical device guaranteed to crush his fellow-beings to pulp in their thousands.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to recover the shock and dismay many people felt at the time. The pinnacle of industrialization was not, as had been hoped at, say, the time of Great Exhibition (1851), peace, prosperity and progress, but the end of civilization, the death and mutilation of immense numbers of people, and the destruction of vast areas of landscape.

### Generational hostility

What was all this for, people wondered? And what would become of the young people who served in the war? Smith's narrator in *Not So Quiet* volunteers as an ambulance driver at the front. At twenty-one, she knows nothing of life “but death, fear, blood, and the sentimentality that glorifies these things in the name of patriotism.”<sup>24</sup> What sort of future can these women, and the damaged men they look after, expect, and what is expected of them? Smith's expression of resentment can be found in many other literary works of the war, especially those written by men and women sent to serve by an older generation that remained safely at home.

This idea is given its most powerful expression in Wilfred Owen's poem “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (1918). Owen begins by

retelling the Genesis story of Abraham (Abram) being called upon to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. The father obeys, unprotesting: “So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went, / And took the fire with him, and a knife.” When Isaac wonders “where the lamb, for this burnt-offering?,” Owen shifts the story into the present day of the war: “Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps, / And builded parapets and trenches there, / And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.” An angel calls out, as in the biblical story, that the son’s life should be spared. But in this version, Abram does not listen: “But the old man would not so, but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one.”<sup>25</sup> The fathers (and in other works, mothers, too) are held responsible for the war and the suffering of the younger generation. In “Lament” (1920), F. S. Flint writes bluntly:

The young men of the world  
Are condemned to death.  
They have been called up to die  
For the crime of their fathers.<sup>26</sup>

Curiously, Rudyard Kipling says something similar in his “Epitaphs of the War” (1919). Kipling writes as a father who keenly supported the war. He went to some effort to get his son John accepted into the army. John was killed on his first day of battle. “If any question why we died, / Tell them, because our fathers lied.”<sup>27</sup> Kipling never openly changed his views about the rightness of the war. These lines are probably intended as a comment upon Britain’s failure to prepare adequately for what he regarded as the necessary war with Germany. But they eerily echo the young writers’ resentment of an older generation that took the nation to war, for which the younger generation paid the price. Generational hostility is one of the things most remembered about British literature of the First World War; it continues to speak to young people called to serve in combat and to all those opposed to war. And it is a subject which writers returned to in the late twentieth century – for example, in Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–95), Sebastian Faulks’s *Birdsong* (1994), and Robert Edric’s *In Desolate Heaven* (1997).

### Writing the landscape

As well as blaming their human parents for the disaster of the war (with considerable historical justification), soldiers’ writings also represent the land itself as a kind of mother – as in Ivor Gurney’s “Strange Service” or “England the Mother” in his collection *Severn and Somme* (1917) – and the devastated war zones are remembered as a maternal body. The land protects the men, but also threatens to suffocate or drown them in its mud (most powerfully

represented in Ford's *Parade's End*). In return for this ambiguous nurturing, the men and their machines attack the land, and one another within it, making their surroundings even more unstable and dangerous. This motif of the maternal land is used in highly complex ways to express the sheer destructive power of the First World War. Isaac Rosenberg's "Dead Man's Dump" (1917) imagines the earth in a frenzy of "savage love" when it is under bombardment:

Manic earth! howling and flying, your bowel  
Seared by the jagged fire, the iron love,  
The impetuous storm of savage love.  
Dark Earth! dark Heavens! swinging in chemic smoke,  
What dead are born when you kiss each soundless soul  
With lightning and thunder from your mined heart,  
Which man's self dug, and his blind fingers loosed?<sup>28</sup>

Out of the "iron love" and "savage love," a perverse birth – the dead.

Destruction of the land is also used to stand for the death and mutilation of the men who try to shelter within it. Blunden, Gurney, Edward Thomas, and many others drew upon a long tradition of pastoral to try to describe the devastation of the First World War. They mourn the land, and also use it to remember, to bear witness to the often unspeakable effects of the war upon human beings. In Blunden's "The Ancre at Hamel: Afterwards" (1925), the speaker listens to the river Ancre, the site of immense suffering, "grieve and pine":

As if its rainy tortured blood  
Had swirled into my own,  
When by its battered bank I stood  
And shared its wounded moan.<sup>29</sup>

As the speaker regrets the violence enacted upon the land, the land itself is called upon to mourn.

### Conclusion

British literature of the First World War remains immensely powerful, still speaking to readers, and indeed to combatants, in the twenty-first century. It tries to articulate the trauma of industrial warfare, raising questions that are still pertinent. As Gurney asks in his poem "War Books" (c.1925), "What did they expect?":

What did they expect of our toil and extreme  
Hunger – the perfect drawing of a heart's dream?

Did they look for a book of wrought art's perfection,  
Who promised no reading, nor praise, nor publication?  
Out of the heart's sickness the spirit wrote  
For delight, or to escape hunger, or of war's worst anger.<sup>30</sup>

What did combatants and civilians expect from the First World War? How did they respond to its excitement (even ecstasy) as well as to its profound sufferings and disappointments? And what did they expect from their war writers? No one knew quite what would come out of the war or the peace that followed, but whatever one expected, the pain and disappointment were profound. The literature tries to express this complex of feelings and to grapple with the fact that, for writers as for other citizens, their faith in civilization had been permanently damaged.

NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Sassoon's Poems," *Times Literary Supplement* (May 31, 1917); rptd in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew MacNeillie, 4 vols. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1987), II: 120.
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