

WILFRED OWEN

(18 March 1893–4 November 1918)

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English poet Wilfred Owen is probably the most heralded poet of the First World War and for good reason. His shocking, realistic war poetry on the horrors of trench and gas warfare was heavily influenced by his friend and mentor Siegfried Sassoon and stands in stark contrast to both the public perception of war at the time and the confidently patriotic verse written by earlier war poets such as Rupert Brooke. Most of his best-known work was published posthumously. The circumstances of his death remain to this day excruciating testimony to the grotesque ironies and hideous senselessness of war.

Wilfred Owen was born on 18 March 1893 at Plas Wilmot, a house in Weston Lane, near Oswestry in Shropshire. He was of mixed English and Welsh ancestry and the eldest of Thomas and Harriet Susan (née Shaw)'s 4 children. When born, his parents lived in a comfortable house owned by Wilfred's grandfather Edward Shaw, but after the latter's death in January 1897 and the house's sale in March, the family lodged in the back streets of Birkenhead, father Thomas temporarily working for the railway company in town. In April, Thomas later transferred to Shrewsbury, where the family lived with his father's parents. In 1898, he transferred back to Birkenhead when he became station master at Woodside station; the family lived at three successive homes in the Tranmere district, before moving back to Shrewsbury in 1907. Wilfred was educated at the Birkenhead Institute and at Shrewsbury Technical School (later known as the Wakeman School). He discovered his poetic vocation during a holiday to Cheshire, in 1903 or 1904, when he was only 10 or 11 years old. His early influences included the Bible and the major figures in Romantic poetry, particularly John Keats.

In his last two years of formal education Owen was a pupil-teacher at the Wyle Cop school in Shrewsbury. In 1911, he passed the matriculation exam for the University of London but not with the first-class honors needed for a scholarship, which in his family's circumstances was the only way he could have afforded to attend. He was raised as an Anglican of the evangelical school, and in his youth was a devout believer, in part due to his strong relationship with his mother, which lasted throughout his life. In return for free lodging, and allegedly some tuition for the entrance exam, Owen worked as lay assistant to the Vicar of Dunsden near Reading. During this time he attended classes at University College, Reading (now the University of Reading), in botany and later, at the urging of the head of the English Department, took free lessons in Old English. His time spent at Dunsden parish led to disillusionment with the Church, both in its ceremony and its failure to provide



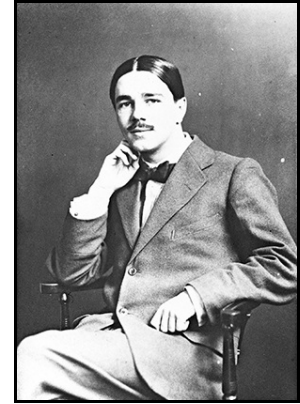
Wilfred Owen c.1916

aid for those in need. He broke with the vicar and moved to France, where from 1912 he worked as a private tutor teaching English and French at the Berlitz School of Languages in Bordeaux, and later with a family in the area.

For more than a year after war broke out, Owen, torn between conflicting sentiments, could not decide whether to enlist—he even considered the French army—but eventually returned to England and joined the Artists Rifles Officers' Training Corps on 21 October 1915. After seven-months training in Essex, he was commissioned on 4 June 1916 as a second lieutenant (on probation) in the Manchester Regiment.

Initially, he held his troops in contempt for their loutish behavior; however, his perspective was to be altered dramatically by a number of traumatic experiences during his participation in the legendary and very bloody Battle of the Somme from January through May 1917—falling into a shell hole and suffering a concussion; being blown high into the air by a trench mortar; and lying several days on an embankment in Savy Wood amongst what he thought were the remains of a fellow officer. Soon afterwards, Owen was diagnosed as suffering from shell shock and sent for treatment to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. While recuperating there, he did some teaching at the Tynecastle High School in a poor area of the city, but, more importantly, he made friends among Edinburgh's artistic and literary circles, most transformatively with Siegfried Sassoon, who was becoming influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis and showed Owen through example additional things (including satire) that poetry could do. Sassoon's emphasis on gritty realism and "writing from experience" was contrary to Owen's hitherto Romantic-influenced style and would lead to Owen's effective synthesis of the two. In November 1917 Owen was judged fit for light regimental duties and discharged from Craiglockhart. After a contented and fruitful winter in Scarborough, North Yorkshire, where he associated with members of another artistic circle into which Sassoon had introduced him, which included Robbie Ross, Robert Graves, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett, he was posted in March 1918 to the Northern Command Depot at Ripon, where he composed or revised a number of poems, including "Strange Meeting."

Robert Graves and Sacheverell Sitwell stated that Owen was homosexual and that homoeroticism is a central element in much of his poetry. While credible, the claims about Owen's homosexuality may be based more on probability and interpretation than fact, and in any case the importance of homoeroticism in his work is open to debate. In any case, through Sassoon, Owen was certainly introduced to a sophisticated homosexual literary circle which included Oscar Wilde's friend Robbie Ross, writer and poet Osbert Sitwell, and Scottish writer C. K. Scott Moncrieff, the translator of Marcel Proust. Such contacts broadened Owen's outlook and increased his confidence in incorporating homoerotic elements into his work. Throughout Owen's lifetime and for decades after, homosexual activity between men was a



Wilfred Owen c.1912

punishable offence in British law and the account of Owen's sexual development has been somewhat obscured because his brother, Harold Owen, removed what he considered discreditable passages in Owen's letters and diaries after the death of their mother. Andrew Motion wrote of Owen's relationship with Sassoon: "On the one hand, Sassoon's wealth, posh connections and aristocratic manner appealed to the snob in Owen: on the other, Sassoon's homosexuality admitted Owen to a style of living and thinking that he found naturally sympathetic." Stephen MacDonald's play *Not About Heroes* (first performed in 1982) takes as its subject matter the friendship between Owen and Sassoon, and begins with their meeting at Craiglockhart.

In July 1918, although he was slated to stay on home-duty indefinitely, Owen chose to return to active service in France, perhaps in homage to the example of his admired friend Sassoon. Owen's decision was probably the result of Sassoon's being shot in the head in an apparent "friendly fire" incident and put on sick-leave in England for the remainder of the war. Owen saw it as his duty to add his voice to Sassoon's earlier testimony, so that the horrific realities of the war might continue to be told. Sassoon was violently opposed to Owen's returning to the trenches, threatening to "stab [him] in the leg" if he tried it. As a consequence, Owen did not inform him of his action until he was once again in France. By the very end of August 1918, Owen was again on the front line.

On 1 October 1918 he led units of the Second Manchesters to storm a number of enemy strong points near the village of Joncourt; his courage and leadership in that assault won him the Military Cross, an award he had always sought in order to justify himself as a war poet. However, because of slow bureaucracy, news of the award did not make its way into the military-gazette record until 15 February 1919. Some 3 months earlier on 4 November 1918, Wilfred Owen was



Wilfred Owen

killed in action during the crossing of the Sambre–Oise Canal, exactly one week (almost to the hour) before the signing of the Armistice ending the war and only one month after his heroic Joncourt action. Notification of his promotion to the rank of First Lieutenant arrived the day after he was killed. Most ironically, his mother received the telegram informing her of her son's death on Armistice Day, just as the church bells were ringing out in celebration. Owen is buried in the small Communal Cemetery, northwest of the village of Ors (distinct from the Ors British Cemetery to the northeast), in the Nord region of France. On 11 November 1985, Owen was one of the 16 Great War poets commemorated on a slate stone unveiled in Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner. The inscription on the stone is taken from Owen's "Preface" to his poems: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity."

Wilfred Owen is regarded by many as the greatest poet of World War I. He had been writing poetry for some years before the war, but his later poetic voice was most profoundly influenced by the work of his great friend, fellow poet and mentor

Siegfried Sassoon, whom Owen viewed with an esteem bordering on hero-worship; in fact, some manuscript copies of Owen's poems survive with annotations in Sassoon's handwriting. Owen's poetry, which underwent significant changes in 1917, purging much of his earlier Keatsian luxuriance, would eventually be more widely acclaimed than that of his mentor. The distinctive music of Owen's later verse owes much of its power to his mastery of alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance, half-rhyme, and the pararhyme—the rhyming of two words (e.g., *hall/Hell*) with identical or similar consonants but differing, stressed vowels—that he pioneered. Owen was not the only poet at the time to rely heavily and in innovative ways on assonance, but he was one of the first to experiment with it extensively. Certainly, his use of pararhyme produces effects of dissonance, failure, and unfulfillment that subtly reinforce his themes.

Owen's poetic reputation has had the benefit of strong patronage, and it was a combination of Sassoon's influence, support from Edith Sitwell, and Edmund Blunden's preparation of a new and fuller edition of the poems in 1931 that ensured his popularity. There was also a revival of interest in his poetry in the 1960s, which plucked him out of a relatively exclusive readership and into the public eye. Moreover, interest in Owen's work has been assisted by a treasure trove of material essential for extensive scholarly enquiry. In 1975 Mrs. Harold Owen, Wilfred's sister-in-law, donated to Oxford University's English Faculty Library all of the manuscripts, photographs, and letters that her late husband had owned, as well as all of Owen's personal library and an almost complete set of *The Hydra*—the magazine of the Craiglockhart War Hospital. Furthermore, the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin holds a large collection of Owen's family correspondence.



Owen, Photo by T. Farrell

Wilfred Owen's poetry has been adapted in a variety of other formats. Benjamin Britten incorporated nine of Owen's poems into his *War Requiem*, which was commissioned for the reconsecration of Coventry Cathedral and first performed there on 30 May 1962. Derek Jarman adapted it to the screen in 1988, along with the 1963 recording as the soundtrack. In 1982, singer Virginia Astley set the poem "Futility" to music she had composed. In 2010, local Wirral musician Dean Johnson created the musical *Bullets and Daffodils*, based on music accompanying Owen's poetry. Other Owen tributes have also been numerous. In addition to the commemoration in Westminster Abbey, there is a small museum dedicated to Owen and Sassoon at the Craiglockhart War Hospital, now a Napier University building. The forester's house in Ors where Owen spent his last night, Maison Forestière de l'Ermitage, has also been transformed by Turner Prize nominee Simon Patterson into an art installation and permanent memorial to Owen and his poetry; it opened to the public on 1 October 2011. Not least, Owen was the subject of the BBC docudrama *Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale* (2007).