

SIEGFRIED SASOON

(8 September 1886–1 September 1967)

Chris Snodgrass © 2015

English poet Siegfried Sassoon was decorated for bravery on the Western Front and became one of the leading poets of the First World War. His poetry both described the horrors of the trenches and satirized the patriotic pretensions of those who, in Sassoon's view, were responsible for prolonging without valid purpose a jingoism-fueled war. He became a focal point for dissent within the armed forces when he made a lone protest against the continuation of the war in his "Soldier's Declaration" of 1917, culminating in his admission to a military psychiatric hospital. His hospital convalescence resulted in his forming a friendship with Wilfred Owen, who was greatly influenced by him. Sassoon later won acclaim for his prose work, notably his three-volume fictionalized autobiography (the award-winning *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* [1928], and also *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* [1930], and *Sherston's Progress* [1936]), collectively known as the "Sherston trilogy."



Siegfried Sassoon 1915

Sassoon was born the eldest of 3 sons and grew up in the neo-gothic mansion named "Weirleigh" (after its builder, Harrison Weir), in Matfield, Kent, to a Jewish father and an Anglo-Catholic mother. His father, Alfred Ezra Sassoon (1861–95), was a member of the wealthy Baghdadi Jewish merchant family, though he was disinherited for marrying outside the Jewish faith, and died of tuberculosis in 1895. Siegfried's mother, Theresa, belonged to the Thornycroft family of highly acclaimed sculptors—her brother was Sir Hamo Thornycroft, creator of some of the finest statues in London. Although there was no German ancestry in Sassoon's family, his mother named him Siegfried because of her love of Wagner's operas. His middle name, Loraine, was the surname of a clergyman with whom she was friendly. When he was 4 years old, his parents separated and never reconciled; during his father's weekly visits to the boys, his mother locked herself in the drawing-room.

Sassoon was educated at the New Beacon School, Sevenoaks, Kent; at Marlborough College, Marlborough, Wiltshire (where he was a member of Cotton House); and at Clare College, Cambridge, where from 1905 to 1907 he read history but left before getting a degree. He spent the next few years hunting, playing cricket, and writing verse, some of which he published privately. As his father had been disinherited, Siegfried had only a small private fortune, but it allowed him to live modestly without having to earn a living (he would later be left a generous legacy by an aunt, Rachel Beer, which allowed him to buy the great estate of Heytesbury House in Wiltshire). His first published success, *The Daffodil Murderer*

(1913), is a deft parody of John Masefield's *The Everlasting Mercy*; Robert Graves, whom Sassoon met during the war and became close friends with, describes the novel in *Good-Bye to All That* as a "parody of Masefield which, midway through, had forgotten to be a parody and turned into rather good Masefield."

Before the war Sassoon, an avid and talented cricketer, had expressed the following opinions on the political situation: "France was a lady, Russia was a bear, and performing in the county cricket team was much more important than either of them." Yet as soon as the threat of a new European war was recognized, he was seized by patriotism, joined the British Army, and was already in service with the Sussex Yeomanry on 4 August 1914, the day Great Britain and Ireland declared war on Germany. He broke his arm badly in a riding accident and was put out of action before even leaving England, spending the spring of 1915 convalescing. He was then commissioned into the 3rd Battalion (Special Reserve), Royal Welch Fusiliers, as a second lieutenant on 29 May 1915. His younger brother Hamo was killed in the Gallipoli Campaign on 1 November, and in the same month Siegfried was sent to the 1st Battalion in France.



Siegfried Sassoon c.1913

Sassoon's tours of duty on the Western Front were marked by truly exceptional bravery. One notable example testifies also to calm nonchalance: armed with grenades, he single-handedly captured a German trench in the Hindenburg Line, driving off sixty German soldiers; then he sat down in the trench and began reading a book of poems which he had brought with him; when he went back to his company, he did not even report the incident, thus precluding any medal for the deed. In a separate incident, for which he did receive the Military Cross, he remained for 1½ hours after a raid on enemy trenches, under heavy rifle and bomb fire, repeatedly racing out and bringing back the wounded; owing solely to his courage and determination, all the wounded were retrieved. Sassoon's "conspicuous gallantry" was so inspiring that soldiers of his company said that they felt confident only when he accompanied them. He often went out on night raids and bombing patrols and demonstrated ruthless efficiency when he became a company commander. His deepening depression at the horror and misery that soldiers were forced to endure produced, in Sassoon's case, a paradoxically manic courage, earning him the nickname "Mad Jack" for his virtually suicidal exploits. So extraordinary was Sassoon's consistent bravery that he was recommended for the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest military commendation, but it was denied him, owing in part no doubt to his blistering opposition to the war in 1917 and after.

Despite his many medals and his battlefield reputation, at the end of a convalescent leave in 1917 Sassoon decided to take a stand against the conduct of the war, refusing to return to duty. Encouraged by pacifist friends such as Bertrand Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell, he sent a letter to his commanding officer entitled "Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration." It was forwarded to the press and

read out in the House of Commons by a sympathetic parliament member. The letter was labeled as treasonous by some; at the least it was thought to disloyally condemn the war government's motives. Rather than court-martial Sassoon, the Under-Secretary of State for War, Ian Macpherson, declared him unfit for service and had him sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital near Edinburgh, where he was officially treated for neurasthenia ("shell shock"). Before declining to return to active service Sassoon had thrown his Military-Cross award into the river Mersey, not merely as a rejection of militaristic values, but equally out of the need to perform some destructive, cathartic act exorcizing the dark anger which was engulfing him. The depth of Sassoon's ferocious anti-war feeling was owing in part, though only in part, to the death of his friend David Cuthbert Thomas, who appears as "Dick Tiltwood" in the Sherston trilogy; Sassoon would spend years trying to overcome his grief. The novel *Regeneration*, by Pat Barker, is a fictionalized account of this period in Sassoon's life, and it was made into a 1997 film starring James Wilby as Sassoon and Jonathan Pryce as W. H. R. Rivers, the psychiatrist responsible for Sassoon's treatment and whose sudden death in 1922 was another major blow to him. Despite all this, after spending some time out of danger in Palestine, Sassoon eventually returned to the Front, only to be almost immediately wounded again on 13 July 1918—when he was shot in the head near Arras by a fellow British soldier who ironically had mistaken him for a German.



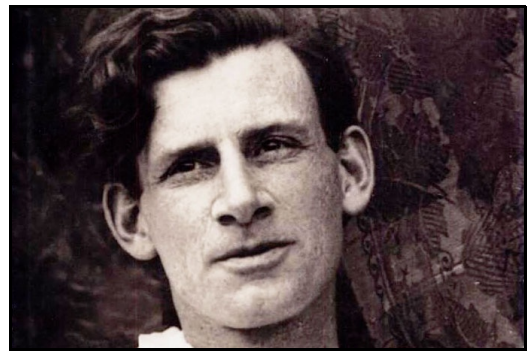
Siegfried Sassoon

Sassoon's experiences with the realities of war horrified him, such that the tone of his writing changed completely: where his early poems exhibit a Romantic, dilettantish sweetness, his war poetry moves to an increasingly discordant music, intended to convey the ugly truths of the trenches to an audience hitherto lulled by patriotic propaganda. His poems' shock tactics, bitter irony, and masterly use of direct speech (learned from Hardy) attacked the old men of the Army, Church, and Government whom he held responsible for the miseries and murder of the young. Details such as rotting corpses, mangled limbs, filth, cowardice and suicide are all trademarks of his work at this time, and this philosophy of "no truth unfitting" had a significant effect on the movement towards Modernist poetry.

After the Great War, Sassoon dabbled briefly in the politics of the Labour movement, and in 1919 took up a post as literary editor of the socialist *Daily Herald*. During his period at the *Herald*, he was responsible for employing several eminent names as reviewers, including E. M. Forster and Charlotte Mew, and commissioning original material from other writers like Arnold Bennett and Osbert Sitwell. He became a friend and patron of the composer William Walton, who dedicated his *Portsmouth Point* overture to Sassoon in recognition of his financial assistance and moral support; many of his poems were later set to music by composers, most notably Cyril Rootham, who cooperated with the author to do so. Sassoon sought emotional fulfilment in a succession of love affairs with men, including the landscape

architectural and figure painter, draftsman and illustrator, William Park “Gabriel” Atkin; actor Ivor Novello; Novello’s former lover, the actor Glen Byam Shaw; German aristocrat Prince Philipp of Hesse; writer Beverley Nichols; and an effete aristocrat, Stephen Tennant, but only the last made a permanent impression (though Shaw remained a close friend throughout his life).

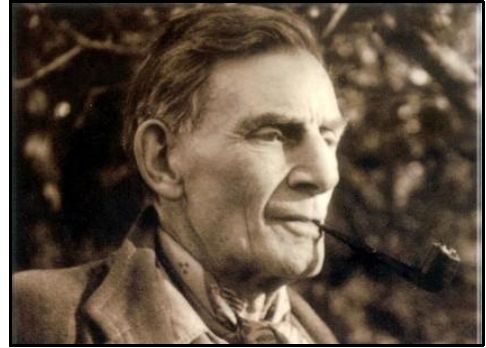
His writing style generally softened after the war, but at times, as in his *Satirical Poems* (1926) attacking society, his work still displayed a cutting edge, though never again with the pungency of the war poems that made him famous. Sassoon embarked on a lecture tour of the USA, as well as traveled extensively in Europe and throughout Britain, but the deaths of three of his closest friends—Edmund Gosse, Thomas Hardy and Frankie Schuster (the publisher)—in 1927–28 was yet another serious setback to his personal happiness. Sassoon branched out into prose starting in 1928 with the first volume of his Sherston trilogy, the anonymously-published fictionalized autobiography *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, which became a classic almost immediately and earned him new fame as a humorous writer. After the trilogy, he would revisit his youth and early manhood with three volumes of genuine autobiography, which were also widely acclaimed (*The Old Century* [1938], *The Weald of Youth* [1942], and *Siegfried’s Journey* [1945]).



Siegfried Sassoon

In December 1933, to many people’s surprise, he married Hester Gatty, who was many years his junior. This union led to the birth of a child, something which he had long craved, in the form of his only child George (1936–2006). George became a scientist, linguist and author, and was adored by his father, who wrote several poems addressed to him. However, the marriage broke down after the World War II, as Sassoon was ultimately unable to find a compromise between the solitude he enjoyed and the companionship he craved. Separated from his wife in 1945, he lived in seclusion at Heytesbury in Wiltshire, although he maintained contact with a circle that included E. M. Forster, close friend cricketer Dennis Silk, and Vivien Hancock, headmistress of the school his son George attended. Sassoon was awarded the distinction of Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1951. Towards the end of his life, he converted to Roman Catholicism, being admitted to the faith at Downside Abbey, close to his home. He also paid regular visits to the nuns at Stanbrook Abbey, whose press printed commemorative editions of some of his poems. During this time he also became interested in the supernatural and joined the Ghost Club. He died one week short of his 81st birthday, of stomach cancer, and is buried at St Andrew’s Church, Mells, Somerset. He was another of the 16 Great War poets commemorated on a slate stone unveiled in Westminster Abbey’s Poet’s Corner in 1985.

Interest in Sassoon and his writing has continued unabated into the 21st century. In 2003 was published *Memorial Tablet*, an authorised audio CD of readings by Sassoon recorded during the late 1950s, which also includes commentary on Sassoon by three of his Great War contemporaries: Edmund Blunden, Edgell Rickword, and Henry Williamson. In 2009 Cambridge University purchased from Sassoon's family (raising £1.25 million to do so) a valuable archive of his papers—including his war diaries, a draft of “A Soldier's Declaration” (1917), notebooks from his schooldays, post-war journals, love letters to his wife Hester, and photographs and letters from other writers—to be added to the university library's existing Sassoon collection. In 2010, a major exhibition of Sassoon's life and archive, *Dream Voices: Siegfried Sassoon, Memory and War*, was held at Cambridge University. Most recently, the discovery in 2013 of an early draft of one of Sassoon's best-known anti-war poems “Atrocities,” which concerned the killing of German prisoners by their British counterparts, has led some biographers to say they will rewrite portions of their previous work about the poet.



Siegfried Sassoon 1950s