

5 WAR POEMS WITH A DIFFERENCE (Nov 2018)

As it is the centenary this year of the Armistice, I thought I would look over a few poems that avoid the stereotypes we might have of “war poetry” – all Owen/Sassoon style poems of trench warfare, gas attacks, and troops going “over the top” to be mown down in suicidal attacks across No Man’s Land.

In fact, more than 90% of war, in or near the front line of any theatre of operations, is likely to be experienced as boredom, curiosity, even wry humour (cf Spike Milligan’s accounts or Robert Graves’ “Goodbye to All That”). I’ve chosen to think about three quite well-known poems which deserve to be better known as the two world wars slip further and further away from modern consciousness.



The first is a lovely poem by May Wedderburn Cannan, (1893-1973), the daughter of the Dean of Trinity College, Oxford. She seems to have loved everything connected with military life especially, and she adored a certain General Heath, a close friend of the family, who captured her imagination at an early age with his spurs, uniform and gallant bearing. I find this poem fascinating for its enthusiastic recollection of a particular time and place. She was serving as a nurse in Rouen - 1915 was still relatively early in the war, and we might be surprised, perhaps, by her ‘nostalgic’ evocation of this experience, which is felt as such an “Adventure”. It should not, however, be forgotten just how sheltered young women’s lives were at that time and what an opportunity war work must have offered for many.

Rouen

Early morning over Rouen, hopeful, high, courageous morning,
And the laughter of adventure and the steepness of the stair,
And the dawn across the river, and the wind across the bridges,
And the empty littered station, and the tired people there.

Can you recall those mornings and the hurry of awakening,
And the long-forgotten wonder if we should miss the way,
And the unfamiliar faces, and the coming of provisions,
And the freshness and the glory of the labour of the day?

Hot noontide over Rouen, and the sun upon the city,
Sun and dust unceasing, and the glare of cloudless skies,
And the voices of the Indians and the endless stream of soldiers,
And the clicking of the tatties, and the buzzing of the flies.

Can you recall those noontides and the reek of steam and coffee,
 Heavy-laden noontides with the evening's peace to win,
 And the little piles of Woodbines, and the sticky soda bottles,
 And the crushes in the 'Parlour', and the letters coming in?

Quiet night-time over Rouen, and the station full of soldiers,
 All the youth and pride of England from the ends of all the earth;
 And the rifles piled together, and the creaking of the sword-belts,
 And the faces bent above them, and the gay, heart-breaking mirth.

Can I forget the passage from the cool white-bedded Aid Post
 Past the long sun-blistered coaches of the khaki Red Cross train
 To the truck train full of wounded, and the weariness and laughter,
 And 'Good-bye, and thank you, Sister', and the empty yards again?

Can you recall the parcels that we made them for the railroad,
 Crammed and bulging parcels held together by their string,
 And the voices of the sergeants who called the Drafts together,
 And the agony and splendour when they stood to save the King?

Can you forget their passing, the cheering and the waving,
 The little group of people at the doorway of the shed,
 The sudden awful silence when the last train swung to darkness,
 And the lonely desolation, and the mocking stars o'erhead?

Can you recall the midnights, and the footsteps of night watchers,
 Men who came from darkness and went back to dark again,
 And the shadows on the rail-lines and the all-inglorious labour,
 And the promise of the daylight firing blue the window-pane?

Can you recall the passing through the kitchen door to morning,
 Morning very still and solemn breaking slowly on the town,
 And the early coastways engines that had met the ships at daybreak,
 And the Drafts just out from England, and the day shift coming down?

Can you forget returning slowly, stumbling on the cobbles,
 And the white-decked Red Cross barges dropping seawards for the tide,
 And the search for English papers, and the blessed cool of water,
 And the peace of half-closed shutters that shut out the world outside?

Can I forget the evenings and the sunsets on the island,
 And the tall black ships at anchor far below our balcony,
 And the distant call of bugles, and the white wine in the glasses,
 And the long line of the street lamps, stretching Eastwards to the sea?

...When the world slips slow to darkness, when the office fire burns lower,
 My heart goes out to Rouen, Rouen all the world away;
 When other men remember, I remember our Adventure
 And the trains that go from Rouen at the ending of the day.

It is somewhat ironic that she has chosen such a Kiplingesque metre, which with its tripping measures seems to intensify the breathless excitement of all that she feels. In the same way, Kipling's own exuberant pieces often reflect his enthusiasm for colonial adventure in India and the far east. Look for example at *Gunga Din* or T.S.Eliot's parody of Kipling's *L'Envoi* in *Skimbleshanks*:

There's a whisper down the field where the year has shot her yield,
 And the ricks stand grey to the sun,
 Singing:--'Over then, come over, for the bee has quit the clover,
 And your English summer's done.'
 You have heard the beat of the off-shore wind,
 And the thresh of the deep-sea rain;
 You have heard the song--how long! how long?
 Pull out on the trail again!

Compare with Eliot's

There's a whisper down the line at 11.39
 When the Night Mail's ready to depart,
 Saying `Skimble where is Skimble has he gone to hunt the thimble?
 We must find him or the train can't start.'
 All the guards and all the porters and the stationmaster's daughters
 They are searching high and low,
 Saying `Skimble where is Skimble for unless he's very nimble
 Then the Night Mail just can't go.'

Next, I want to look at *Naming of Parts* by Henry Reed. The governing mode of the poem, for we are a long way off from 1915 here, is irony. I've attached an essay I wrote in an hour to try to help students wrestling with the poem and essay-writing generally. There are three poems in the series *Lessons of the War*, but this one, I think, is the best.

LESSONS OF THE WAR (1942) Henry Reed
To Alan Michell

NAMING OF PARTS

Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
 We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
 We shall have what to do after firing. But to-day,
 Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
 Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring gardens,
 And today we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
 Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
 When you are given your slings. And this is the pilingswivel,
 Which in your case you have not got. The branches
 Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
 Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always released
 With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not let me
 See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite easy
 If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
 Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone see
 Any of them using their finger.

And this you can see is the [bolt](#). The purpose of this
 Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
 Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
 Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and forwards
 The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the flowers:
 They call it easing the Spring.

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly easy
 If you have any strength in your thumb: like the bolt,
 And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance,
 Which in our case we have not got; and the almond-blossom
 Silent in all of the gardens and the bees going backwards and forwards,
 For today we have naming of parts.

This is what I wrote as a sample 'Critical Appreciation' essay (written in an hour) for my pupils.

Naming of Parts

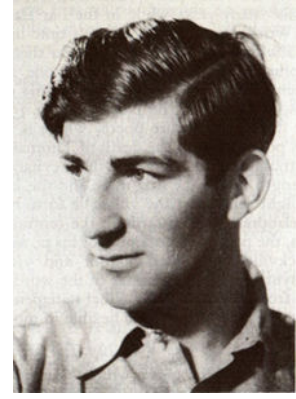
The repetition of the phrase "naming of parts", four times as well as the title, might give us a sense of weary boredom. The poet seems to be feeling depressed by the subject. The poem is based on an army training course on rifles or guns (with "what to do after firing" coming the next day and talk of "safety-catch(es)"). But the lecture is clearly taking place near some gardens which have caught the attention of the poet. Nature provides an ironic contrast to the dull talk about weapons of destruction. In the poem, we appear to have two voices in all but the first and last stanza: the clipped voice of the instructor and the languid voice of the poet in counterpoint.

The voice of the instructor is dry and full of factual details ("this Is the upper sling swivel..."). He is polite but authoritative ("please do not let me See anyone using his finger...") and dull ("The purpose of this is to open the breech, as you see."). The voice of the poet, by contrast, is full of poetic descriptions ("Japonica Glistens like coral", "blossoms are fragile and motionless..."). It is as if the poet cannot concentrate on the lecture, but drifts off, as he stares out of the window at nature. The destructiveness of war is therefore ironically contrasted with the beauty of nature, living and creative.

However, the poem is more nuanced than this. The poet is also aware of the fragility of the blossoms. He notices that the bees are "assaulting and fumbling the flowers" as if, even in nature there is a destructive urge at work. He humorously makes a play of words with "easing the spring" in the gun and "easing the Spring", the season of rebirth and procreation. There is a hint that nature needs violence in order to procreate, but it is made

humorously. There is more humour in the phrase “which we have not got”, since not only do the soldiers not have the guns yet, but they have also lost their liberty (“eloquent gestures, Which in our case we have not got.”).

The discipline of the stanzas, six-line stanzas, with a last line that usually makes some ironic point, reflects the discipline of the army world. But the freedom of the lack of rhymes and the lack of metre seems to show the freedom of the poet's mind. This is the only freedom he has left, making fun of the lesson and showing the irony of what they are learning about.



The last stanza is all in the poet's voice. It's more sarcastic in its repetition of the lesson details – so he WAS listening after all! But the very last line shows his weariness with the subject. There is, however, a further point to be made. After all, a poet's job is to name things. He names “Japonica” for example. The naming of the parts of a gun may be very tedious, but poets are alive to everything. Perhaps that is why the mood of the poem is ultimately light-hearted and not too severe. The instructor's words may be highly technical, but the poet is still interested in their sound (“the bolt And the breech, and the cocking-piece, and the point of balance” – jargon, but interesting-sounding jargon!

The final poem, with its intriguing title *Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden* is by Keith Douglas, who was tragically killed near Bayeux during the Normandy landings in 1944. Only 24 when he died, he had been awarded a scholarship to read History and English at Oxford in 1938 just before the war began. His poetry had already been noticed favourably and he was editing “Cherwell” a university poetry magazine when war broke out a year later. He joined up immediately and saw active service later in Africa, where disobeying orders, he posted himself to the frontline at the Second Battle of El Alamein and managed to take part in the tank battle that saw the Eighth Army sweep through finally to victory against Rommel.

One of his finest poems, *Vergissmeinnicht*, was written in the aftermath of such tank battles. This particular poem, however, of 1942, must have been written on leave – in Cairo or Alexandria – and seems far removed from scenes of war. It casts a wryly humorous look at life in “an Egyptian tea-garden”. It may not strictly count as a ‘war poem’, as such, but we can see a sort of “war” going on, even here, in the situation of a beautiful woman, “a white attraction”, offering herself up for seduction? protection? simply for money? Mankind, the poet seems to note, is not so far removed from animals when it comes to the basics of life.

My question to students has always been, “How much sympathy does the poem seem to have for the woman?” She seems to have an ambiguous role in the poem, doing her best to attract the men’s “cruel wish for love” – a haunting and paradoxical phrase. We need to remember just how unusual it might have been for a woman (a “white” woman?) to be thus exposed, unaccompanied, in what sounds like the very masculine setting of a tea garden or café. I like the poem for its witty metaphors. There is a game “slyly” being played out here in the café, a cool contest of attraction and survival. The poet, as poets do, is also playing his own game as he watches. Besides the tension between life-asserting attractiveness and the uselessness of being just a beautiful object, there is an interesting tension also between freedom of expression and the poet’s disciplined control of form and rhyme. Although the eye may be dispassionate, the poem, however, refrains from judging and seems to feel some compassion for the woman in the last line. What do you think? (My pupils are always all geared up these days for analysing the “male gaze” and its predatory implications...!)

Behaviour of Fish in an Egyptian Tea Garden

by Keith Douglas

As a white stone draws down the fish,
she on the seafloor of the afternoon
draws down men's glances and their cruel wish
for love. Slyly her red lip on the spoon

slips-in a morsel of ice-cream; her hands
white as a milky stone, white submarine
fronds, sink with spread fingers, lean
along the table, carmined at the ends.

A cotton magnate, an important fish
with great eyepouches and a golden mouth
through the frail reefs of furniture swims out
and idling, suspended, stays to watch.

A crustacean old man clamped to his chair
sits coldly near her and might see
her charms through fissures where the eyes should be
or else his teeth are parted in a stare.

Captain on leave, a lean dark mackerel
lies in the offing, turns himself and looks
through currents of sound. The flat-eyed flatfish sucks
on a straw, staring from its repose, laxly.

And gallants in shoals swim up and lag,
circling and passing near the white attraction;
sometimes pausing, opening a conversation:
fish pause so to nibble or tug.

Now the ice-cream is finished,
is paid for. The fish swim off on business:
and she sits alone at the table, a white stone
useless except to a collector, a rich man.