

WILFRED OWEN SCHOLARSHIP: 1919-1975

by

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B.A., University of Northern Colorado, 1973

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1976

Approved by:


Major Professor

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Wilfred Owen's body of work is quite small and the best of his poems were written within a brief period of approximately two years. Yet his work has attracted attention from the beginning, and the extent of his influence has remained a subject of critical debate. Although Owen is usually considered to have status only as a war poet, critical and scholarly interest in his work, while never overwhelming, has increased steadily over the years.

It is my purpose in these pages to trace the progress of that interest from its beginnings to the present--from the earliest reviews of his poems in 1919 to the very recent biography by Jon Stallworthy. Since my aim is, in part, to illustrate the development of trends in Owen criticism, I have arranged the material chronologically, summarizing the main critical concerns--as well as the new critical and biographical contributions--of each decade.

At the outset, however, it will be well to name the principal resources of a student of Owen, most of them only rather recently available. There is now, besides a reliable edition of the poems, a full bibliography of secondary materials, a reliable critical introduction, and an admirable biography that sums up what is known of the man.

The biography is Jon Stallworthy's Wilfred Owen (1974[#43]).¹ Before Stallworthy's there were two biographical sources available: Edmund Blunden's "Memoir" [#3] and Harold Owen's three-volume work, Journey from Obscurity [#35]. But the first was incomplete and the second lacked the needed objectivity. Stallworthy draws extensively on Harold Owen's chronicle

¹See Bibliography, Item 43. All subsequent works on Owen are listed in the Bibliography by number, and cited by those numbers in the text: e.g. [#43].

for his characterization of Wilfred as a child and a young soldier, but goes beyond it in many ways, notably in his description of Owen's stay at Craiglockhart War Hospital (where the poet first met Sassoon). Here, he is able to draw on Sassoon's memoirs and on Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters [#5] to provide a more thorough account than is available elsewhere.

Although there was no thorough biography until 1974, the first full-length critical study of Owen's work appeared quite a bit earlier: D.S.R. Welland in 1960 published Wilfred Owen: A Critical Study [#48]. Welland discusses Owen's early ideas on poetry, and examines the impact war had on his development. Neither biographer nor critic encroaches on the other's territory: Stallworthy seldom analyzes the individual poems, and Welland does not attempt biography. Stallworthy's and Welland's books are the most notable of all the secondary material on Owen.

The fullest bibliography of works on Owen is William White's Wilfred Owen (1893-1918): A Bibliography (1967[#1]). In 1970 (The Serif [#2]) White updated his bibliography of poems, translations, editions, biography, criticism, and reviews. The entry for Owen in The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature (Vol. 4, 1972) is more selective.

The poems themselves are available in three editions: Sassoon's, Edmund Blunden's, and (currently the standard) C. Day Lewis's. The various editors have faced numerous difficulties because many of the poems are fragmentary or unrevised, and because only four of them were published before Owen was killed in battle on 4 November 1918. An additional seven were anthologized by Dame Edith Sitwell in Wheels, 1919: Fourth Cycle. It was Sitwell who largely prepared the first edition of Poems (1920[#6]). Siegfried Sassoon wrote an introduction to the volume, and he has usually

been credited with the editorship. Sitwell's greater role in preparing the edition was pointed out by Joseph Cohen ("Wilfred Owen: Fresher Fields than Flanders," [#14]) in 1964. Cohen details the deficiencies of this text, as well as those of Blunden's 1931 edition, The Poems of Wilfred Owen [#3], which included his well-known "Memoir," nine pages of notes on revisions and variants, and some poems not previously published.

C. Day Lewis's edition, The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen (1963 [#4]), is more thorough in both notes and variants. Besides including many new poems, this now standard edition indicates the locations of the available manuscripts (most in the British Museum), and incorporates relevant material from Owen's correspondence to approximate the composition dates of some of the poems. Another helpful feature of this edition is its arrangement: part one brings together the war poems; part two groups the fragments and poems on other subjects; part three consists of selected juvenilia.

I

Owen's poems did not have to wait long for critical recognition. Sitwell's Wheels volume was reviewed by J. Middleton Murry in the Athenaeum in 1919. He describes "Strange Meeting" as the "most magnificent expression of the emotional significance of the war that has yet been achieved by English poetry" [#34,p.147]. Murry focuses on two aspects of Owen's poetry: his imitation of Keats, and his "monosyllabic assonances." Owen's rhyme technique, which Murry calls "the discovery of genius" [#34,p.147], became a primary topic for other early Owen critics.

With the publication of the first edition of Owen's poems, additional reviews appeared. Reviewers for the Times Literary Supplement, although