

SIEGFRIED SASSOON: THE NON-COMMITAL SATIRIST

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### Siegfried Sassoon: The Non-Committal Satirist

Siegfried Sassoon, the poet, claims critical evaluation among twentieth century British literary men chiefly on the basis of his World War I poetry. To all but a small dedicated following, the fact that he continued to write poetry until his death in 1967 may come as a surprise. Joseph Cohen in "The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon" says that "it is indeed remarkable that Sassoon's poetic achievement during the Great War is now forgotten, and even more remarkable that Sassoon, who has published his poems in every decade of this century, is largely unknown by the present generation and ignored by its critics."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps readers generally are more familiar with Siegfried Sassoon as a prose writer. The Memoirs of George Sherston and Siegfried's Journey have probably attracted more readers in the last two decades than his poetry.

It is with Sassoon the poet explicated by Sassoon the autobiographer that this paper is concerned. Peter Levi in "Sassoon at Eighty" states: "His poetry divides roughly into three periods: the early rustic awakening with the astonishing new dimensions of his war poetry; a satiric period which was linguistically interesting for the combination of casual bite with an admirably fibrous Hardy-esque verbal texture; and a ruminative and metaphysical period, a late autumnal flowering. The first period led directly into the second, but the position from which the peacetime satires

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Cohen, "The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon," Tulane Studies in English, 7 (1957), p. 169.

opened fire was neither as strong as Pope's nor as deeply entrenched as Hardy's; and the satire foundered."<sup>2</sup> I propose to analyze the satire of the first two periods of Sassoon's poetry, specifically contrasting the tone of the war poetry with that of the post-war political poems. By using a biographical focus, I intend to demonstrate that the poetry of social statement in the 1920's more accurately represents the natural temperament and poetic commitment of Siegfried Sassoon than the most biting commentary of his war poetry. The denunciatory satire of Sassoon's war poetry was out of character not only with the tone of detachment from reality of his prewar efforts but also with the ruminative poetry written during the remainder of his long, productive career. Assessing his war poetry after a passage of some twenty-five years, Sassoon reflects that "I could now safely admit that army life had persistently interfered with my ruminative and quiet-loving mentality. I may even have been aware that most of my satiric verses were to some extent prompted by internal exasperation."<sup>3</sup> I believe this statement accurately reflects the origin of the bitterly satiric war poems.

Siegfried Sassoon was by temperament and desire a "ruminative and quiet-loving" man, and this characterization reflects the tone and natural commitment of his prewar and post-war poetry. Born in 1886, Sassoon was the son of a wealthy Anglo-Jewish gentleman and Theresa Thornycroft, a painter of some reputation and niece of the noted English sculptor, Hamo Thornycroft. A cultured Englishwoman, Mrs. Sassoon determined early that

<sup>2</sup>Peter Levi, "Sassoon at Eighty," The Poetry Review, 57 (Autumn 1966), p. 172.

<sup>3</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey (London: Purnell and Sons Ltd., 1945), p. 74.

her second son should become a poet, and to the achievement of this end she quite effectively walled him off from distracting influences in the outside world in an existence of her own devising at the ancestral home, Weirleigh. Delicate health in his boyhood kept him from being sent away to school with his brothers, thus completing the set of circumstances that shaped the reflective temperament and self-containing character of Sassoon. He matured very slowly in an untroubled, unhurried atmosphere of books, summer cricket matches, and winter hunting expeditions. C. E. Maguire in "Harmony Unheard: The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon" describes him: "Although he always wanted to be a poet, he spent almost three decades of his life happily untouched by, or cautiously evading, intellectual influences. His school career was undistinguished, his university course cut short . . . . Hunting was for him a poetic apprenticeship akin to Wordsworth's early communing with nature. It combined adventure, beauty, comradeship. He was not coming to conclusions about people or events, but saturating his senses with the feel of things. He was not exactly becoming mature, either mentally or emotionally; his reaction to the war proves this."<sup>4</sup>

He began dabbling with poetry in his teens and by 1910 had published privately some pamphlets of verse. Edmund Blunden characterizes this early poetry: "No poet of twentieth-century England, to be sure, was originally more romantic and floral than young Siegfried Sassoon from Kent. Up to 1914, Mr. Sassoon was known, it seems, more in the hunting-field and on the cricket-ground than in the literary world. There he was

<sup>4</sup>C. E. Maguire, "Harmony Unheard: The Poetry of Siegfried Sassoon," Renaissance, 11, No. 3 (Spring 1959), p. 116.

a gentle amateur, who now and then published a graceful composition...."<sup>5</sup> Sassoon remembers his theory of writing poetry at this time: "Perfection, I felt, could only be achieved through a distillation of imagination which was strangely and exquisitely remote from everyday experience."<sup>6</sup> An old family friend, reading his poetry of that period, advised him "to put some solid thought into [his] poems" because "she felt I ought to be writing in a more physical way" (Weald of Youth, p. 29). Sassoon continues: "I had hoped that she would be more encouraging, for the sonnets had been written in a fine frenzy of aureate unreality, and I had copied them out again with gloating satisfaction" (Weald of Youth, p. 29). He could write with exquisite remoteness about his feelings of death in 1908:

Then, if some bird should pipe, or breezes stir the glade,  
Thinking them for the while my voice, so let them seem  
A fading message from the misty shores of dream,  
Or wheresoever, following Death, my feet have strayed.  
("An Old French Poet," p. 53)<sup>7</sup>

He recalls his early poetic efforts: "I am reminded of the magnanimously uncomprehending emotion which accompanied the putting of those words on paper--words that then seemed as though no-one else had ever used them before. . . . While in the act of composing those lines I probably thought I was saying my final word about life" (Weald of Youth, p. 36).

Michael Thorpe says that in these early poems "feeling is clouded

<sup>5</sup>Edmund Blunden, "War Poets, 1914-1918," Writers and Their Work, ed. Bonamy Dobree, No. 100, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, The Weald of Youth (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1949), p. 28.

<sup>7</sup>In this paper the references to Sassoon's poetry cited are from Siegfried Sassoon, Collected Poems, 1908-1956 (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1961). (Hereafter cited by poem titles and page numbers.)

and dissipated by the proliferation of a Pre-Raphaelite-Swinburnian diction which had already reached its ultimate dilution in Dowson and Johnson. All the fin de siècle epithets are there: dim, glimmering, strange, lovely, darkling, sweet, secret, ecstatic, beautiful, ethereal, celestial."<sup>8</sup> He cites "October" as one such inferior example:

Now do ye dream of Spring when greening shaws  
 Confer with the shrewd breezes, and of slopes  
 Flower-kirtled, and of April, virgin guest;  
 Days that ye love, despite their windy flaws,  
 Since they are woven with all joys and hopes  
 Whereof ye nevermore shall be possessed. (p. 52)

Sassoon was astonishingly immature and had never yet been challenged to recognize the existence of a world containing numerous realities foreign to his own knowledge of life and beyond his imagination. He expressed, however, a vague longing for some tragic experience to happen to him, as well as a desire for a more definite statement in his poetry:

I've listened: and all the sounds I heard  
 Were music,--wind, and stream, and bird.  
 With youth who sang from hill to hill  
 I've listened: my heart is hungry still.

I've looked: the morning world was green;  
 Bright roofs and towers of town I've seen;  
 And stars, wheeling through wingless night.  
 I've looked: and my soul yet longs for light.

I've thought: but in my sense survives  
 Only the impulse of those lives  
 That were my making. Hear me say  
 'I've thought!'--and darkness hides my day.  
 ("Alone," p. 61)

Thorpe sums up the content and poetic commitment of Sassoon's early output by stating that "these poems reveal the poverty of choice with which he was faced: from a critical viewpoint they are chiefly valuable as a

<sup>8</sup>Michael Thorpe, Siegfried Sassoon (Netherlands: Univ. Pers Lieden, 1966), p. 4.

measure of the extraordinary change wrought in Sassoon's writing by his War experience" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 5).

On a gloomy December evening in 1912, Sassoon was whiling away boredom by rereading John Masefield's poem, The Everlasting Mercy. He began writing a few lines of parody to amuse himself. The lines he wrote were entitled The Daffodil Murderer, and the result of them was Sassoon's first concrete experience of writing with any conscious feeling of commitment. He recalls: "I felt that in the last twenty-four hours I had found a new pair of poetic legs, and the fact that they had been graciously presented to me by John Masefield made no difference to my sense of self-satisfaction" (Weald of Youth, p. 126). The poem was published anonymously in The Antidote and in a private edition under the pseudonym of Saul Kane. Vivian de Sola Pinto states: "The Daffodil Murderer is not only a remarkably clever imitation of Masefield's style, but a moving and original poem, superior in some ways to Masefield's. It is significant, too, because it shows that even before the war Sassoon had a sense of the hollowness of the gentlemanly paradise in which he spent his youth, and a deep sympathy for the common man who was excluded from that paradise."<sup>9</sup> Thorpe concurs: "What is characteristic of Sassoon, as the War poems were to show more powerfully, is his capacity to feel for the suffering victim; The Daffodil Murderer has, in parts, the power to move--and this says much. It does not show the stirrings of a social conscience to complain, in Saul Kane's mouth, that some people are better and many worse off than they deserve to be" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 13).

<sup>9</sup>Vivian de Sola Pinto, "Crisis in English Poetry, 1880-1940," English Literature, ed. Basil Willey, 3rd ed. (London: Hutchinson Univ. Library, 1958), p. 143.

Edmund Gosse sent a copy of this parody to Edward Marsh, who at that time was editing a collection of the Georgian poets. Marsh read a selection of Sassoon's poetry in 1913 and offered him this criticism: "It seems a necessity now to write either with one's eye on an object or with one's mind at grips with a more or less definite idea. Quite a slight one will suffice!" (Weald of Youth, p. 138). One of the poems Marsh praised as containing thought was:

Old English songs, you bring to me  
 A simple sweetness somewhat kin  
 To birds that through the mystery  
 Of earliest morn make tuneful din,  
 While hamlet steeples sleepily  
 At cock-crow chime out three and four,  
 Till maids get up betime and go  
 With faces like the red sun low  
 Clattering about the dairy floor.  
 ("Morning-Land," p. 54)

Thorpe considers that most of Sassoon's better prewar poetry dates from this constructive criticism by Marsh; he began writing more critically, "refining his style and expressing his feelings more clearly" (Siegfried Sassoon, pp. 6-7). "The Old Huntsman," written in 1915 before Sassoon went to France, Thorpe considers "his other most accomplished early poem" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 13). It is a blank-verse monologue by an old huntsman recalling happy moments and bitter memories of his past. The poem is a blend of Sassoon's imagined perceptions of an aged huntsman and his own personal feelings:

And morn was at the window; and I was glad  
 To be alive because I heard the cry  
 Of hounds like church-bells chiming on a Sunday.  
 Ay, that's the song I'd wish to hear in Heaven! (pp. 6-7)

This world's a funny place to live in. Soon  
 I'll need to change my country; but I know  
 'Tis little enough I've understood my life,  
 And a power of sights I've missed, and foreign marvels. (p. 9)



I never broke  
 Out of my blundering self into the world,  
 But let it all go past me, like a man  
 Half asleep in a land that's full of wars. (p. 10)

Thorpe says: "Both the strengths and the weaknesses of Sassoon's early life are crystallized in 'The Old Huntsman'; when he wrote, Sassoon was highly conscious of the latter. Its greatest strength, his sense of kinship with nature, was to remain, to be rediscovered to the full in his retrospective prose: for the present, as a poet, he was handicapped by a half-awareness, at best, of humanity" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 14). Looking back on this period in his life, Sassoon recalls: "Then I remembered that night, early in 1914, when I had been up in this room experiencing an emotional crisis in which I had felt that my life was being wasted on sport and minor poetry, and had imagined myself devoting my future to humanitarian services and nobly prophetic writings" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 53).

With a feeling of commitment to a new phase of his life, Sassoon enlisted in the Home Guard in August, 1914, when England entered the Great War. His previously sheltered existence in no way prepared him to cope with the dehumanizing experiences he encountered in the trench warfare on the Western Front. At last his vague desire for tragic experience and his search for poetic commitment were to be fulfilled. He recalls: "Never before had I known how much I had to lose. Never before had I looked at the living world with any degree of intensity. It seemed almost as if I had been waiting for this thing to happen, although my own part in it was so obscure and submissive."<sup>10</sup> This contact with

<sup>10</sup>Siegfried Sassoon, The Memoirs of George Sherston, Memoirs of A Fox-Hunting Man (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1937), p. 291.

brutal reality forced him into achieving a maturity impossible in his idyllic prewar existence and tormented him into writing poetry characterized by bitterness and sardonic humor that was foreign to his nature, the intensity of which he never reached again. Thorpe says of Sassoon's war poetry: "In showing the dreadfulness of the War, in its surface aspects, he preceded Owen and surpassed him and all English poets who had previously written of war. His satires have, quantitatively, greater 'bite' than those of his fellow war-poets and a sheer brutality of utterance that matches the reality. No English satirist since Byron had had such power of invective--though he lacks even Byron's constructiveness. He relieved the pressure of his emotion by speaking the brutality, over and over again" (Siegfried Sassoon, p. 26).

Cohen divides Sassoon's poetry into three groups, each reflecting a definite poetic "role" that Sassoon adopted at various stages of his literary career. He sees the war poetry as a phase of "the angry prophet." "Sassoon's enthusiasm for his role of angry prophet is amply recorded in his prose accounts of his war experiences, The Memoirs of George Sherston and Siegfried's Journey 1916-1920; but the intensity with which he responded to the role and developed it during the war years and afterward is revealed only in his poems [which convey] the raw unchecked emotions themselves" ("The Three Roles of Siegfried Sassoon," p. 170). However, Sassoon did not immediately reach this level of satire. He absorbed experiences slowly; only gradually did his prewar idealism give way to harsher realities. He reminisces: ". . . the War was inevitable and justifiable. Courage remained a virtue. And that exploitation of courage, if I may be allowed to say a thing so obvious, was the essential

tragedy of the War, which, as everyone now agrees, was a crime against humanity" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 305).

At the beginning of his Army career, Sassoon could say that "there was something almost idyllic about those early weeks of the War" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 291). Much of the early British World War I poetry was written as a religious justification of the Cause, romanticizing war, praising patriotism, and glorifying chivalrous sacrifice of life. The poems of Rupert Brooke serve to illustrate this concept:

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead!  
 There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,  
 But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.  
 These laid the world away; poured out the red  
 Sweet wine of youth; gave up the years to be  
 Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,  
 That men call age; and those who would have been,  
 Their sons, they gave, their immortality.  
 (Sonnet III, "The Dead")

If I should die, think only this of me:  
 That there's some corner of a foreign field  
 That is for ever England. There shall be  
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;  
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,  
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,  
 A body of England's, breathing English air,  
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.  
 (Sonnet V, "The Soldier")<sup>11</sup>

Sassoon's early war poetry, like that of some contemporaries in 1915, begins in an aura of idealism, the spirit of Happy Warriorism. He recalls: "While learning to be a second-lieutenant I was unable to write anything at all, with the exception of a short poem called 'Absolution', manifestly influenced by Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet-sequence. The significance of my too nobly worded lines was that they expressed the

<sup>11</sup>Rupert Brooke, The Collected Poems (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1942), p. 148 and p. 150.

typical self-glorifying feelings of a young man about to go to the Front for the first time" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 17):

Horror of wounds and anger at the foe,  
And loss of things desired; all these must pass.  
We are the happy legion, for we know  
Time's but a golden wind that shakes the grass.

There was an hour when we were loth to part  
From life we longed to share no less than others.  
Now, having claimed this heritage of heart,  
What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?  
("Absolution," p. 11)

The poem "France," like the preceding one, was the type the poet said "found favour with middle-aged reviewers":

And they are fortunate, who fight  
For gleaming landscapes swept and shafted  
And crowned by cloud pavilions white;  
Hearing such harmonies as might  
Only from Heaven be downward wafted--  
Voices of victory and delight. (p. 13)

Even after the death of his brother, Hamo, in action in Gallipoli in 1915, he could still write idealistically "To My Brother":

Give me your hand, my brother, search my face;  
Look in these eyes lest I should think of shame;  
For we have made an end of all things base.  
We are returning by the road we came.

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,  
And I am in the field where men must fight.  
But in the gloom I see your laurell'd head  
And through your victory I shall win the light. (pp. 11-12)

From the time Sassoon first went to France in early spring of 1915, he kept a journal of his experiences. He notes: "All squalid, abject, and inglorious elements in war should be remembered" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 318). He recorded and absorbed the shocking scenes of men dehumanized in the trenches which became his angry anti-war poems. He recalls: "This gradual process began, in the first months of 1916, with a few

genuine trench poems, dictated by my resolve to record my surroundings, and usually based on the notes I was making whenever I could do so with detachment. These poems aimed at impersonal description of front-line conditions, and could at least claim to be the first things of their kind. The only one which anticipated my later successes in condensed satire was 'Good Friday Morning', a jaunty scrap of doggerel versified from a rough note in my diary" (Siegfried's Journey, p. 17):

Deep in water I splashed my way  
Up the trench to our bogged front line.  
Rain had fallen the whole damned night.  
O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,  
And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,  
And get my bloody old sins washed white!      (p. 24)

He remembers: "Without knowing why, I remembered that it was Easter Sunday. Standing in that dismal ditch, I could find no consolation in the thought that Christ was risen. I splashed back to the dug-out to call the others up for 'stand-to'" (Fox-Hunting Man, p. 376). Poetry came from entries in his journal, such as " . . . the rockets soared beyond the ridge and the machine-guns rattled out their mirthless laughter":

Through darkness curves a spume of falling flares  
That flood the field with shallow, blanching light.  
The huddled sentry stares  
On gloom at war with white,  
And white receding slow, submerged in gloom.  
Guns into mimic thunder burst and boom,  
And mirthless laughter rakes the whistling night.  
The sentry keeps his watch where no one stirs  
But the brown rats, the nimble scavengers.  
("Golgotha," pp. 14-15)

After nearly a year in France, Sassoon recalls his feelings: "I have said that spring arrived late in 1916, and that up in the trenches opposite Mametz, it seemed as though winter would last forever. I also

stated that as for me, I had more or less made up my mind to die because in the circumstances there didn't seem anything else to be done" (Memoirs of George Sherston, Memoirs of An Infantry Officer, p. 9). He was sent to an Army School for a refresher course, where a major lectured the war-weary veterans on the subject, "The Spirit of the Bayonet." Sassoon recalls: "He spoke with homicidal eloquence, keeping the game alive with genial and well-judged jokes. . . . Afterwards I went up the hill to my favorite sanctuary, a wood of hazels and beeches. . . . But the lecturer's voice still battered on my brain. 'The bullet and the bayonet are brother and sister.' 'If you don't kill him, he'll kill you.' . . . 'Don't waste good steel. Six inches are enough. What's the use of a foot of steel sticking out at the back of a man's neck? Three inches will do for him: when he coughs, go and look for another'" (Infantry Officer, pp. 15-16). The result of this experience was a poem:

To these I turn, in these I trust--  
 Brother Lead and Sister Steel.  
 To his blind power I make appeal,  
 I guard her beauty clean from rust.

He spins and burns and loves the air,  
 And splits a skull to win my praise;  
 But up the nobly marching days  
 She glitters naked, cold and fair.

Sweet Sister, grant your soldier this:  
 That in good fury he may feel  
 The body where he sets his heel  
 Quail from your downward darting kiss.  
 ("The Kiss," pp. 15-16)

Robert Graves, in his autobiography, Good-Bye to All That, says: "His poem ["The Kiss"] was originally written seriously, inspired by Col. Campbell, V. C.'s bloodthirsty 'Spirit of the Bayonet' address at an army school. Later he offered it as a satire; and it is a poem that

comes off whichever way you read it."<sup>12</sup>

Sassoon records an incident that took place on a bombing raid underneath the German trenches: "Other wounded men were crawling back. Among them was a gray-haired lance-corporal, who had one of his feet almost blown off; I half carried him in and when he was sitting on the fire-step he said, 'Thank God Almighty for this; I've been waiting eighteen months for it and now I can go home'" (Infantry Officer, p. 36). The poet may have recalled the wounded soldier and his words when he wrote "The One-Legged Man":

And he'd come home again to find it more  
Desireable than ever it was before.  
How right it seemed that he should reach the span  
Of comfortable years allowed to man!  
Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,  
Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.  
He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,  
And thought: 'Thank God they had to amputate!' (pp. 25-26)

From an observation such as: "No; one couldn't reckon the effect of the war on people by weeks and months. I'd noticed that boys under twenty stood it worst, especially when the weather was bad. Mud and boredom and discomfort seemed to take all the guts out of them" (Infantry Officer, p. 44), the poet created this poignant tribute to the weak young ones that the war victimized:

I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
No one spoke of him again.  
("Suicide in the Trenches," p. 78)

<sup>12</sup>Robert Graves, Good-Bye to All that, An Autobiography (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 339.

Sassoon's compassion for the common soldiers is reflected in such a comment as: "Visualizing that forlorn crowd of khaki figures under the twilight of the trees, I can believe that I saw then, for the first time, how blindly War destroys its victims" (Infantry Officer, p. 94). He wrote poems expressing his admiration for these uncomplaining, even cheerful victims being sacrificed by the War Office:

Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin  
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,  
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain  
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,  
And going to the office in the train.  
("Dreamers," p. 72)

And then he thought: to-morrow night we trudge  
Up to the trenches, and my boots are rotten.  
Five miles of stodgy clay and freezing sludge,  
And everything but wretchedness forgotten.  
To-night he's in the pink; but soon he'll die.  
And still the war goes on--he don't know why.  
("In the Pink," p. 18)

Pinto cites "In the Pink," commenting that "Sassoon was at his best when he combined this pity for the ordeal of the common soldier with a savage irony directed against the stupidity and vulgarity of the people who shut their eyes to the horror of the war" (Crisis in English Poetry, p. 144).

Special targets of the poet's wrath were the newspaper correspondents and the tone of the news dispatches reported to the people at home. "A London editor driving along the road in a Staff car would have remarked that the spirit of the troops was amazing. And so it was. But somehow the newspaper men always kept the horrifying realities of the War out of their articles, for it was unpatriotic to be bitter, and the



dead were assumed to be gloriously happy" (Infantry Officer, p. 117).

He wrote this poem as an answer:

"The effect of our bombardment was terrific. One man told me he had never seen so many dead before."--War Correspondent"

'He'd never seen so many dead before.'  
 They sprawled in yellow daylight while he swore  
 And gasped and lugged his everlasting load  
 Of bombs along what once had been a road.  
 'How peaceful are the dead.'  
 Who put that silly gag in some one's head?  
 'He'd never seen so many dead before.'  
 The lilting words danced up and down his brain,  
 While corpses jumped and capered in the rain.  
 No, no; he wouldn't count them any more . . .  
 The dead have done with pain:  
 They've choked; they can't come back to life again.  
 ("The Effect," p. 73)

In August of 1916, Sassoon contracted a severe gastric fever and was sent back to a hospital in England. He describes a mortally wounded soldier in the ward: "Everyone in the ward seemed to be asleep except the boy whose bed had screens around it. . . . Once I had caught a glimpse of his white face and miserable eyes. . . . His voice went on, in the low, rapid, even tone of delirium. Sometimes I could catch what he said, troubled and unhappy and complaining. Someone called Dicky was on his mind, and he kept on crying out to Dicky. 'Don't go out, Dicky; they snipe like hell!' And then, 'Curse the Wood . . . Dicky, you fool, don't go out!' . . . All the horror of the Somme attacks was in that raving; all the darkness and the dreadful daylight. . . . Next morning the screens had vanished; the bed was empty, and ready for someone else" (Infantry Officer, p. 120). From that experience came the poem:

His wet white face and miserable eyes  
 Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs:  
  
 The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining  
 And calling out for 'Dickie'. 'Curse the Wood!