

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."¹ 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

¹Joseph 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."² 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."³ 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

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

³Siegfried 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."⁴

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

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