

7

The English Trench-Writers of 1914-18: A Very Brief Review

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ABSTRACT

In the First World War/ Great War literature and culture, trench warfare came to be regarded as a powerful symbol of the futility of war. It would not be erroneous to observe that the entrenched soldiers of the Great War could mostly wait for annihilation and fight against boredom and fatigue, and do almost nothing else. Jünger and Remarque have already focussed on the atmosphere of attrition and boredom during the trench-warfare-periods of the 1914-18 belligerences. Thoughtful inclusions in syllabi over the years have considerably acquainted Indians with the (English) poetry of the First World War. However, the writers of 'trench poetry' – even if they are from England – are not usually studied at Indian schools and colleges. The principal objective of this paper is to very briefly introduce readers to the concept of 'trench poetry of the First World War'. And, any reading of First World War-literature is likely to remain incomplete without reference to trench-writings because the European trenches extended for five hundred miles as soon as combat began.

Key-words: Trenches, Great War, Poetry, Annihilation, Fatigue, Boredom

Though the usage of trenches as a part of strategic defence was arguably first used by the Roman legions during nights to block sudden advancement of enemy lines (Ripley and Dana, 1859. P. 622), the technique of entrenching as a form of defence first matured during the First World War/Great War (1914-18), when both the *Central Alliance* (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and

Turkey) and *Triple Entente* (Britain, France, Russia/U.S.A.) combatants dug themselves in deeply on the *Western Front* from September 1914 onwards (Ellis, 1976. P. 10). However, as Michael Hanson (Wallace, 2005, p. 29) or William Philpott (Liddle, 2016, p. 53) note, engagements at Verdun (February-December 1916), the Somme (July-November 1916), and Passchendaele (July-November 1917) demonstrated that personnel from both the confronting sides remained overwhelmingly vulnerable to enemy-projectiles even after the adoption of this particular form of warfare. In fact, in the Great War literature and culture, trench warfare soon came to be regarded as a powerful symbol of the futility of war (Griffith, 1996, p. 4), where, under the command of inefficient generals, the Anglo-French personnel (and, in extension, the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians too) were no better than 'lions led by donkeys' (*ibid.* 5-6). It would not be, therefore, erroneous to observe that the entrenched soldiers of the Great War could mostly wait for annihilation and fight against boredom and fatigue. In publications like *Storm of Steel* (1920) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), Jünger (1895-1998) and Remarque (1898-1970) focus especially on this atmosphere of attrition and boredom during the trench-warfare-periods of the first global confrontation.

Thoughtful inclusions in syllabi over the years have considerably acquainted Indians with the poetry of the First World War. The names of 'Rupert Brooke' (1887-1915), 'Edward Thomas' (1878-1917), 'Siegfried Sassoon' (1886-1967), 'Wilfred Owen' (1893-1918), and 'Robert Graves' (1895-1985) are no longer alien to Indian researchers, though – sadly – the names of German combatant-poets of the two World Wars as well as those of the general soldier-poets of the Second World War are areas mostly neglected. Similarly, the writers of 'trench poetry' – even if they are from England – are not usually studied at Indian schools and colleges. The principal objective of this paper is to very briefly introduce readers to the concept of 'trench poetry of

the First World War'. And, any reading of First World War-literature is likely to remain incomplete without reference to trench-writings because, as Trudi Tate notes, the European trenches extended for five hundred miles as soon as combat began (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 163). Tate also mentions that the First World War-trench-writers like Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918) habitually view the devastated and trench-marred war-zones as desecrated "maternal body", which, interestingly, 'pays back' by becoming dangerous (*ibid.* 171-72).

A very brief review of life in the trenches reveals why soldiers, who usually served in them between one day and two weeks, could not withstand the sight of activities continuing inside the dugouts. Lyon also attaches special importance to the descriptions of trench-life for studying 'wartime [...] conditions' (2005, p. 55). Though expected to provide safety, entrenched soldiers faced the constant risk of taking sniper fire, other than intermittently encountering poison-gas attacks, while diseases – especially dysentery, typhus, and cholera – killed a significant section of those serving in the trenches. Moreover, constant sounds of explosions often led to young soldiers acquainting 'shell-shock' or 'neurasthenia' inside trenches, which made life even more unbearable. Two diary entries by the English volunteer Harry Drinkwater (1889-1978) of the 2nd *Birmingham Battalion*, written inside a Somme (Picardie)-trench in Northern France, attest to the miseries of trench-soldiers. On 19 December 1915 Sunday, he writes:

"No words can adequately describe the conditions. It is not the Germans that we are fighting, but the weather. Within an hour of moving off, we were up to our knees in mud and water. The mud gradually got deeper as we advanced along the trench".¹

On the very next day, he writes:

"The trenches are in a terrible condition – anything up to four feet deep in mud and water. We are plastered in mud up to our faces. Our food – cold bacon, bread and jam – is slung together in a sack

that hangs from the dripping dugout roof. Consequently, we eat and drink mud"².

It was in such an atrocious atmosphere that the trench poets (here we would deal with only the English trench-soldier-poets of the Great War for convenience) wrote their versified memories of the war. Though the writings of Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy (1883-1929) (also known as 'Woodbine Willie'), Isaac Rosenberg, and – arguably – Ivor Gurney can be identified as English 'trench poems proper', one can remember the two poignant trench-life-related poems by Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967): the eighteen-line "The Hero" (1917) and the twelve-line "Suicide in the Trenches" (1918). In the first, Sassoon writes about the 'gallant lies' regarding the concept of military-heroism as an officer lies to the mother of a fallen entrenched soldier, Jack, about his supposed daredevil exploits, and reconsiders: 'how 'Jack', cold-footed, useless swine,/ Had panicked down the trench that night the mine/Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried/To get sent home, and how, at last, he died,/Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care/Except that lonely woman with white hair'. In "Suicide in the Trenches", Sassoon recalls how a young soldier, who had found it hard to cope with the hellish life in trenches, committed suicide by shooting himself in head, and he satirises the English commoners for their over-inflated ideas of militaristic heroism: '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. // You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye/Who cheer when soldier lads march by,/Sneak home and pray you'll never know/ The hell where youth and laughter go'. These two poems sufficiently demonstrate the principal considerations of 'trench-poems': the fatal boredom of soldiers serving in the dugouts, and an empathy for those who have been sentenced to serve in mired hellishness by people led by erroneous concepts of nationalism

and warring. Not every writer spoke despicably of trenches though. Jessie Pope, for example, wrote “The Call” in 1915, inviting: “Who’s for the trench –/Are you, my laddie?/Who will follow the French –/Will you, my laddie?/who’s fretting to begin,/Who’s going out to win?/ And who wants to save his skin –/Do you, my laddie?”. Interestingly, Tate mentions that not all of such pro-war, pro-trench-warfare writings in England lacked in intelligence (McLoughlin, 2009, p. 165).

These two qualities, tempered by a sympathetic Anglican religiosity, could be found in the poems written by Geoffrey Kennedy, a military-priest, poet, and winner of the *Military Cross* for his daring to offer *Woodbine* cigarettes and spiritual aid to the dying soldiers amidst the intense fusillades of the First World War. Manufactured since 1888 by the English tobacco company *W.D. and H.O. Wills*, the strong and unfiltered *Woodbines* were usually avoided by new army-recruits, but injured soldiers – reportedly – found succour in them; and these earned for Kennedy the sobriquet of ‘Woodbine Willie’. Once a Vicar of *St. Paul’s Church*, Worcester, Kennedy volunteered as a chaplain to the English Army on the Western Front, and after winning the *Military Cross* in 1917, he published two collections of principally trench-poems: *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* (1918) and *More Rough Rhymes* (1919). Interestingly, the same priest who lectured to the English soldiers about the usefulness of bayonets adopted a pacifist attitude during the Great War period. Edna Longley observes that the Great War-trench-poets (mostly of England) often reverted back to the Romantic writers to utilise their poems as “open goal for irony” (Sherry, 2005, p. 65), and Kennedy was not different from them.

Among Willie’s more frequently anthologised war-poems are “The Spirit”, “The Secret”, “Well?”, and “War”. The last-mentioned of these poems juxtaposes his ideas of divinity and the miseries of belligerence within its eight lines: “There’s a soul in the Eternal,/Standing stiff before the King./There’s a little

English maiden/ Sorrowing./There's a proud and tearless woman,/Seeing pictures in the fire./There's a broken battered body/On the wire". Often serving under intense fire, Willie was habituated with watching bodies of numerous unidentifiable warriors dangling lifeless from barbed wires put up around trenches. In "Well?", Willie comes out of his priest-persona, and goes into a confessional mode, recalling his own defects – a practice that entrenched soldiers often indulged in because of the fear of dying any moment: "A throng `o faces came and went,/ Afore me on that shore,/ My wife, and Mother, kiddies, pals,/ And the face of a London whore./ And some was sweet, and some was sad,/ And some put me to shame,/ For the dirty things I'd done to `em,/ When I `and't played the game./ Then in the silence someone stirred,/ Like when a sick man groans,/ And a kind o' shivering chill ran through/ The marrer ov my bones./ And there before me someone stood,/ Just lookin' dahn at me,/ And still be'ind `Im moaned and moaned/ That everlasting sea./ I couldn't speak, I felt as though/ `E `ad me by the throat,/ `Twere like a drownin' fellah feels,/ Last moment `e's afloat./ And `E said nowt, `E just stood still,/ For I dunno `ow long./ It seemed to me like years and years,/ But time out there's all wrong" (l. 45-68). In "The Secret", he discusses his intense preference for the *Woodbine* cigarettes: "Quarters kids us it's the rations,/ And the dinners as we gets./ But I knows what keeps us ^{ss}milin' / It's the *Woodbine Cigarettes*./ For the daytime seems more dreary,/ And the night-time seems to drag/ To eternity of darkness,/When ye ave'nt got a fag./ Then the rain seems some'ow wetter,/ And the cold cuts twice as keen,/ And ye keeps on seein' Boches,/ What the Sargint `asn't seen./ If ole Fritz `as been and got ye,/ And ye `ave to stick the pain,/ If ye `aven't got a fag on,/ Why it `urts as bad again./ When there ain't no fags to pull at,/ Then there's terror in the ranks./ That's the secret – (yes, I'll `ave one)/ Just a fag – and many Tanks" (l. 21-40). His "The Spirit" is a humorous and optimistic sermon to English soldiers serving in the muck of frontline trenches: "When there ain't no gal to kiss you,/ And the

postman seems to miss you,/ And the fags have skipped an issue,/ Carry on./ When ye've got an empty belly,/ And the bulley's rotten smelly,/ And you're shivering like a jelly,/ Carry on./ When the Boche has done your chum in,/ And the sergeant's done the rum in,/ And there ain't no rations comin',/ Carry on./ When the world is red and reeking,/ And the shrapnel shells are shrieking,/ And your blood is slowly leaking,/ Carry on./ When the broken battered trenches,/ Are like the bloody butchers' benches,/ And the air is thick with stenches,/ Carry on./ Carry on./ Though your pals are pale and wan,/ And the hope of life is gone,/ Carry on./ For to do more than you can,/ Is to be a British man,/ Not a rotten 'also ran',/ Carry on". Kennedy's optimistic poems – in their bid to provide enthusiasm to the Allied combatants, do not usually focus on the horrendousness of life in trenches – something which Rosenberg's war-poems do.

Jean Moorcraft Wilson, in her 8 November 2003 – essay "Visions from the Trenches", published in *The Guardian*, has identified Rosenberg's *Poems from the Trenches* to be the 'most outstanding poems of the First World War', and her observations have been seconded by numerous literary critics and historians. However, while Willie generally tried to avoid the brutal aspects of warring in his publications, the Latvian Jew Rosenberg, who was in Cape Town at the time of declaration of the Great War, was critical of the first global belligerence right from the beginning. Although the chronic-bronchitis-afflicted poet had published two poetry-collections, *Night and Day* (1912) and *Youth* (1915), his war – rather, trench – poems like "Break of Day in the Trenches" (1916), "Returning we hear the Larks" (1917), "Dead Man's Dump" (1917), and "Louse Hunting" immortalised him. Serving on the Western Front as a Private of the 11th (Service) Battalion of The King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment, Rosenberg was killed on 1 April 1918 at Fampoux, north-east of Arras, France, when his patrolling party was ambushed – ironically – at 'daybreak'.

In "Break of Day in the Trenches", first published in Poetry (Chicago) in December 1916, Rosenberg adopts the resigned, cynical attitude of a warrior bored to death and inextricably condemned to trench-fighting: "The Darkness crumbles away./It is the same old druid Time as ever,/ Only a live thing leaps my hand,/ A queer sardonic rat,/As I pull the parapet's poppy/ To stick behind my ear./ Droll rat, they would shoot you if they knew/ Your cosmopolitan sympathises./ Now you have touched this English hand/ You will do the same to a German/ Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure/ To cross the sleeping green between" (l. 1-12). In "Returning, we hear the Larks", the soldier-poet captures the mood of and uncertainty of life for combatants as they move from trenches to trenches: "Death could drop from the dark/ As easily as song -/ But song only dropped,/ Like a blind man's dreams on the sand/ By dangerous tides,/ Like a girl's dark hair for she dreams no ruin lies there,/ Or her kisses where a serpent hides" (l. 10-16). In "Dead Man's Dump" – which Paul Fussell regards as 'the greatest of all the First World War poems' (Astley 67) – the soldier-narrator, on a wiring-duty, runs into heaps of corpses of fallen soldiers who have died regardless of their nationality: "The plunging limbers over the shattered track/ Racketed with their rusty freight,/ Stuck out like many crowns of thorns,/ And the rusty stakes like sceptres old/ To stay the flood of brutish men/ Upon our brothers dear.// The wheels lurched over sprawled dead/ But pained them not, though their bones crunched,/ Their shut mouths made no moan,/ They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,/ Man born of man, and born of woman,/ And shells go crying over them/ From night till night and now.// Earth has waited for them/ All the time of their growth/ Fretting for their decay:/ Now she has them at last!/In the strength of their strength/ Suspended–stopped and held" (l. 1-19). In "Louse Hunting", Rosenberg satirically focuses on how the entrenched soldiers paid considerable attention to ensure that lice do not bother them in their dugouts: "Nudes – stark and glistening,/Yelling in lurid

glee. Grinning faces/ And raging limbs/ Whirl over floor one fire./For a shirt verminously busy/ Yon soldier tore from his throat, with oaths/ Godhead might shrink at, but not the lice./And soon the shirt was aflame/ Over the candle he'd lit while we lay" (l. 1-9). Readers can remember that one of the graver problems afflicting the First World War trenches was that of lice, which also led to several diseases.

Gurney, it seems, matured as a poet while serving on the frontline. In fact, Astley mentions, "He started writing poetry seriously while in the trenches" (2014, p. 64). A patient of frequent nervous breakdowns, Gurney was studying on scholarship at the *Royal College of Music*, London, when the Great War intervened. He enlisted in the *Gloucestershire Regiment* in February 1915, and, in September 1917, he was poison-gassed, which sent him out of action straight to the *Edinburgh War Hospital*, where he unsuccessfully fell in love with the V.A.D. cadet, Annie N. Drummond. Summarising Gurney's poetic oeuvre, Desmond Graham observes that in order to escape from the "torments of his mental illness and confinement", the poet, in his poems (including the trench-poems), often "turns back to then battlefield as place where he had identity, friendship, and promise" (2001, p. 31). This attitude sets his poems apart from those of other writers.

Gurney's two collections of war-verses – *Severn and Somme* and *War's Embers* – were published respectively in 1917 and 1919, and among his more famous combat-poems from the trenches are "To his Love" (1918), "The Bohemians", "Strange Hells", and "The Silent One" (1922). In the last-mentioned poem, he sardonically summarises the uncertainties of warriors' lives as he watches a soldier fall because of his misconstrued allegiance to his military profession: "Who dies on the wires, and hung there, one of two – /Who for his hours of life had chattered through/ Infinite lovely chatter of Bucks accent:/ Yet faced unbroken wires; stepped over, and went/ A noble fool, faithful to

his stripes – and ended” (l. 1-5). In “The Bohemians”, Gurney pooh-poohs the high ideas of high military discipline, and observes that during belligerence the most important idea is to survive amidst the trenches rather than adhering to ideals and fashions: “Certain people would not clean their buttons,/Nor polish buckles after latest fashions,/Preferring their hair long, putties comfortable,/Barely escaping hanging. Indeed hardly able,/In Bridge and smoking without army cautions/ Spending hours that sped like evil for quickness,/(While others burnished brasses, earned promotions)/ These were those ones who jested in the trench” (l. 1-8). In the first three lines of “Strange Hells”, Gurney explores the psychological effects of combat on the entrenched warriors: “There are strange hells within the minds war made/ Not so often, not so humiliatingly afraid/ As one would have expected – the racket and fear guns made”. “To his Love” is a hapless trench-fighter’s lamentation for his fallen co-combatant: “Cover him, cover him soon!/And with thick-set/ Masses of memoried flowers/ hide that red wet/ Thing I must somehow forget” (l. 16-20). Gurney failed to forget his loss of Drummond, and had to be briefly institutionalised. Reviewing several of such trench writings, Das puts importance on them because of their bearing testimonies to male to male camaraderie and homoerotic possibilities which resulted in Robert Nichols’s “The Secret” and Sassoon’s “The Last Meeting” (2005, p. 128-32). Edna Longley, on the other hand, values trench poems like Rosenberg’s and Gurney’s for their modernity (Sherry, 2005, p. 67-77).

There are several other poems which could be linked to ‘trench poetry’. For example, Edward Thomas’s eighteen-line “Rain” resuscitates memories of how the entrenched soldiers felt as they kept waiting for enemy movements in respective trenches. As Baker writes, “In the First World War, rain, mud, and the freezing cold totally overwhelmed the strategy of generals, snug and warm in their châteaux behind the lines. The ordinary soldiers left memorable descriptions of the appalling

conditions which made not just fighting, but existence too, unendurable" (1996, p. 245). In "The Sentry", Wilfred Owen writes of a shattered German trench, attesting the indescribable sufferings of warriors across the nations: "We'd found an old Boche dug-out, and he knew,/And gave us hell, for shell on frantic shell/ Hammered on top, but never quite burst through./Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime,/Kept slush waist-high and raising hour by hour,/And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb". Vincent Sherry notes that trench poems are usually more intense than general poems of the First World War soldier-poets because "[t]he enclosed space of the trench restricts but intensifies the sensory prospect in ways Siegfried Sassoon typifies in the poem he titles with the epithetical image of 'The Death Bed'" (Das, 2013, p. 43). Containment within the small space of trenches often brought out violent emotions from the soldiers-writers struck in them. Davies, Goellmann, and Melendre write that the entrenched English warriors, in order to escape from the boredom of the trenches and to come to terms with their own emotions, tried reading publications by Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, and John Buchan, while the Germans usually read Wilhelm Busch, Kurt Aram, Walter Bloem, Karl May, and Theodor Fontane³. They also published widely in trench-magazines such as *The War Illustrated* (U.K.), *The Wipers Times* (U.K.), *Le Poilu* (France), and *Der Drahtverhau* (Germany).

Thousands of Great War soldiers died in the trenches. For example, at least 12.5 per cent of English troops serving on the *Western Front* were killed while entrenched. Later, mud and soil filled up the dugouts, and in France and Belgium, millions of poppy-plants grew on the battlefields. Though not exactly a trench-poem, the Canadian physician John McCrae's "In Flanders's Fields", written on the Ypres salient in May 1915, commemorates those countless warriors who perished almost unknown in the trench-ravaged grounds of First World War-afflicted Europe: "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow/ Between the crosses row on row,/That mark our place; and in the sky/The

larks, still bravely singing, fly/ Scarce heard amid the guns below.//We are the Dead. Short days ago/ We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,/Loved and were loved, and now we lie/ In Flanders fields.// Take up our quarrel with the foe:/To you from failing hands we throw/ The torch; be yours to hold it high./If ye break faith with us who die/We shall not sleep, though poppies grow/ In Flanders fields". The destroyed Flanders trenches over the ravished earth are now visited regularly by the 'living' tourists and historians, who generally try to conceive what intense emotion within the confines of trenches sprouted the painful trench poems of Rosenberg or Gurney.

NOTES

1. "Diary of the Damned: Extracts from Harry Drinkwater's Diary". *The Daily Mail (London) – Mail Online* (7 November 2013. Accessed on 13 April 2015). Retrieved from [http:// www.dailymail.co.uk /news/article-2491760/Harry-Drinkwaters-lost-diary-Great-War.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2491760/Harry-Drinkwaters-lost-diary-Great-War.html)
2. *Ibid.*
3. Davies, Richard, Udo Goellmann, and Sara Melendre. (30 April 2017). "Trench Literature: Reading in First World War". *Abe Books*. Retrieved from <https://www.abebooks.com/books/world-war-soldiers-reading-kipling/trench-literature.shtml>

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