



“Went to War with Rupert Brooke and Came Home with Siegfried Sassoon”: The Poetic Fad of the First World War

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Exploring literary fads and fashions provides a more comprehensive understanding of culture than isolated studies concentrating on a select representation of writers of a particular time period. As this essay argues, a close analysis of the fad for poetry during the First World War provides a better understanding of the socio-cultural reality of the war generation than a study based on isolated critical deliberation on a few select male poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke. A study of such a poetic fad is more significant, as the time-period from 1914 to 1918 facilitated major shifts in the lifestyle of nearly each and every section of British society.¹ It is imperative to read the representative male canonical poetic voice as one of the many divergent poetic voices and ideologies prevalent during the war, rather than *the* absolute representative ideology of the time period. The first section of this essay intends to explore the poetic fad of the Great War and probe into the reasons that gave birth to such a widespread cultural phenomenon. The second section establishes that a critical exploration of the fad integrates the neglected poetic voices of the time period, thereby ensuring a more comprehensive, gender-balanced and authentic understanding of the socio-political reality of the time period.

The First World War served as a significant catalyst to the nation’s writers, especially poets — both men and women — who rushed into print with their works. This creative outburst is clearly evidenced by the thousands of poems written and published during the four years of the war. Catherine Reilly’s crucial work *English Poetry of the First World War: A Bibliography* (1978) lists 2225 published poets, testifying to the immense popularity of poetry during the time of the war. Shortly after the declaration of hostilities, newspapers like *The Times* and *Daily Mail* were teeming with poetic contributions. On 23 June 1915, the *Daily Mail*, amusingly complaining against the literary epidemic that led to “A Serious Outbreak of Poets”, observed that more poetry had “found its way into print in the last eleven months than in the eleven preceding years.”

The majority of these poems did not come from the established poets, but from the common masses who, riding on their newfound poetic-afflatus, invigorated the infectious poetic fad in vogue. Even the plethora of poetic contributions from combatants created problems for newspapers like *The Wiper Times* and *Westminster Gazette*. So much so that on 20 March 1916 *The Wiper Times* referred to the poetic fad as “an insidious disease” that contributed to “a hurricane of poetry”. Now what were the reasons behind this sudden deluge of verse or the poetic fad? Among the major reasons, the first one was obviously the nature of the war. The Great War was a total war, in the sense that it had an influence – in some form or the other – on every

section of the British society. Unlike the previous wars, like the Boer or the Crimean War, it was geographically closer and it facilitated a mass scale enlistment of young men for the forces.² As it has been rightly observed:

There was hardly a year between the accession of Victoria and the outbreak of the Boer war when the British were not engaged in war overseas – in India, China, Africa, the Far East, the Near East, the Antipodes – but significantly, not close to home in Europe. These were only ‘little’ wars, fought by professionals. Newspapers, popular entertainments and ephemera constantly steeped the Victorian consciousness in the idea of war as something irresistibly glamorous which happened a long way away. (Robert Giddings 7)

Keeping in tune with the enthusiasm and urgency to enlist and volunteer for various forms of war-services, the extended conflict also inflicted heavy casualties, unprecedented and unmatched in British history.³ Besides the direct impact on the combatants, the non-combatants too were indirectly involved with the war. Anxiously perusing the casualty lists, the imminent threats of German air raids looming large, adapting to live under the limitations of the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA); all these developments implied that the influence of the war was an omnipresent one.

Yet the prolonged wide scale nature of a war and its geographical proximity do not necessarily imply literary or poetic indulgence. There were other factors too which contributed to the rise of the poetic fad. Among these, the most significant factor was the contribution of the education system. Compared to the generations of the earlier wars, the Great War generation – largely reaping the benefits of the Victorian and Edwardian educational reforms – not only saw a phenomenal rise in the literacy level but was deeply conversant with the rich storehouse of the patriotic and heroic poems of Sir Alfred Austin, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Newbolt and other poets. As it has been rightly observed “If we lie back and think of England and Literature in the period prior to and during the First World War, we are likely to name first certain poets as the nation’s bedfellows” (Brooker and Widdowson 116). It is imperative to remember that during a time when the world of media mostly revolved round the print form of expression, with film still in its nascent stages of evolution, poetry in itself was an integral part of the Edwardian society, not only as a means of popular entertainment but also in inculcating a “sound philosophy” of life (Stead 73). As Paul Fussell points out, “indeed, the *Oxford Book of English Verse* presides over the Great War in a way that has never been sufficiently appreciated” (Fussell 159). It is also important to bear in mind that there were ready role models for poetic emulation for various sections of versifiers. The patriotic verse of Alfred Austin, William Watson, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Newbolt or the romantic verse of A.E. Houseman, depending on rhyme and rhythm, served as role models for poetic experimenters during the period of the outbreak of the war.

The gradual emergence of the Imagist and the Georgian movements too acted as a stimulus to the poetic fad, especially for the more conscious poets, willing to experiment with form and content in their verse. These movements were spearheaded by poets like Ezra Pound, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Richard Aldington and John Fletcher who fought for a verse which discarded conformist poetic subjects and versification, giving the poets liberty to choose any poetic subject and subsequently generate its own rhythms using common speech.⁴ Time and again it presented an image or a vivid sensory description in verse that is immaculately accurate, unambiguous and concentrated. On the other hand, the Georgian movement which mainly revolved round the best-selling anthologies, compiling the works of the young

poets like W.H Davies, John Freeman and others was “devoted to the sights and emotions of the countryside and the lyrical, nostalgic word patterns that can be formed from it” (Hussey 5). This series of anthologies published by Edward Marsh also provided a radical break to most writers,⁵ a sort of apprenticeship “that many poets served and the form of publication in which a large readership discovered them” (Hussey 4). Thus it is clear that poetry was an integral part of the common British lifestyle and it provided a spontaneous means of relatedness for the ordinary citizen, irrespective of gender or educational, economic and social background. It also comes as no surprise that while on active-service, Wilfred Owen was reading “Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus”(Fussell 232), while “in the winter of 1917 Edward Thomas was reading Robert Frost’s *Mountain Interval* at an artillery position near Arras and corresponding with Frost about it”(Fussell 164). Of the various forms of literary expression, poetry was still regarded as the highest form of creative expression:

The poetry anthologies of the period, too, act as revealing barometers of the contemporary taste and judgement which worked to forge the English literary tradition. After Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*, the most influential anthology was undoubtedly Quiller-Couch’s *Oxford Book of English Verse* (which went through 17 reprints from 1900-30). (Brooker and Widdowson 120)

All fashions have their own icons, and the poetic fad of the Great War found its one in the figure of Rupert Brooke. Brooke’s war sonnets published in early 1915 served as a catalyst for the poetic fad. So much so, that Dean Inge of St Paul’s Cathedral chose Brooke’s “The Soldier” as the text for his sermon (Jones 418, 421). Brooke’s early death due to septicaemia – and important to remember, not due to a combat experience – did not prevent him from being showered with obituaries during the war. The “most beautiful young man in England”, according to Yeats (Read 209), was described by Winston Churchill after his death as a representative of “classic symmetry of mind and body,...all that one could wish England’s noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable” (Read 247). Brooke’s premature death coupled with the immense popularity of his sonnets led to the colossal success of his poetic volumes posthumously printed:

Brooke’s first volume, *Poems* (1911), was reprinted in 1913 and then six times in 1915 and four more by August 1916. By 1932 it had sold 100,000 copies. A second selection, titled *1914 and Other Poems*, went through fourteen impressions between May 1915 and September 1916. A collected edition, with Edward Marsh’s memoir, appeared in 1918 and went through sixteen impressions in the next ten years. (Brooker and Widdowson 121)

The patriotic fervour of Brooke’s war verse also aided in providing consolation to the grieving war-victims, desperately struggling to be reconciled with the deaths of close ones at the Front. The golden-haired poet-soldier “combined the ruling-class values with which Britain entered the war, giving expression to both the sense of pastoral England as ‘Home’ and the readiness for self-sacrifice in the service of a nation at war” (Brooker and Widdowson 121). It is also interesting to observe the dramatic transformation, the onset of the war and the early death of Brooke had on his status as a poet. Prior to the war his verse was dismissed as being “disgusting” (Child 337); however, the war transformed him into “the only English poet of any consideration who has given his life in his country’s wars” (Jones 429).

The Brooke myth, besides propagating the notion of nobility of sacrifice, further enhanced the validity of the notion of the altruistic young British soldier-poet

ready to heroically embrace death amidst tragic circumstances. The myth had a dual impact on the prevalent poetic fad – besides encouraging a deluge of patriotic verse written on similar themes at the home front – it also stimulated the poetic passion of the soldier poets in the trenches. The myth eulogised the soldier-poet, giving birth to the new concept of the war poet viewing “the soldier as poet, rather than the poet as soldier”. As Simon Featherstone points out:

The elevation of Rupert Brooke to the status of national war poet was both an innovation and a continuation of a process of national self-representation. The crisis of the First World War demanded new ways of defining and communicating national identity and purpose. Brooke’s sacrificial militarism and aesthetic nationalism formed one response to this demand. (Featherstone 25)

However, there was a gradual but a radical shift in the focus of the poetic fad from the die-hard patriotism and romanticism associated with the war, to the tragic and brutal reality of the trenches and modern warfare. This realistic verse found a steady market too, as publishers rushed in with slim volumes of compilations like *Soldier Poets: Songs of the Fighting Men* published in 1916 and *Refining Fires, Songs of Youth and War* and *The Muse in Arms* published in 1917.

The onset of the war gradually changed the romantic pre-war notions of Valour, Honour and Glory. Within two years of the war, the violent reality of the trenches irretrievably converted the initial mood of patriotic fervour to one of scepticism and deep resentment. By the summer of 1917, the resentment culminated in a soldier-poet’s dissent, with Sassoon openly protesting against the continuation of the war: “I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, on which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest” (Giddings 111). The aphorisms that gained currency then – in tune with the poetic fad in vogue – was “Went to war with Rupert Brooke, came home with Siegfried Sassoon”.

However, the ennobling notion of the war, in accordance with the Brooke myth, totally changed by the end of the twenties. Rapid publication of novels and war-memoirs progressively refuted the notions of the Brooke myth.⁶ It changed the understanding and perception of the war altogether, shifting the primary focus of critical attention to poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Edmund Blunden’s edition of Owen’s poems, published in 1931, contributed a great deal in popularising Owen’s war poetry, directing attention of the readers to the cause of pity and sacrifice that was behind most of Owen’s poems and letters. The role model of a poetic martyr thus gradually shifted from Brooke, during early days of the war, to Owen and Sassoon largely for the philosophy it advocated: “My subject is war, and the pity of war/ the poetry is in the pity” (Stallworthy 266). As Vincent Sherry observes:

In Britain, for vivid instance, the Georgian sensibility of the pre-war years was not only challenged, it was ultimately transformed by the dire realities of the martial experience it was called upon to witness. The high-gloss, arcadian surface of Brooke and his companion talents lost its sheen, its credibility. A new convention formed around the strong models of (the later) Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, which featured in their discordant tones a lyric of often fierce realism. (7)

Thus the notion of war poetry gradually came to revolve round Owen and Sassoon’s verse. Subsequent critical attention enforced and re-enforced the validity of these notions of war. However, the plethora of critical attention directed to Sassoon and

Owen exacerbated the problem as how war poetry should be defined, interpreted, read and valued. It gradually contributed to a rather restrictive canon of the poetry of the Great War, which a study of the contemporary poetic fad tends to clarify at length.

It is important to remember that of the thousands of poems which found their way into print during and after the war, only a few hundred are still being reproduced and read today. Instead of providing a gender-balanced and a comprehensive authentic picture of the impact of the war, the concentration of most anthologies of poetry have shifted to an exclusive depiction of the horrors of the war.⁷ A study of the prevalent poetic fad as a wider cultural phenomenon aids us to ensure justice, not only as regards authentic representation of the contemporary culture but also as regards canonical poetic representation in terms of gender. Nearly seven decades after the war, the tradition of Great War poetry was largely believed to be an exclusively male prerogative. Most standard anthologies published earlier, contained no poems written by women poets at all.⁸ It was only in the recent past, with the publication of C.W. Reilly's *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry & Verse of the First World War* (1981) that readers had some acquaintance with women's poetic response to the Great War. Nearly seven decades following the war, Catherine Reilly's bibliographical work uncovered almost 532 women poets from the First World War, the majority of whom have long since been again condemned to literary oblivion.

The apparent reason for discrimination against women poets in all probability lay in the great emphasis placed on the combat experience of war. In accordance with the argument, war poetry is believed to have emerged from the direct experience of fighting, and such an experience was alien to women in the First World War; hence, the inevitable conclusion there can be no women's war poetry. According to James Campbell, anthologists and critical commentators of the World War poetry use an ideology which he brands as "combat gnosticism" – "the belief that combat represents a qualitatively separate order of experience that is difficult if not impossible to communicate to any who have not undergone an identical experience" (Campbell 203). Campbell rightly asserts that such an ideology has hindered, or rather restricted the "canon" of texts, confining it to writing only pertaining to the actual war experience. The equation of "war" with "combat", gives the exclusive prerogative of war poetry only to men who have been engaged in active combat. Even "mere military status" does not suffice; the imperative pre-requisite is that of being a combatant. Though bereft of the experience of actual fighting, for most women in Britain the war was a catalyst for challenging and re-defining gender stereotypes. The Great War gave women from diverse backgrounds, a chance to develop new means of self-expression. Women's poetic expressions of the war chronicle the new social roles to which they themselves were trying to adjust. Strangely enough, in spite of the socio-political validity of women's verse, it is yet to receive commensurate critical attention. As Claire Buck rightly points out:

In the same way that women workers, both middle and working class, were pushed out of their wartime jobs after 1918, women's contribution to war writing was until the 1980s largely invisible. Women wrote and published extensively about the war; for example, between 1914 and 1918 women's poetry was published in single-author collections, anthologies, and the leading newspapers and periodicals of the day, as well as factory newspapers, women's magazines, and local newspapers. Of the more than 2,000 poets publishing during these years a quarter were women. By contrast soldiers on active service wrote less than a fifth of the total output. This widespread circulation of women's poetry during the war years is not recorded in later-century anthologies or criticism. For example,

Jon Silkin's 1979 *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* included only Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetayeva, and Brian Gardner's *Up the Line to Death: The War Poets 1914-1918* (1964) contained no women. (Buck 87)

The specific ways in which women saw and narrated the war, clearly reveal the distinctive nature of their war experience. The war came at a crucial time when women's suffrage movement was at its peak. Within the limitations of linguistic currency, the commitment with which women recorded their experiences, painful or otherwise, reveals their self-awareness and confidence in being observant chroniclers of their part in the conflict through verse. Hence, poems relating the excitement and exhilaration of nascent roles in war-services are as indicative as the war-elegies which speak of loneliness, anguish and bereavement. A closer study of the poetic fad reveals the unique contribution of women poets such as Vera Brittain, Carola Oman, Charlotte Mew, Evelyn Underhill, Jessie Pope, May Sinclair, May Cannan and Edith Nesbit. It is only an exhaustive and an elaborate study of the poetic fad that can retrieve "from oblivion the experience of the muted half of society as rendered in verse" (Khan 1) during the war. A critical exploration of the fad reveals a wide gamut of divergent ideological voices as revealed through women's verse.

A poet like Jessie Pope, to the modern reader, conventionally stands in conflict with the ideas of the key war poets such as Owen and Sassoon. Pope came more into focus as Owen originally dedicated "Dulce Et Decorum" to her. In spite of being the target of poetic attack from Owen, Pope's war poems are central to the understanding of the prevalent sentiments on the Home Front during the war; more so, as Pope's jingoist war verse, written "in racy, swinging metres" was immensely popular during the span of the war (Khan 18). The note accompanying one of the epistolary facsimiles reproduced in her *War Poems*, informs the reader that "ever since the war began Miss Pope has been publishing these poems, and has received from all parts of the world letters in their praise" (Pope 2). The facsimile of the soldier's letter written from the Front was reproduced as "the most gratifying" experience of the huge amount of fan mail that had inundated the office of *The Daily Mail* for Pope:

Dear Sir

Some days ago I saw in your Continental edition some verses by Jessie Pope entitled "NO".

I would be very glad if you could send a marked copy of your English edition with those verses in it to...

The verses were much admired by us all out here, & I want you to send them to my wife for me, as they will be such a "buck up" for her, and bucking up means so much to those at home as well as for us. Really they need it most, as after all, theirs is the most wearying suspense.

I enclose you a couple of stamps I bought from home in payment, and at last find them useful.

If you will do this for me I shall be very grateful.

Yours faithfully...[.] (Pope 2)

The letter is not only an expression of the popularity Pope enjoyed during the war, but also a crucial social document revealing a lot about the socio-cultural milieu of the war period. Pope's poems may be dismissed by the modern reader and critic as merely propagandist, but to the war generation her poems not only provided patriotic

fervour but also the much-needed psychological succour to rejuvenate their sagging spirits, both at home and the Front. As Gerard DeGroot rightly points out in his work *Blighty*, “We may revere Owen, but the Great War generation preferred Jessie Pope” (DeGroot 244).

A close study of the poetic fad also reveals the forgotten voices of the Commonwealth or the British Empire.⁹ These important aspects of the war are drowned in the segregated critical attention directed to select poets only. The sacrifice of the Indian soldiers enters May Cannan’s “Rouen”, a poem which was chosen by Philip Larkin for the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, asserting that the poem reveals something crucially important about the century. Justifying the inclusion of the poem Larkin asserted that he “found it in the Bodleian... and immediately knew that this was something that had to go in. It seemed to me to have all the warmth and idealism of the V.A.D.s in the First World War. I find it enchanting” (Fyfe 43). In spite of Larkin’s attention, the poem until recently has been overlooked by most editors of the war poetry anthologies as it doesn’t directly deal with the combatant’s experience of the war.

With the war barely a few months underway, Edward Thomas had passed his judgement on the longevity of war poetry “No other class of poetry vanishes so rapidly, has so little chosen from it for posterity” (Thomas 341). Perhaps the poetic afflatus inspired by the earlier wars had influenced his prophecy, but the poetic fad of the Great War – a culmination of various socio-political and literary circumstances – was indeed a landmark event in the early part of the twentieth century. As my essay repeatedly argues, the varied forms of poetic responses need to be critically explored at length for an authentic representation of the cultural history, instead of arbitrary concentration on a few select poets. In this context it is important to remember Foucault’s words in “What is an Author?”. While formulating “historical analysis of discourse” he asserts the need of examining literary texts in accordance with ‘their modes of existence’:

Perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations, but according to their modes of existence. The modes of circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation of discourses vary with each culture and are modified within each. The manner in which they are articulated according to social relationships can be more readily understood, I believe, in the activity of the author function and in its modifications than in the themes or concepts that discourses set in motion. (Foucault 117)

Studies of poets and their works “in accordance with their modes of existence” and “author function” would unravel and do justice to the lost poetic voices of the war. The impact of a fashion tends to permeate the remotest corner of the social fabric, thereby facilitating and accommodating responses from almost every section of the society. All fashions gradually culminate after unravelling themselves and then subsequently fade with the roll of time. Yet in their own way they leave behind an indelible imprint on the literary, social and cultural history of humankind. It is very interesting to note that the poetic fad of the Great War accommodated voices from a wide cross-section of British society. Unfortunately today editors, critics and poetry anthologists have chosen to confine themselves to only a select few of those poetic voices, which provide a rather uni-dimensional, lopsided and quite often a one-gendered view of the First World War.

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End Notes

¹ There are several books exploring the socio-political impact. For more details see DeGroot, Winter and Marwick among others.

² It is estimated that ‘between August 1914 and December 1915, 2,466,719 men enlisted, the largest volunteer army in any country in history’ (De Groot 43).

³ As regards data of the casualties, i.e. the military dead, the fatalities in merchant navy and civilian deaths see Winter 68-69.

⁴ For more details see Preface of *Some Imagist Poets*.

⁵ Sir Edward Marsh (1872-1953) was the chief patron of the Georgian school of poetry. Besides being the literary executor of Rupert Brooke, he edited five anthologies of *Georgian Poetry* between 1912 and 1922. For more details see Hassall.

⁶ Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of a Foxhunting Man* and Robert Graves’s *Good Bye to All That* among others.

⁷ For more details see Claire Tylee’s introduction to *The Great War and Women’s Consciousness*.

⁸ Some editions like that of Hibberd and Onions, as well as that of Stephen tend to incorporate more women’s war verse. Recent edited war poetry anthologies, like Motion’s and Walter’s, tend to redress the balance.

⁹ “By the time of the Armistice, India had provided over 1.27 million men, including 827,000 combatants, contributing roughly one man in ten to the war effort of the British Empire” (Omissi 4).

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