

## **Siegfried Sassoon**

### **1886 – 1967**

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With war on the horizon, a young Englishman whose life had heretofore been consumed with the protocol of fox-hunting, said goodbye to his idyllic life and rode off on his bicycle to join the Army. Siegfried Sassoon was perhaps the most innocent of the war poets. John Hildebidle has called Sassoon the "accidental hero." Born into a wealthy Jewish family in 1886, Sassoon lived the pastoral life of a young squire: fox-hunting, playing cricket, golfing and writing romantic verses.



Being an innocent, Sassoon's reaction to the realities of the war were all the more bitter and violent -- both his reaction through his poetry and his reaction on the battlefield (where, after the death of fellow officer David Thomas and his brother Hamo at Gallipoli, Sassoon earned the nickname "Mad Jack" for his near-suicidal exploits against the German lines -- in the early manifestation of his grief, when he still believed that the Germans were entirely to blame). As Paul Fussell said: "now he unleashed a talent for irony and satire and contumely that had been sleeping all during his pastoral youth." Sassoon also showed his innocence by going public with his protest against the war (as he grew to see that insensitive political leadership was the greater enemy than the Germans). Luckily, his friend and fellow poet Robert Graves convinced the review board that Sassoon was suffering from shell-shock and he was sent instead to the military hospital at Craiglockhart where he met and influenced Wilfred Owen.

Sassoon is a key figure in the study of the poetry of the Great War: he brought with him to the war the idyllic pastoral background; he began by writing war poetry reminiscent of Rupert Brooke; he mingled with such war poets as Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden; he spoke out publicly against the war (and yet returned to it); he influenced and mentored the then unknown Wilfred Owen; he spent thirty years reflecting on the war through his memoirs; and at last he found peace in his religious faith. Some critics found his later poetry lacking in comparison to his war poems. Sassoon, identifying with Herbert and Vaughan, recognized and understood this: "my development has been entirely consistent and in character" he answered, "almost all of them have ignored the fact that I am a religious poet."

**Biography by:** Robert Means  
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### 'They'

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honourable race,  
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found *some* change.  
' And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

### Survivors

No doubt they'll soon get well; the shock and strain  
Have caused their stammering, disconnected talk.  
Of course they're 'longing to go out again,' —  
These boys with old, scared faces, learning to walk.  
They'll soon forget their haunted nights; their cowed  
Subjection to the ghosts of friends who died,—  
Their dreams that drip with murder; and they'll be proud  
Of glorious war that shatter'd all their pride...  
Men who went out to battle, grim and glad;  
Children, with eyes that hate you, broken and mad.

### Glory of Women

You love us when we're heroes, home on leave  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.  
You worship decorations; you believe  
That chivalry redeems the war's disgrace.  
You make us shells. You listen with delight,  
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.  
You crown our distant ardours while we fight,  
And mourn our laurelled memories when we're killed.  
You can't believe that British troops retire  
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run.  
You can't believe a women like me is fighting still.